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The Normalisation and Domestication of Digital Disinformation: On the Alignment and Consequences of Far Right and Russian State (Dis)information Operations and Campaigns in Europe

Martin Innes, Helen Innes, Colin Roberts, Darren Harmston and Daniel Grinnell.

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ABSTRACT

This article traces a normalising and domesticating process in the use of digital misinformation and disinformation as part of political campaigning in Europe. Specifically, the analysis highlights innovations associated with the digital influence engineering techniques pioneered by far-right groups and agencies linked to the Kremlin, showing how there are areas of alignment and differentiation in the agendas and interests of these two groups. Their individual and collective activities in this area are important because of how they have promoted the use of similar disinforming tactics and techniques in the conduct of domestic politics.

INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery that the St Petersburg based Internet Research Agency sought to influence the 2016 US Presidential election by deploying large numbers of fake social media accounts, there has been a dramatic increase in the scope and scale of disinformation studies. Multi-disciplinary in orientation, this effort has illuminated how misinformation (unintentionally misleading) and disinformation (deliberately designed to mislead) is recurrently involved in collective sense-making around diverse policy challenges, including: the coronavirus pandemic and levels of vaccine hesitancy (Boberg, 2020); social reactions to terror attacks (Innes et al, 2019); and multiple democratic events and elections (Margetts et al., 2016). As a result, disinformation has been elevated to one of the pre-eminent global policy challenges of our times. This reflects its status as a problem in its own right, but also its centrifugal influence upon public perceptions and political decision-making across a range of policy domains.

That this is so was highlighted in President Biden's inauguration speech, where he asserted:

“we must reject a culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured.” (President Joe Biden 20/01/21)¹

Biden's selection of this theme reflects how, despite growing awareness and concern, over the course of 2020, if anything, the challenges posed accelerated. The global health pandemic induced multiple conspiracy theories, rumours and propaganda about the causes and consequences of coronavirus, that were propagated by a diverse range of actors. These narratives interacted with and reached their epitome with the 2020 US Presidential campaign, during which the prevalence and distribution of a variety of falsehoods and lies was tracked and traced on an almost daily basis by many major media outlets (Election Integrity

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/> (accessed 30/03/21)

Partnership, 2021). Of especial consequence, was the violent storming of the Capitol Building by members of a coalition of far-right groups (including the ‘Oath Keepers’, ‘Three Percenters’ and ‘Proud Boys’) on the 6th January 2021, whose actions were driven in large part by a sustained campaign on social media falsely claiming that the election result had been manipulated.

Retrospectively published studies have started to tease apart how and why this happened. Notably, the Office for the Director of National Intelligence published a report in March 2021, claiming the US election was targeted by influence efforts emanating from Russia and Iran. Contrastingly, the Election Integrity Partnership (2021), a coalition of leading American civil society organisations and academics, published an analysis highlighting an almost industrial scale domestic disinformation campaign.

These two analytic strands build out from and refract key themes in the rapidly developing disinformation studies research literature. For example, Martin et al. (2019) conducted a meta-review of foreign state influence efforts between 2013-18. Using fairly tightly prescribed inclusion criteria, they identified 53 such episodes, the majority of which were Russia linked. A series of other studies have mapped the tactics, techniques and methodologies used by such state-linked campaigns (Dawson and Innes, 2019).

There has also been a corresponding effort focusing upon mapping more domestic disinformation sources, especially emanating from a hard right media ecosystem. The most influential being Benkler et al.’s (2018) network analysis inflected account. But there have also been a succession of more micro-oriented analyses of particular hard-right groups, platforms and campaigns (Krafft and Donovan, 2020).

Cutting across these two strands, and indeed other associated substantive topics, the academic literature has tended to be organised around three principal ‘optics’:

- The ‘political economy’ perspective locates the principal cause of our problems with disinforming communication in the institutional structures of society, especially the media ecosystem and its tilt to the ‘hard right,’ in terms of ownership and editorial lines (see Benkler et al., 2018; Starr, 2020).
- A more ‘epistemic’ collection of studies, centres upon changes in our societal relationship to knowledge and uncertainty. Studies from this vantage point often invoke discourses of ‘post truth’ and ‘post fact’ (Pomerantsev, 2019; Kakutani, 2018; Kavanagh and Rich, 2018).
- Pragmatics – this position focuses upon *how* disinformation is constructed and communicated, in terms of tactics, techniques and behaviours. There are three main variants: (1) ‘Operational research’ - that is largely atheoretical analyses of defined operations or campaigns (Jurvee, 2018; Valskivi, 2018); (2) ‘Social-behavioural’ that accents the role of particular influence and persuasion methodologies (Innes, 2020); and (3) ‘Technical’ where the focus is upon explicating the affordances designed into the platforms themselves (Howard, 2020).

The aggregated picture that emerges from these varying approaches is how rumours, conspiracies and propaganda, as sub-types of disinformation, or what Innes (2020) labels ‘deviant information’ (on the grounds that it does not inform in terms of increasing certainty and/or knowledge), have become an almost routine and unremarkable feature of contemporary digital political communication.

Conceptually, an insightful analogy can be drawn between this situation and the process of the ‘normalization of deviance’ first introduced by Diane Vaughan (1996), in her justly lauded account of the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster. This framework distilled how the fatal explosion was attributable to; interactions between aspects of the organisational performance culture; technical affordances; and worker group values, that coalesced to generate a spectacular and significant failure. The pivotal idea being that individuals and groups of workers at NASA incrementally adjusted and negotiated their interpretations and expectations of flawed procedures, so that deviant results came to be tolerated. So whilst no single deviation on its own was especially significant, situated in a highly complex inter-dependent and interacting socio-technical system, negative effects were mutually and recursively compounded and amplified. This concatenated process by which deviance and anomalies are recast as an unexceptional feature of a socio-technical system, is analogous to what can be observed in relation to the performance of distorting and deceptive communications in the contemporary media ecosystem.

Framed in this way, this article interrogates the extent to which the normalization of deviance construct illuminates key vectors in the trajectory of development of political disinformation (intentionally misleading) and misinformation (unintentionally misleading). In terms of its application to this task, it is found to be conjoined with an allied process of ‘domestication’, wherein tactics and techniques originating in geopolitical conflicts are ‘trickling down’, to become enmeshed and embedded in domestic contests.

There are then, three underpinning aims for the article. First, it attends to how far-right and Russian backed operations and campaigns have individually and interactively, both directly and indirectly, contributed to the spreading and embedding of disinformation in political campaigns. This in turn sets up a discussion of the extent to which the conjoined concepts of the normalization and domestication of disinformation help make sense of the broad trajectory of development - the second aim. The third aspect of the analysis is to consider the wider implications for both understanding and managing disinformation and its social and political impacts.

Definitionally, in terms of mapping the boundaries of the article’s interests, its focus is upon ‘operations’ and ‘campaigns’. Thus, we are interested in collective actions that are sustained over a period of time, rather than individuated instances of misleading content. In pursuing this agenda, we are especially concerned with the role of deliberately misleading content. However, as signalled by the use of ‘parantheses’ when referencing ‘(dis)information operations and campaigns’, we recognise that whether content is ‘pure’ disinformation is frequently somewhat ambiguous and contingent. Not least, because of how the practitioners of the ‘dark arts’ of constructing disinformation are aware that distorting a ‘grain of truth’ as the basis for a messaging effort, is frequently more influential and persuasive (Bittman, 1985; Rid, 2020).

As denoted by the above aims, the principal intent underpinning this article is to make a theoretical contribution to understanding how disinformation shapes the contemporary ordering of social reality. This theoretical development work is informed and illuminated by empirical data, but systematic empirical testing is not its primary purpose. Rather the empirics integrated into the discussion convey how Russian state and European far-right groups, have played a key role as innovators in working out the predicates of some key techniques of disinformation, that have been adopted and adapted by other domestic

disinformation actors. Thus capturing how these methods have moved from the geopolitical realm, to being integrated into the rhythms and routines of domestic politics. The empirical materials are especially helpful in exploring and mapping the digital interactions, exchanges and encounters between Russian state aligned actors and assets, and groups self-identifying with the European far-right, and thus points of assonance and dissonance between them, and their recursive influence. So whilst much public and political debate surrounding disinformation has pivoted around notions of malign state actors, arguably the more profound and pressing social problem that is emerging, as exemplified by the 2020 US election, is the domestication and normalization of disinforming behaviours.

The next section outlines how the empirical materials were collected and interpreted. Subsequent sections then look at how each of the two groups of interest have influenced each other in terms of their digital footprints and activities, incorporating a case study of a particular episode in Estonia. The conclusion moves on to track how the kinds of disinformation tactics and techniques pioneered by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and an amorphous collection of far-right groups, are now becoming more prevalent and widespread throughout social and political life.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The data informing this article were derived from a large-scale research programme designed to understand the causes and consequences of disinformation across a range of situations and settings.² This has included projects spanning: multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, VKontakte and Reddit; data collection across twelve European countries; and different events and episodes, including terror attacks, political elections and public knowledge campaigns.

The data reported were collated across multiple social media platforms, with a particular focus upon Twitter, utilizing the Sentinel platform. Sentinel comprises a suite of data collection and analysis ‘apps’ and algorithms, with similar collection and processing functionality to many commercial packages (Preece et al., 2018). Sentinel’s data collection is organized around a series of user configurable ‘channels’, comprising up to 400 search terms that filter out irrelevant material, whilst capturing units of social media traffic that, because of their textual content, are likely connected to the subject of interest. This structure enables the system to work within the 1% limit of total traffic volumes freely available through the Twitter ‘firehose’.

Data were analysed using a range of methods. This includes social network analysis techniques to configure a topological map of their networks of relations. The perspective afforded by this mode of representation is augmented by some higher resolution qualitative case studies, selected to give a more grounded sense of what their activities look like in practise. This is augmented by a qualitative case study of a relevant episode in Estonia. Together these empirical methods are intended to support key theoretical points, rather than providing for robust empirical testing of the conceptual propositions laid out. In this sense, the overarching methodology is aligned with Manning’s (2016) formulation of ‘pattern elaborative theory’, which accents the value of interplay between ‘exemplary evidence’ and

² Aspects of this programme has been variously funded by UK government, the Economic and Social Research Council and European Union.

key theoretical precepts, as a way for distilling behavioural patterns not previously recognised or perceived.

CONNECTING THE FAR-RIGHT AND RUSSIA

A blend of academic, journalistic and activist research has documented multiple connections between far-right groups across different European countries, and between these groups and a series of Russian politicians and institutions (Shekhovstov, 2018). For example, it is well known now that in France Marine Le Pen's Front National (now National Rally) has previously borrowed several Million Euros from Russian banks, with its leader actively promoting closer relationships with Russia. Similarly, Martin Sellner, leader of the influential Generation Identity movement heaped praise on President Putin in a 2016 interview, drawing specific parallels with the Eurasianist movement, that has potentially permeated aspects of Putin's ideological framework. In turn, there has been a degree of reciprocation evident, for example, in Putin's overt support for the 'Night Wolves' across Slovakia and several other Central European countries. In Spain, evidence has been adduced of Russian linked digital influence engineering operations favouring the right-wing VOX party, and the secessionist Catalan independence movement. There are allegations also of financial support having been provided to Matteo Salvini's insurgent, populist 'Five Star' movement in Italy (Shekhovstov, 2018).

More recently, in 2019 several senior members of 'Britain First' twice visited Russia, including a meeting hosted at the Duma involving other "patriot" groups from across the world. At this event the leader of Britain First claimed shared values and beliefs with Putin's regime across a range of topics, including: anti-globalisation; the corruption of liberal politics; immigration; the harms caused by the EU 'superstate; and the decline of traditional family values and rise of feminism. He concluded:

I believe that civil war in European states is now inevitable because of the failed globalist policies of multiculturalism and mass immigration. I applaud President Putin for condemning Western liberalism at the G20 summit last week.³

Such rhetoric notwithstanding, it is important that the degree of consensus and coherence across the European far-right movement is not over-stated. For example, the aforementioned Britain First and its progenitor the National Front, has never experienced the kinds of electoral success enjoyed by their European affiliates. Nor should the alignment between far-right ideas and Russia's ideological precepts that is sometimes claimed, be over-accentuated. After all, as Robert Service (2019) notes, a crucial feature of Putin's operationalization of power has been his pragmatism and opportunism.

Labelling individuals or groups as 'far right' invokes something of a 'plastic' category that spans a range of thought communities and interest groupings (Davey and Ebner 2017: 4). Caiani and Parenti (2013) describe a 'loosely coupled' series of political and ideological nodes of the 'extreme right', rather than a cohesive and coherent social 'movement'. Cas Mudde's (2000) broad characterisation of these groups as linked by their allegiance to idealised authoritarian political systems, ethnic nationalism, and xenophobia, is helpful in bundling together some defining features of a fragmentary far-right sphere. That said more recent scholarship has accented how influenced by the inception of Web 2.0, the far-right has "undergone a process of (post-)modernisation" (Bogerts and Fielitz 2019: 150). This applies

³ https://www.britainfirst.org/transcript_paul_goldings_speech_at_the_russian_parliament accessed 10/1/20

especially to the alt-right, definable as a primarily online (Nagel 2017), “nebulous, fluid, sometimes anarchic” strand of the far-right (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir: 2).

Equally perplexing is where to position President Vladimir Putin and the Russian state on the ideological spectrum. Not least because of how the Russian state’s understanding of its relations with Western liberal democratic polities has evolved over time, becoming more adversarial and antagonistic (Service, 2019). For Giles (2019), this reinforces a sense of ‘Russian exceptionalism’ wherein, Russian political culture is substantially different from Western liberal democratic systems, meaning that attempts to ‘read’ Russian politics through Western lenses, are inherently misleading.

These are clearly on display if we consider how there are both points of convergence and divergence in the relationship between the discourses of far-right groups and the Kremlin. There is a shared antipathy for notions of LGBTQ+ equality, and a ready recourse to anti-Liberal and anti-immigration rhetoric. And yet, in the Baltic States of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, one of the frequently leveraged narrative tropes is that the citizens and governments of these states have a certain predilection for Nazi ideas. This narrative is continually repeated as part of attempts to persuade ethnic Russians that the political and cultural integrity of these countries is failing, and can only be recovered by coming back under the Russian sphere of influence, as opposed to leaning towards Europe. The inflection point being that whereas in Western conceptualizations strong culturally conservative value sets are seen as clearly aligned with Nazism in the far-right, viewed through a Russian lens, such as that afforded by their version of Eurasianism, ‘hyper-conservatism’ and Nazism are distinctive tendencies that do not necessarily assimilate with one another.

INNOVATORS IN DISINFORMATION

One area where the respective interests and agendas of the far-right and Russian state have over-lapped and interleaved is in the information environment, where they have both been key innovators in the use of social media and in realizing the potential of disinformation. For example, Roberts et al. (2018) provide a detailed analysis of how groups such as the English Defence League have exploited high-profile crisis events such as the Islamist murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby, to try and increase their support base and mobilize their affiliates into offline action by propagating rumours and conspiracies (see also Dobрева et al., 2019).

Switching to the activities of the St Petersburg IRA, Dawson and Innes (2019) identify three core tactics in their playbook: buying followers; ‘follower fishing’; and ‘narrative switching’. Locating these historically, the origins of the IRA can be traced back to around 2011/12, but their capacity and capability development ‘surged’ in 2014 accompanying Russia’s involvement in Crimea, and the period afterwards.

By looking at the IRA campaign in more detail, we can establish key points of intersection between the two groups of interest. It is no coincidence that some of the most successful IRA accounts in 2016 deliberately mimicked right wing social identities, clearly adopting signifiers intended to signal a certain persona. As Goffman (1961) described it, there are ‘identity kits’ associated with particular social roles and positions in the social hierarchy, comprising specific objects and styles of dress that are ascribed meaning. By appropriating these, the account operators were able to infiltrate particular digitally enabled thought communities to message certain audience segments. For example, the next Figure shows the

avatar and biography of one of the most (in)famous of the IRA accounts (original in colour) and how it displayed clear signifiers of identity:



Figure 1: A spoofed Internet Research Agency account

Other IRA operated accounts expressed support for Matteo Salvini's 'Five Star' Movement repeatedly messaging that Italians should leave the EU, scrap the Euro and quit NATO, in order to recover their sovereignty. Agency run accounts also targeted German right-wing audiences. However, as Dawson and Innes (2019) evidence, there are some important anomalies here when one investigates such material carefully. For example, one account with the spoofed account handle of 'Thomas_Gerster' from around the 24th September 2016 was tweeting lots of messages supportive of the Alternative Fur Deutschland Party (AFD), such as:

'I #chooseAfD, because I remember # asylum crisis and no longer trust #Merkel!' ;

'I #chooseAfD, because I want to live in the Federal Republic instead of Caliphate #Germany!';

And retweeting messages such as:

'Every German #Patriot will vote #AfD tomorrow! We need a political earthquake to save #Germany! # Btw17 #NoAntifa #NoIslam'.

Intriguingly though, by tracking back in the account's history something remarkable and unexpected was revealed. Some six months earlier, this same account had been posting anti-AFD messages such as:

'#AfD is shit, AFD is shit #MerkelMustStay'

‘The people who choose the #AfD are just sick #MerkelMustStay’

This kind of ‘narrative switching’ behaviour is probably a deliberate tactic designed to enable an account to ‘inject’ its antagonistic message into a group. One of the consequences of the well known homophily effect of social media is that it is difficult to expose a group to a message transmitted from outside the members. But by building an identity within the group, people will likely attend to it, enabling the ultimate mission of inducing doubt, discord and distrust.

Examining the four terror attacks that occurred in the UK in 2017, Innes et al. (2019) document how IRA accounts were detected trying to amplify sentiments about the involvement of Islamism and encouraging far-right adherents based in the UK to engage in both digital and analogue protests. This is indicative of a more general point about how the IRA operators targeted these kinds of messaging at far-right groups because they thought they would resonate and incite tensions.

In terms of understanding the trajectories of development that underpin the ability to deploy disinformation in these ways, it is important to acknowledge how sophisticated and wide-ranging the investment and effort has been. For instance, alongside its investment in operations like the IRA and the hacking activities of the ‘FancyBear’ unit of the GRU, the Russian State has bankrolled a global network of media channels (RT and Sputnik). These play an important role in amplifying and corraling some of the conspiracies and propaganda that originate on the internet and in social media platforms. Indeed, this represents an important reciprocal pathway in terms of the relationship between Russian influence operations and far-right social media campaigns, inasmuch as the latter often draw upon and link to Russian state-owned media sourced content in their messaging.

One of the most important social media trends observed by a number of commentators over the past two years or so, has been a general pattern of migration amongst far-right affiliates away from the major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to a series of others, such as Gab, Telegram, 4Chan and 8Chan. Indeed, this movement has been so marked that some have started talking in terms of there being an alternative far-right media ecosystem being established. The apparent purpose being to insulate adherents of far-right ideologies from contrary influences.

Consisting of a series of “fast-paced, interest-based, anonymous imageboards”, each containing various sub-fora (Manivannan 2020), ‘the chans’ represent the “antithesis of a [sic.] Twitter or Facebook”, constituting an alternative to mainstream social media (McLaughlin 2019). Vyshali Manivannan’s (2012, 2013, 2020) studies on 4chan, depict a “discourse community” where “anti-normative, egregious, and abusive dialogue” pervades (2013: 114). Other projects have highlighted how the platform’s /pol/ board was particularly influential in the propagation of racist and political memes into other online communities. however, when normalised by its size, it is comparatively inefficient in this propagation in relation to Reddit or Twitter, suggesting 4chan may primarily influence its internal audience (Zannettou *et al* 2018: 14).

Marc Tuters (2019: 44) argues such online Alt-Right spaces are as much sub-cultural as they are political, and are best understood as forms of “dark fandom”, wherein members express disdain for the “dominant hegemonic system’. Within these spaces, memes perform a key function in the creation of a sense of community identity. They possess “subcultural capital”

(Prisk 2017: 9) where, by sharing them, users signal awareness of various Alt-Right norms, thus creating a community bound by mutual understanding. By sharing memes throughout social media, users may intend to shift the “Overton Window”, the boundaries of acceptable public discourse, potentially enabling the Gramscian-style slow creep of extreme Right-Wing narratives into broader societal consciousness (Nagle 2017: 33). This is clearly also the aim of some of the IRA accounts, when they mimic hard-right personas and identities, and repost messages originating in far-right forums.

In terms of the overarching argument of this article, the critical point is that the ideas and values of far-right groups and the Kremlin, clearly intersect and overlap at multiple junctures. That said, there have been moments and situations where different agendas have been in play. But in pursuing their aims, both entities have been significant innovators in the production and propagation of disinformation. Both strategically and tactically, the Russian state and far-right groups have played an influential role in demonstrating just what can be achieved if one is unencumbered by the ‘facts’, or considerations of ‘truthfulness’. In so doing, their innovations have been picked up by other domestic actors keen to harness the affordances of the new information environment and media ecosystem. To develop this insight, in the next section we draw upon social network analysis to illuminate in more detail, the relationships between far-right and Russian sources.

ANALYZING SOCIAL NETWORKS

As mentioned in passing above, a well known site of conceptual co-mingling between the European far-right and Putin’s Kremlin is the Eurasian movement, and in particular Alexandr Dugin’s ‘neo-Eurasionism’. Its roots can be traced back to the 1920s as an ideological movement originally inspired by the German conservative revolution and its notion of plotting a ‘third way’ between communism and capitalism. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Dugin’s ideas have proven influential among sympathisers in Europe, not least because of his ability to converse and publish in multiple languages and across disciplinary boundaries (although he was sacked from his academic position at Moscow University in 2014). The worldview espoused through a blend of published work, online platforms and the far-right political party ‘Eurasia’, founded in Russia in 2002, urges Europe to ally with Eurasia to form ‘the Heartland’. This represents a united continent of white Christian peoples – inclusive of Russia – that is able to resist the corrosive power of the United States. Both Dugin and the European far-right understand the international order through a similar lens, taking inspiration from fascist principles and their mission to preserve traditional European values to counter the tide of Western transatlantic liberalism. From their shared perspective, the European Union and NATO are destructive, bureaucratic forces reinforcing American interests and ideals to the detriment of a strong, coherent European identity.

Dugin has personally cultivated contacts with European Far Right figures since the late 1980s. He has particularly strong links with the European New Right (ENR) originating in France with the ethno-nationalist think tank GRECE, headed by Alain de Benoist. Dugin’s online influence is particularly evident in the European far-right media ecosystem: from Zuerst! magazine in Germany, to Nya Tider in Sweden and French far right television TV Libertes. In 2017, Dugin and Lurie Rosca (former leader of the Christian Democratic Peoples’ Party of Moldova) founded the ‘Chisinau Forum’, an event bringing together intellectuals from the former USSR and Western Europe. This has included European far-right political figures, news media and collaboration with Steve Bannon’s right wing, populist ‘The Movement’.

Dugin's current links with and influence upon the Kremlin are more circumspect, however. Although, he served as an advisor to the State Duma speaker Gennadiy Seleznyov and a key member of the ruling United Russia party Sergei Naryshkin, his extreme theories are not a direct influence on official Kremlin ideology. There is however a degree of overlap. Moreover, Dugin and the Kremlin have likely fostered 'allies in common' where the interests of all parties cohere around anti-liberal narratives (Laruelle, 2015: xxiii).

In light of these ideational and personnel connections we decided to use the Eurasia network as a useful 'jumping off point' for an illustrative, more structural and empirical exploration of the links between the activities of the European far-right and Russian state in the contemporary information environment. Accordingly, we sampled 9 media organisations that, based upon an initial network mapping exercise, were identified as strongly embedded within the topology of the neo-Eurasian movement. These media organisations were posting across six platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, telegram, VK, YouTube) and so for each account, we collected their most recent messages over a 50 day period (1st December 2019 – 19th January 2020) across these. This yielded a total of 3317 posts, written in English, German, Spanish, French and Russian. Prior to analysis the non-English material was machine translated, but the linguistic diversity present is itself an indicator about the international linkages of this element of the far-right.

From the text content of each post several defined features were used to inform the analysis: usage of externally linking URLs and their domains; other platform user tags and emojis employing regular expression rules; as well as person, place, and organisation word tokens using NLTKs entity extraction module. URLs which used a redirecting or shortening site were resolved to their end point. A count of the number of posts per media organisation which mention each identified feature was then created.

Figure 2 below provides a simplified visual representation based upon an analysis of the 9 media organisations' (labelled M1-9) linking behaviour. The edges indicate of whether the sites are referencing each others' content. There were a total of 37 links to external domains, of which, 23 were used exclusively by one media organisation. For the remaining 14, only 5 were cited extensively by multiple media organisations (one was YouTube for example), and of these, three were linked to one of the other nine media organisations. Thus, the picture that emerges is of relatively sparse levels of inter-linking. By classifying the accounts concerned, the interpretative inference that can be drawn is that the more Russian oriented features tend to cluster together, and these are largely separate from more far-right centred clusters.

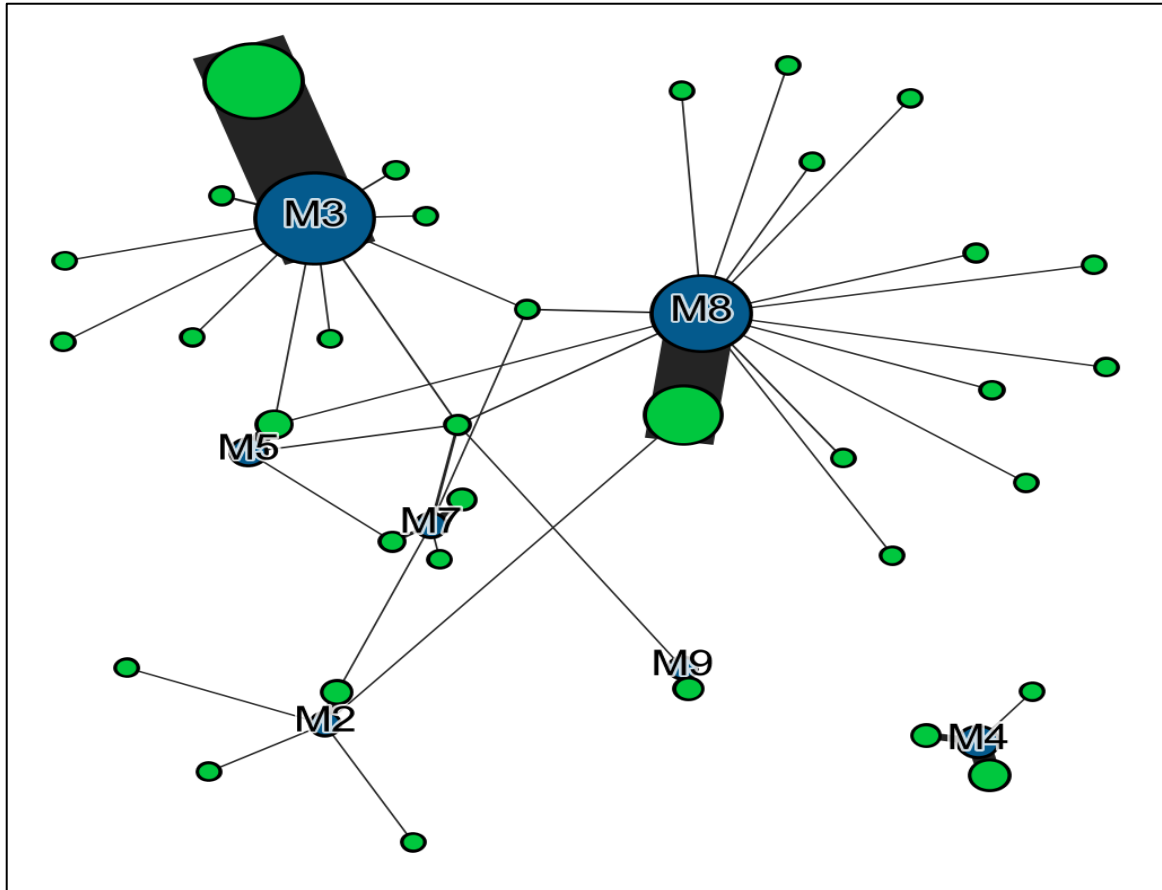


Figure 2: Network Analysis of Linking Behaviour

A second analytic strategy was then applied to the dataset, this time focused upon the message contents. In contrast to the relatively loose-coupling in link domain usage, focusing upon content suggests much stronger similarity in activity. Indeed, 38 named entities and hashtags were mentioned in the posts of 5 or more of the media organisations, and 10 named ‘entities’ were mentioned by 7 or more of them. These entities were: ‘US’, ‘FRANCE’, ‘IRAN’, ‘EU’, ‘IRAQ’, ‘NEW’, ‘RUSSIA’, ‘UK’, ‘SOLEIMANI’, and ‘ALEXANDER’. A visual representation of the results is provided in Figure 3 below, where the media organisations are represented as blue nodes. The remaining nodes are text features that are depicted coloured yellow to red based on the number of media organisations that mentioned them, and sized based on the number of mentions (textual entities used by only one media organisation have been removed to aid viewing).

transferred for use in other situations and contexts, by other actors. For it is this movement that is centred by the processes of normalization and domestication.

High level proxy indicators for these patterns of development can be inferred from performance data published by some social media platforms. For example, Table 1 below lists the number of accounts taken down and de-platformed by Twitter in 2018-19 and the attribution they have made in terms of country of origin. What is striking about such data is the sheer number of accounts involved and the range of countries engaging in ‘co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour’. This suggests a pattern of spread and diversification that is intrinsic to processes of normalization and domestication.

| COUNTRY OF ORIGIN | TWITTER RELEASE DATE | NO. OF ACCOUNTS |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| China | July 2019 | 5241 |
| Ecuador | April 2019 | 1019 |
| Iran | October 2018 | 770 |
| | January 2019 | 2320 |
| | June 2019 | 4779 |
| Russia | October 2018 | 3613 |
| | January 2019 | 416 |
| | June 2019 | 4 |
| Saudi Arabia | April 2019 | 6 |
| Spain | April 2019 | 259 |
| United Arab Emirates (+ Egypt) | March 2019 | 4248 |
| | April 2019 | 271 |
| Venezuela | January 2019 | 1960 |

Table 1: Twitter Accounts Identified as Engaging in ‘Co-ordinated Inauthentic Behaviour’ by Alleged Country of Origin Covering 2018-19.

Facebook does not publish exactly the same data, but what they do put into the public domain can be interpreted similarly. For instance, in the first three months of 2019 Facebook ‘de-platformed’ 2.28m accounts, with an additional 1.38m accounts ‘taken down’ in the last quarter of 2020 (Facebook, 2021). To put these figures into perspective, out of approximately 2.8 billion monthly active users in the last quarter of 2020, Facebook estimates that around 5% are fake accounts (Tankovska, 2021). Of course, not all of these are engaged in (dis)information operations and campaigns, but many will be. Accepting that such internal performance data is likely to ‘undercount’ the problem, as there is little incentive for them to advertise the presence of such activities on their platforms, such data do provide a way of approximating the scale of the problem. It is clearly significant, and of course, such figures provide no insight into what is happening on the increasing numbers of smaller social media platforms.

Additional evidence supportive of a spread and diversification of accounts engaging in (dis)information operations and campaigns, as a predicate for the processes of normalization and domestication, is to be found in Woolley and Howard’s (2019) global review. Adopting a comparative cross-country research design, they document how ‘computational propaganda’ methods can be detected across an increasing number of countries. Sometimes these are directed towards citizens in other states, but most often they are engaged in the management of domestic public opinion.

More qualitative evidence aligned with the principal thrust of this argument is also available. For example, tracking the UK's Brexit Referendum and associated General Elections highlighted multiple instances of the prevalence and distribution of misinformation and disinformation authored and amplified by all sides of the political debate (Starr, 2020). Illustrative examples, amongst many others, include: the claim that £350 million could be invested in the NHS advertised on the side of the Vote Leave campaign bus; conspiracies about who was 'really' responsible for the murder of Jo Cox MP; the Liberal Democrats 'selective' use of polling data and creating leaflets that looked like newspapers; and Jeremy Corbyn publicising supposedly 'leaked' documents from the US-UK trade negotiations less than two weeks before the election date, that it transpires may well have been hacked and distributed by, as yet unknown, Russian state actors.⁴

An Estonian Case Study

The assertion that the techniques and tactics of disinformation originally worked out at a geopolitical level, are increasingly embedded in the conduct of more domestic politics, is further evidenced by data collected in Estonia. Estonia provides an especially interesting context for a case study on the grounds that it has invested significantly, both materially and reputationally, in the principles of 'e-government'. However, as one of the post-Soviet Baltic states bordering Russia, it is also deeply acquainted with the challenges posed by pervasive targeted disinformation, being a repeated target for both overt and covert Russian messaging in this regard (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2021). It also exemplifies some of the complexities and tensions between the agendas of far-right groups and the Russian state.

Over the past few years, several former Soviet countries have been subject to a sustained propaganda campaign conducted overtly and covertly by Russian backed media and social media outlets (Giles, 2019), pivoting around three principal master-narratives. The aim of which is to try and recover increasing influence over the governance of these countries, fundamentally by turning them away from the European project and adoption of more liberal-democratic values and institutions. In outline the content of these three recurring narratives are:

1. Baltic-Nazism – the allegation is repeatedly made that citizens across the Baltic region have a history of being sympathetic to Nazi beliefs and values, that albeit somewhat masked, carries over into the present day.
2. Discrimination against ethnic Russians – consistent claims are made that citizens with Russian family histories, or who are Russian language speakers, are being systematically discriminated against by the 'native' populations.
3. Failing state – overlapping with the preceding two narratives, are assertions that the institutional structures of these countries are so frail that over-time the fundamental integrity of these states is weakening and will eventually collapse.

Operating within this milieu, is the small, vocal and increasingly influential Conservative People's Party of Estonia, commonly known as EKRE. The party, and its associated youth movement Sinine Äratus seek to promote: 'national values and a conservative worldview',⁵

⁴ See <https://crimeandsecurity.org/feed/perception-infections> (accessed 30/03/21)

⁵ <https://sininearatus.ee/pohikiri/>

although the European Council on Foreign Relations described them more robustly as "nationalist, xenophobic, anti-liberal, and Eurosceptic".⁶ Their torchlight processions celebrating nationalism have been likened to the "Tiki torch" marches of Trump supporters in Charlottesville.⁷ Rejecting the globalised West and its institutions, EKRE demand a strong, homogenous, Eastern European national identity for the Estonian people. This identity embraces a Finno-Ugric heritage shared with allies including Hungary, Finland and Poland. Yet, whilst such value propositions are clearly coherent with many of the ideas advocated by Russia, EKRE opposes it on issues such as its Eastern border and the provision of Russian-language teaching in schools.

Until recently, EKRE were on the extreme margins of Estonia's political landscape, with the country governed by a social-liberal coalition since 2016. However, following Parliamentary elections early in 2019, EKRE more than doubled their percentage vote share and controversially became part of a new coalition government. Whilst undoubtedly benefiting from the tide of populist political movements sweeping across Europe, EKRE's visibility and success at home owes much to its tightly co-ordinated online and offline networks. In the pre-election period, these were used to: i) visibly confront and challenge its opponents with disinforming narratives; and ii) effectively play on the fears of Estonians that national stability, identity and values were at real risk from the forces of immigration and social liberalism.

Intriguingly, during the election campaign, investigations by a national newspaper revealed members of the youth wing of the party had been using Facebook to create fake accounts and 'troll' their political opponents.⁸ The accounts were linked because each used some variation of the moniker 'Valter'. They also made inflammatory comments on news articles and used Facebook Messenger to target LGBT and equality groups whose offline meetings EKRE members also focused upon. The then leader of Sinine Aratus, Ruuben Kaalep, engaged in these activities as 'Bert Valter'. The network of Valter alter-egos were active and highly proficient participants creating Facebook group pages, memes and videos that used humour to reinforce their message 'in plain sight'. When the newspaper story revealing their activities was published, the chair of EKRE (now an Interior Minister of Government) sought to normalize this conduct, stating:

"I see nothing to be criticized, nothing criminal about this. It is all a reaction to an information operation by the mainstream media that is currently underway. What is wrong with a person expressing their opinion under three different Facebook accounts?"

In response to which other EKRE supporters mobilized an online counter campaign, adopting the hashtag "#istandwithvalter" and targeting the newspaper's Facebook posts with replies simply reading 'ekre'.

Importantly, given the interests of this article, a particular social fracture exploited by EKRE and this digital campaign (as well as Russian state media) was growing anti-refugee sentiment within Estonia, when the country was due to be a signatory to the EU Migration Pact. EKRE

⁶ https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_rise_of_estonias_radical_right_to_engage_or_not_to_engage

⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/estonias-far-right-ekre-party-threaten-election-upset/>

⁸ <https://news.postimees.ee/6501755/ekre-sees-no-problem-with-trolling>

rapidly and vocally mobilised supporters to protest⁹ outside the Riigikogu that the Migration Pact threatened Estonian sovereignty, a narrative that President Kaljulaid labelled one of “*hysteria, lies and hurt*”¹⁰. Sustained online and offline pressure from EKRE undermined government stability almost to the point of its collapse and ultimately was successful, not only in blocking Estonia’s endorsement of the Pact, but also pushing the issue onto the public agenda for when they went to the polls four months later.

This short case study is insightful for how it illuminates some of the subtleties and nuances that exist in the digital activities of far-right groups and Russian state backed entities. Estonia is a country where disinformation has been normalized thanks largely to the stream of strategic communications narratives directed at the post-Soviet Baltic states more generally, that emanate from both overt and covert Russian state sources. The point of this case study however, is to illuminate how similar disinformation tactics, techniques and behaviours are now becoming integrated into the conduct of domestic politics of this relatively young liberal-democracy. Although the aims of the domestic political actors and the geopolitical ones may be distinct, the repercussions of their activities blend and impact together, weakening the integrity of liberal democratic processes by attacking key institutions and undermining the ordering of reality.

CONCLUSION

This article has advanced three principal claims. First, that there are clear overlaps between the interests and ideological values of the European far-right movement and the Russian state. Interactions and exchanges between the two have been enabled by their respective presences on social media, albeit the extent of these should not be over-interpreted. Second, the far-right and agencies associated with the Kremlin have both been responsible for important innovations in the conduct of (dis)information operations and campaigns. Third, that the disinforming, distorting and deceptive tactics and techniques they have introduced, have been adopted and adapted by more domestically oriented political actors, and in the process, increasingly normalized.

That the information space has been profoundly polluted by the digital influence engineering activities performed by groups with far-right affiliations seeking to propagate their ideas and prejudices, and by organisations backed by states such as Russia seeking to ‘level up’ the asymmetries they perceive in geopolitical power relations, is well evidenced. Equally important to this story is how social media technologies have been harnessed for each of these entities to provide and secure support, to and from, the other. This has also allowed some of their core idea and value sets to mingle and blend.

Such patterns of development are especially challenging for governments, in terms of developing and implementing policy and practice responses, on the grounds that they cut across how state authorities typically organize. Liberal democratic governments tend to separate foreign from domestic policy issues. An artefact of which is that there is a higher degree of permissibility for monitoring and surveilling the traces of social media communications of other state actors, than applies to one’s own citizens. Thus, the ways in which the disinformation challenge has evolved, induces tensions and dilemmas about how

⁹ <https://news.err.ee/880019/ekre-anti-migration-pact-protest-gets-out-of-hand-ratas-condemns-violence>

¹⁰ <https://www.postimees.ee/6454823/president-kritiseerib-valitsust-nadal-aega-on-koetud-uhiskondlikku-husteeriat-valetatud-ja-haiget-tehtud>

far it is appropriate to go to manage some of the harms attributed to it. This is accentuated by concerns about the potential for ‘control creep’ that will impact upon rights to freedom of expression, and also whether it is legitimate for private social media companies to be the key decision-makers about how, when and against whom to intervene. Ultimately, this accentuates the level of anxiety that state agencies feel about the long-term implications of a social system where what and how we ‘know’ is increasingly fragile and fragmented.

History demonstrates that the social ordering of reality has been recurrently and profoundly shaped and re-shaped by advances in media and communication technologies (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Social media was initially celebrated for its democratising and liberalising possibilities. But it has increasingly become evident that these platforms are equally potent vehicles for practicing mass manipulation through ‘dark nudging’ at unparalleled scale and pace. For Vaughan (1996), the ‘normalization of deviance’ occurs when what was previously perceived as exceptional, becomes viewed as routine. This seems a very apposite descriptor for what is happening at the moment.

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