CHAPTER 2

Russia's trolling complex at home and abroad

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Political trolling in Russia has reached massive proportions, as evidenced by both investigative journalism revealing the existence of 'troll factories'[1] and 'big data' analysis of trolling activity on the internet.[2] Russian 'trolls' have also been officially charged with Kremlin-orchestrated hacking and interference in other countries' affairs, most notably elections.[3] But what is the philosophy behind trolling, and what is its effect on political communication? This chapter looks at both the internal and external dimensions of Russia's trolling complex. Within Russia, trolls' activities serve to neutralise dissident voices on the internet and thereby reduce the potential for anti-regime political mobilisation. Moscow deploys trolls abroad as part of a disruptive and subversive strategy, undermining the liberal order to its advantage.

The philosophy behind the trolling complex

In 2014, in the midst of the war in the Donbass, when the Russian defence minister Sergey Shoygu was asked whether Russian troops had been deployed in the southeast of Ukraine, he replied cryptically: 'It is very difficult to look for a black cat in a dark room, especially if it is not there. All the more stupid to look for it there if this cat is clever, brave and polite.'[4] The insinuation is that it makes no sense to ask about the existence of the putative cat. If the black cat is there – which, in fact, it is – the cat is clever enough to make its presence undetectable, and hence immune from liability.

1. Alexey Kovalev, "Russia's Infamous 'Troll Factory' Is Now Posing as a Media Empire," *Moscow Times,* March 24, 2017, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-infamous-troll-factory-is-now-posing-as-a-media-empire-57534; Dmitry Volchek and Daisy Sindelar, "One Professional Russian Troll Tells All," *RFE/RL*, March 25, 2015, https://www.rferl.org/a/how-to-guide-russian-trolling-trolls/26919999.html.
2. Oliver Roeder, "What You Found In 3 Million Russian Troll Tweets," *FiveThirtyEight*, August 8, 2018, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-you-found-in-3-million-russian-troll-tweets/.
3. "Grand Jury Indicts 12 Russian Intelligence Officers for Hacking Offenses Related to the 2016 Election," https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/grand-jury-indicts-12-russian-intelligence-officers-hacking-offenses-related-2016-election
4. *Lenta.ru*, April 17, 2014, https://lenta.ru/news/2014/04/17/shoygu/; *Novaya Gazeta*, December 14, 2017, https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/12/14/74914-ministr-prevyshe-vsego.

This anecdote reflects the perverse logic behind trolling. In the popular discourse in today's Russia, the adjective 'polite' is often used as an ironic allusion to the Russian military presence in the Crimea. Russian soldiers in the Crimea have been described both as 'little green men', referring to their camouflage, and as 'polite people' in an effort to portray them as peaceful and non-interfering in local people's lives.[5] In this context, Shoygu's reply simultaneously denies and confirms the presence of Russian troops in the southeast of Ukraine. Evasiveness, prevarication and maintaining ambiguity about the truth is a common political tactic in contemporary Russia, one which is consolidated by political trolling. In lieu of classical propaganda geared to convince and manufacture consent,[6] the government's strategy is to manufacture cynicism that stimulates disengagement. Cynicism is a weapon in this context: political trolling seeks to undermine, or suspend, the normative foundations of key areas and principles of liberal governance (such as, for example, elections, democracy, the right to self-determination), by invoking those principles rhetorically, but also ridiculing and deriding their content in actual practice. The writer Peter Pomeratsev's formulation, '[n]othing is true and everything is possible,'[7] aptly describes the cynicism underpinning Russia's trolling complex.

Pro-Kremlin trolling customises for regime purposes activities which used to be the domain of private actors. Originally trolling is a recreational activity carried out by relatively privileged private individuals that self-organise.[8] Pro-Kremlin trolls tend to be precarious workers who are commissioned to perform specific tasks and whose incentive is therefore not self-expression but the need to earn a living. The classic trolling premise of 'doing it for the lulz', that is, for the digital *schadenfreude* produced by pranks and insults, is adapted to further the political purposes of a regime, which is antithetical to the original trolling 'ethos'. The method is to re-appropriate the liberal values of the freedom of speech and civic engagement to create a semblance of citizenry action. In other words, pro-Kremlin trolling relies on citizens' critical faculties to get them engaged in a debate. However, they quickly become alienated as they realise that their engagement proves futile in an internet environment characterised by absurd fabrications, red herrings designed to confuse and mislead, politically-charged attacks and even taunts and insults. Dissident voices appear to be yet another mirage which discourages political mobilisation before it can materialise.

5. Roland Oliphant, "Ukraine Crisis: 'Polite People' Leading the Silent Invasion of the Crimea," *The Telegraph*, March 2, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10670547/Ukraine-crisis-Polite-people-leading-the-silent-invasion-of-the-Crimea.html

6. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

7. Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (London: Public Affairs, 2015).

8. On trolling see e.g. Gabriella Coleman, Hacker, *Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London & New York: Verso, 2015); Wendy Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2015).

Techno-authoritarianism: 'neutrollisation' in domestic politics

Russia uses this approach both at home and abroad. Of course, there are undoubtedly millions of genuine Russia-based supporters of the current regime who disseminate their views in the Russian blogosphere. But trolls do not fall into this category – and they are also quite numerous.

We know this because trolling and bot accounts have their identifiable specificities. Bots are easy to pin down and quantify through network analysis because a bot is a software application which runs automated and structurally repetitive tasks at a high rate.[9] One study estimates that from February 2014 to December 2015, during a particularly intense period in Russian politics, the activity of bots among accounts actively tweeting about Russian politics exceeded 50%.[10] NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO Stratcom COE) assesses that between February and April 2018 only 7% of active users who post in Russian were recognisable as humans or institutions and the remaining 93% were news accounts, bots, hybrid, or anonymous.[11] Trolling accounts maintained by humans are more difficult to identify and need to be examined for patterns that diverge from regular users' behaviour: the absence of personal details, photos, links to other social networks, mentions of relatives and friends, etc.[12] Thematically, a typical troll account usually consists of a stream of non-personal and ludicrous content punctuated with frequent political posts. It is usually investigative journalists and former trolls that help with such identifications, as the authors of this chapter explain in a previously published study of this subject.[13]

Most organised pro-Kremlin trolls work for the Internet Research Agency LLC, commonly known as a 'troll factory'. The agency was founded in the summer of 2013 in Ol'gino in St Petersburg in the aftermath of two developments: the emergence of social media as a platform for political mobilisation during the Arab Spring, and the nationwide wave of anti-regime protests that took place in Russia between 2011 and 2013. The protests were organised by civil society actors and in particular by the so-called 'non-systemic' opposition.[14] The scale of anti-regime mobilisation in those years was the highest since the 1990s. The protest movement resulted in a series of programmatic documents, among them the 'Manifesto of Free Russia'

9. Lawrence Alexander, "Social Network Analysis Reveals Full Scale of Kremlin's Twitter Bot Campaign", *Global Voices*, April 2, 2015, https://globalvoices.org/2015/04/02/analyzing-kremlin-twitter-bots/.
10. Denis Stukal, Sergey Sanovich, Richard Bonneau and Joshua A. Tucker, "Detecting Bots on Russian Political Twitter", *Big Data 5*, no. 4 (December 2017), https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/big.2017.0038.
11. Robotrolling, 2018/2, https://www.stratcomcoe.org/robotrolling-20182-0.
12. Andrey Soshnikov, "Stolitsa politicheskogo trolling" [The capital of political trolling], *Moy Rayon*, March 11, 2015, http://mr7.ru/articles/112478/.
13. Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov, "Neutrollization: Industrialised Trolling as a Pro-Kremlin Strategy of Desecuritization," *Security Dialogue*, 49, no. 5 (2018): 345-363.
14. That is, one operating outside of the parliament, as the parliamentary opposition is widely believed to have been co-opted by the regime to perform a largely symbolic function.

published online by Boris Nemtsov, which called for radical political change.[15] The government liberalised party legislation and reinstated the direct election of governors as a concession (although, regarding the latter, they also introduced municipal and presidential filters which *de facto* meant that the federal government retained a lot of control over regional politics). Since then, however, as evidenced by surveys conducted by the Levada Center, the share of Russian citizens that are willing to participate in protests driven by political demands has been slowly decreasing (save for a brief hike in potential participation in the spring and summer of 2017).[16] This registered decline was most certainly a result of a complex combination of factors, and the authors do not seek to claim here that institutionalised political trolling was the most important of those. Yet, as becomes obvious from a closer look at the actual practice of pro-Kremlin trolling activities, their main aim was unequivocal: to neutralise potential social mobilisation at its origin.

A trolling frenzy in the aftermath of the assassination of Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 shows this mechanism in practice. Nemtsov was an important leader of the Russian 'non-systemic' opposition and his assassination could have damaged the Kremlin if the authorities were shown to have been implicated. In March 2015, *Novaya Gazeta* and *Moy Rayon* published four leaks containing lists of troll accounts with descriptions of their tasks in connection with the assassination of Nemtsov.[17] Trolls were tasked to: spread the view that the authorities did not stand to gain by the assassination and that it was a provocation aimed at creating the impression of the regime's complicity; portray the opposition as capitalising on the death of their comrade, and thereby incite negative attitudes towards them; insinuate the involvement of Ukrainian individuals; and criticise Western politicians for using Nemtsov's murder as an excuse to interfere in Russia's internal affairs. Each post was to include some keywords to facilitate searchability: 'opposition', 'Boris Nemtsov', 'assassination of Nemtsov', 'provocation', 'opposition in Russia'.[18] An empirical analysis[19] demonstrates the 'flooding effect' of the coordinated spread of pre-fabricated messages that the pro-Kremlin trolls subsequently generated. They used highly sensationalist and contradictory content to simulate a public forum that had the appearance of having been generated by ordinary citizens. Their aim was to sow discord and confusion by making it near impossible to separate truth from fiction and intervene in the discussion in a meaningful way.

The ambiguity of trolls who maintain the appearance of authenticity makes it particularly difficult to blow the whistle on a troll. A direct confrontation ends up 'feeding the troll', i.e. it sucks a user into an endless cycle of irony and ridicule that makes a meaningful exchange impossible. The effect is structural in that it

15. Boris Nemtsov, "Manifest svobodnoy Rossii" [Manifesto of Free Russia], *Ekho Moskvy*, June 9, 2012, https://echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov_boris/897379-echo/.

16. Levada Center, Survey on Protests, May 8, 2018, https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/05/08/protests-2/.

17. Diana Khachatryan,"Kak stat' troll'hanterom" [How to become a troll-hunter], *Novaya Gazeta*, March 10, 2015, https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/03/10/63342-kak-stat-trollhanterom.

18. Ibid.

19. Kurowska and Reshetnikov, "Neutrollization: Industrialized Trolling as a Pro-Kremlin Strategy of Desecuritization", 355-57.

prevents political mobilisation from taking off the ground. By using this tactic of neutralisation-by-trolling, or 'neutrollisation', the trolls' puppet masters (possibly affiliated with the Russian authorities) contaminate the internet, thereby undermining it as a space for political engagement and informed debate. Hence, the regime no longer needs to resort to outright coercion or censorship.

Out of 60% of the Russian population that use social media, around 80% occasionally encounter information that makes them angry, and around 15% regularly encounter content that is inimical to their views, annoying or objectionable.[20] The overwhelming majority of such users choose to ignore such information instead of blocking it, confronting the posters, or contacting the site administrator.[21] This may appear to be a sensible strategy. Yet such rudimentary statistics do not provide data about the source of such content, how and where in the social media sphere it has been encountered, and what is the history of handling such information by individual users. In other words, while non-engagement is the most frequent reaction to comments and statements posted by trolls, we need further analysis to understand whether this is an informed choice and to what extent this is an effect of 'neutrollisation'.

Trickster diplomacy

Russia applies these methods abroad, too. Pro-Kremlin trolls generate and cultivate a plethora of fake Twitter and Facebook accounts to engineer political disorientation and alienation on the internet outside of Russia.[22] This international strategy mirrors domestic practices of exploiting self-expression on social media. Russia cannot however deploy its 'neutrollisation' tactics on a global scale given its current relations with the West.

It therefore opts for the role of a playful trickster. A trickster can be defined as an actor who is fully embedded within dominant institutions but subverts them by adopting a cynical and derisive attitude towards them.[23] A trickster does not propose any sustainable alternative to the existing order. It acts instead from within it but undermines and corrupts the system.

The discourse on multipolarity – or of a polycentric world order in Russian diplomacy parlance – is an example of how Western normative grammar can be twisted in this way. Adopted from the neorealist theory of International Relations conceived in US

20. Levada Center, Survey on Social Media, May 8, 2018, https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/05/08/social-media/

21. Ibid.

22. Yevgeniya Kotlyar, "Pervoe videointervyu s eks-sotrudnikom amerikanskogo otdela 'fabriki trolley'" [First video-interview with a former employee of the American department of the 'troll factory'], *Dozhd'*,October 26 , 2017, https://tvrain.ru/teleshow/reportazh/oni_sdelali_video_kak_negr_zanimaetsja-448671/; Nicholas Fandos and Kevin Roose, "Facebook Identifies an Active Political Influence Campaign Using Fake Accounts", *New York Times*, July 31, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/31/us/politics/facebook-political-campaign-midterms.html.

23. For more on the notion of the trickster as used in mythology, folklore, psychoanalysis and more recently in internet studies, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trickster

academic circles and framed as an alternative to US liberal hegemony,[24] Russia's narrative of a polycentric world projects an image of Russia as a guardian of the global order standing against the double standards applied by the West.[25] Such parodic re-appropriation is common when 'humanitarian intervention' is at stake.[26]

The alleged use of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to justify the intervention in Georgia in 2008 provides a perfect example of how Russia resorts to exactly such cynical tactics to bend and distort the meaning of a norm. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, never invoked the doctrine as such. He explicitly justified the intervention in terms of the responsibility to protect Russian citizens as stipulated in the Russian constitution, in contrast to the liberal notion of the right to protection of any individual regardless of citizenship. He also ironically alluded to R2P as 'the term which is very widely used in the UN when people see some trouble in Africa or in any remote part of other regions.'[27] In his turn, the Russian representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, referred to the R2P doctrine to claim that Georgia had failed to carry out its responsibility to protect its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His accusation of double standards is worth quoting:

> 'Now it is clear why, for many months, Georgia rejected our urgent proposal that it sign a legally binding document on the non-use of force to settle the South Ossetian conflict … The President of Georgia said that demanding his signature on such a document was absurd, because Georgia does not use force against its own people. Now it appears that it does. How can we not recall the responsibility to protect that we hear so much about in the United Nations?'[28]

Conclusion

The most sinister aspect of 'neutrollisation' is that it ultimately exploits and undercuts national and global citizens' genuine desire for political engagement. But reacting to a troll only creates more chaos, meaning that confrontation is not a viable or effective option. Recognition is relatively straightforward, if not entirely effortless. 'The EU versus Disinformation' campaign[29] and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence[30] initiative on educating the public on how

24. Xymena Kurowska, "Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms: Russia's Position on Responsibility to Protect," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 14, no. 4 (2014): 489-508.

25. Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly," September 23, 2016, http://russiaun.ru/en/news/ga_71sl.

26. Erna Burai, "Parody as Norm Contestation: Russian Normative Justifications in Georgia and Ukraine and their Implications for Global Norms," *Global Society* 30(1): 67–77.

27. Sergey Lavrov, "Interview to BBC", Moscow, August 9, 2008. For analysis see Anatoly Reshetnikov, "Intervention as Virtue, Obligation and Moral Duty: The Meaning of Russia's Rhetoric on Responsibility During the Georgian and the Crimean Crises", *Russian Politics* 2, no. 2 (June 2017): 155–181.

28. United Nations Security Council 5952nd meeting, s/pv.5952, New York, August 8, 2008, 5, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.5952.

29. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/

30. https://www.stratcomcoe.org/

to identify trolling is a crucial step forward in this respect. However, the moral panic over trolling and efforts to 'name and shame' Russia for its alleged trolling and hacking activities will likely backfire – because this is exactly the reaction that the trolls are looking for. Seasoned internet users know that the best strategy is to ignore trolls, that is, to consciously refuse to be 'neutrollised' by resisting the constant stream of innuendo and negative messages propagated by trolls. This is the educational function of anti-trolling campaigns. If a reaction is necessary, it should be as laconic and unemotional as possible to minimise the risk of 'feeding the troll' and engendering further provocations.

While relevant, such measures are not sufficient for handling Russia's 'trickster diplomacy' because if Russia engages in such diplomacy, it is a direct result of the existing configuration of the international order. Russia resorts to trolling primarily in response to its stigmatisation by the West and as part of its perceived mission to counter the hegemony of the West. Folk wisdom has it that to pacify a trickster one needs to channel its dexterity into solving common problems which transcend the trickster's grievances. In other words, to 'outsmart' it by making it part of the club. In the current strained climate of Russia-West relations, such an option would quickly be labelled as appeasement, legitimisation of aggression, and/or political naiveté. It would also risk undermining the unity of the Western bloc regarding sanctions against Russia, which is the ultimate goal of the Kremlin. For the time being, the West may therefore be stuck with the challenge of dealing with Russia's 'trickster diplomacy'.