

The Kremlin's Platform for 'Useful Idiots' in the West: An Overview of RT's Editorial Strategy and Evidence of Impact



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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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1. Executive summary

This Report provides a detailed overview of the history, agenda, and evidence of impact of the Kremlin-funded international broadcasting network *RT (Russia Today)*. In recent months, *RT* has come under increasing scrutiny for its role in the Kremlin's disinformation campaign against the West. Unlike other agents of this campaign, which operate primarily behind the scenes and whose ties to the Kremlin are less overt (e.g., bot networks, pro-Kremlin trolls, proxy-run disinformation sites, etc.), *RT* operates out in the open, pushing its pro-Kremlin agenda under the guise of 'free speech' and 'alternative' journalism aimed at counteracting the alleged bias of the mainstream media.

Thanks to this public visibility and its close ties to the Russian government, *RT* is seen as the official 'face' of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign in Europe and the United States; consequently, it often receives disproportionate attention and blame within Western policy circles for its contribution to the Kremlin's destabilisation efforts (e.g., in the US intelligence report on Russian electoral interference). At the same time, many people in Europe and the US, including politicians and other persons of influence, continue to exhibit troubling naïveté about *RT*'s political agenda, buying into the network's marketing ploy that it is simply an outlet for independent voices marginalised by the mainstream Western press. These 'useful idiots' remain oblivious to *RT*'s intentions and boost its legitimacy by granting interviews on its shows and newscasts. A significant contingent of the far left and far right, in Europe as well as the US, also openly supports *RT*'s anti-Western agenda.

This Report aims to resolve these conflicting realities, first, by identifying and describing the malignancies of *RT*'s editorial strategy, which unambiguously qualify the network as a Kremlin disinformation outfit, and second, by setting the record straight about the extent and nature of *RT*'s impact, which is frequently overstated to the detriment of sober analysis and apt strategic response. The following points summarise the Report's key insights.¹

¹ This Report benefited from the excellent input of several reviewers. In particular, the author would like to thank Jakub Janda, Spyros Kosmidis, Ben Nimmo, David Salvo, and Veronika Víchová for their invaluable insights and recommendations. Responsibility for the content of this Report lies solely with the author.

Key points

1. **RT's raison d'être is to denigrate the West at all costs and undermine public confidence in the viability of liberal democracy. On these grounds, RT categorically qualifies as a Kremlin disinformation outfit and, more specifically, as an instrument of hostile foreign influence.** Its claim to be a meaningful, legitimate alternative to the 'biased' mainstream news media is nothing but a smokescreen for this malign agenda.
2. **RT's epistemology is rooted in the denial of the very possibility of objective, verifiable truth** (see section 4.). The goal of this epistemology is to trigger a sense of 'reality limbo', whereby viewers' ability to use facts and reason to make sense of their world is subtly undermined, engendering uncertainty, confusion, and doubt at the individual level, and destroying the possibility of meaningful civic discourse and organisation at the societal level. In practical terms, *RT* pursues this epistemology via two themes that consistently define its broadcasting:
 - a. **anti-Westernism (particularly anti-Americanism)**, and
 - b. **conspiracism**.

These two themes reveal the essence of *RT*'s editorial strategy: to pollute the information space with disinformation and speculative noise, provoke doubt about the veracity and impartiality of mainstream news, incite distrust in Western governments and institutions, and ultimately undermine democratic stability by fracturing public consensus about fact-based reality.

3. **RT disguises the malicious objectives of this editorial strategy by claiming to uphold traditional liberal-democratic ideals like free speech, critical journalism, and independent thought** (see section 4.3.). *RT*'s shrewd perversion of these principles through rhetorical ploys like the 'Question More' ad campaign – which appears to advocate media literacy, critical thinking, and reasonable scepticism about media content – can seem highly convincing to the untrained eye. This exploitation of the language of liberal democracy renders *RT*'s messaging difficult to counter, particularly with less sophisticated audiences who do not see through the strategy and buy into *RT*'s ruse that it is a 'brave underdog' attempting to stand up to an 'evil, corrupt establishment'.
 - a. For example, when criticised, *RT* employs a narrative of victimhood and political persecution by Western governments that aligns neatly with the Kremlin line that the West is trying to weaken Russia in order to sustain its hegemony. *RT* thus casts itself as an embattled challenger to the Western imperial order and defender of free speech, vilified for daring to question the mainstream media orthodoxy.
4. **RT uses guest appearances by Western politicians, journalists and writers, academics, and other influential public personalities to boost its credibility** (see section 6.1.). Regardless of their intent, these appearances amount to complicity with the Russian propaganda machine, and thereby render its influence that much harder to counter. *RT* is not a neutral media platform; per point 1, its raison d'être is to disparage and demoralise the West at all costs, and all content it airs is calibrated to serve this purpose. Thus, even guest appearances made in good faith – e.g., motivated by the desire to offset some of *RT*'s more toxic and hyperbolic narratives – are counterproductive.

- a. It is crucial to establish an understanding within relevant circles that *RT* is a tool of the Kremlin, not an independent international broadcaster, and, consequently, that appearing on the network makes one a 'useful idiot' to a hostile foreign power.
- 5. **Expert consensus suggests that in terms of attitudinal influence on viewers, *RT*'s impact is minimal to modest** (see section 8.). At present, definitive conclusions about *RT*'s impact are impossible due to lacking empirical evidence. Acquiring hard data about *RT*'s specific effects should be a research priority for all organisations and governments interested in countering the Kremlin's disinformation campaign.
 - a. **In terms of penetrating and distorting public discourse, *RT*'s impact derives primarily from the secondary circulation its content garners from domestic proxies and 'useful idiots' (e.g., politicians and local or national media that uncritically repeat material originating on *RT*)** (see section 8.4.). This is the frontline of the battle against *RT*'s influence. Disrupting the chain of circulation between *RT* and its proxies, crucially at the level of government and mainstream media, will significantly neutralise its impact.
 - b. **Politicians and media organisations should publically commit to a higher degree of fact-checking rigour when sharing news and information in public fora.** Given the rate at which dis- and misinformation travel in the digital environment, it is incumbent upon leaders and those who wield influence over public discourse to take extra caution to ensure that their communication is factually accurate. Meanwhile, those who are reluctant to make such a commitment should be named and shamed for their abdication of civic responsibility.
- 6. **While the security hazard of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign and influence operations should not be taken lightly, it is imperative to not overinflate the threat of individual influence agents like *RT* and *Sputnik*.** Such a reaction is counterproductive: it further empowers these agents, allowing them to claim excessive success and consequently obtain more funding from the Kremlin to expand their operations.
 - a. In the big picture, *RT* is a second-rate news network with an abysmal reputation and dubious audience numbers that lies about its popularity to appear more relevant than it actually is. An effective mitigation strategy will acknowledge this reality, even if intelligence concerns remain about its ability to plant disinformation and distort public discourse.
 - b. Our approach to *RT* should be similar to that of dealing with a bully: as a rule, never let him know he is getting under your skin; ignore him as long as possible and, when that fails, use humour and public derision to disarm him.

Due to concern about the frequency of public misconceptions about *RT*, we would like to preface this Report with a brief refutation of the four most common myths. In service of correcting these misconceptions, we encourage readers to circulate these arguments, which are carefully based on evidence presented in this Report, within their networks and public fora.

Myth: *RT* is a reliable source of alternative news (i.e., stories that are unreported by mainstream media).

Reality: *RT* is a purveyor of disinformation; it violates journalistic standards of honesty and impartiality in pursuit of a pro-Kremlin political agenda aimed at demonising and weakening the West. *RT* cherry-picks stories that suit its grand narrative about the decay of Western democracy, exaggerating their importance and/or reporting them out of context in a way that fundamentally misrepresents reality. This focus on the dysfunctions and shortcomings of Western democracy is not motivated by commitment to public transparency or the desire to rectify these problems, as is true of independent media in pluralist democratic societies. Rather, it is motivated by the hostile aim to portray the West as wholly degenerate and on the verge of collapse in order to demoralise the public.

Myth: *RT* is worth watching because it provides an insider view of the 'Russian perspective'.

Reality: *RT*'s broadcasting offers no meaningful insight into the perspective(s) of independent Russian voices, not least because *RT* never reports about Russia – only about the failings and hypocrisies of Western society. *RT* exists to serve as the Kremlin's mouthpiece, with content carefully designed and calibrated to manipulate public opinion. Its broadcasting adheres to a single editorial line that runs parallel to the Kremlin's political agenda: to portray Western governments and institutions as incompetent at best or corrupt at worst, regardless of the truth.

Myth: All news outlets are biased to some degree – *RT* is no better or worse than mainstream Western media.

Reality: This is a false equivalence: while it is true that the mainstream media is at times guilty of biased reporting, there is clearly a vast difference between that and outright state control; between imperfect adherence to journalistic standards and their outright abnegation. Equating the traditionally pluralist Western press with a pseudo-news network funded by the Kremlin for the explicit purpose of advancing its global political agenda is intellectually dishonest. The mainstream Western media, while flawed, does not invent fake stories, deny truth, or give airtime and recognition to Holocaust deniers, 9/11 truthers, and other charlatans. *RT* is guilty of all of the above.

Myth: There is no harm in being interviewed on *RT* – it's just another platform for sharing one's message and reaching a wider audience.

Reality: *RT* relies on 'useful idiots' who are either unaware of its agenda or outright supportive of it to boost its credibility as a legitimate news network. Accordingly, appearing on *RT* is not harmless; it enables and legitimates *RT*'s subversive agenda. *RT* is not a neutral platform where one can present a given message on one's own terms. The opposite is true: *RT* operates on a mandate that is fundamentally hostile to Western liberal democratic interests, and any content it airs, regardless of the source, is calibrated to advance that agenda. It is therefore impossible to appear on *RT* without being ultimately complicit in its efforts to undermine Western democracy and pollute the information space.

2. Introduction

This Report details how *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), the Kremlin-funded international broadcasting network, seeks to manipulate the global information space and “[undermine] the standard western model of news reporting” in accordance with the Kremlin’s political agenda.² Although *RT* masquerades as a legitimate news network on par with state-sponsored broadcasters like the *BBC World Service* and *Al Jazeera*, claiming to “[deliver] stories overlooked by the mainstream media” and “[provide] an alternative perspective on major global events” from “the Russian viewpoint”, this Report reveals a far more insidious agenda.³ Bluntly put, **RT is neither a credible journalistic outlet nor an innocuous vehicle for public diplomacy or nation-branding. Rather, its efforts to manipulate international public opinion through the propagation of conspiracism, disinformation, and truth nihilism represent a ‘postmodern’ mutation of Soviet-era propaganda techniques**, “blending traditions of Kremlin subterfuge with the latest in PR and media manipulation”.⁴ The crux of this strategy is a deliberate indifference to the very idea of ‘truth’. Indeed, according to Kremlin insider and political technologist Gleb Pavlovsky, the crucial distinction between Soviet propaganda and today’s is that even the *illusion* of truth has become extraneous. He explains that even when the Soviets lied, “they took care to prove [that] what they were doing was the ‘truth’”, whereas “now no one even tries proving the ‘truth’. You can say anything. Create realities.”⁵

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine war over three years ago, *RT* has been on the frontlines of Russia’s disinformation campaign against the West, which many Western leaders and policy-makers now consider to be one of the most exigent security threats facing the Euro-Atlantic community. Informed by longstanding methods of Soviet-era propaganda doctrine, Vladimir Putin and his crew of political technologists have adapted information-psychological warfare for the digital age, deploying a diverse arsenal of media networks, pseudo-news agencies, Internet trolls, and Twitterbots to inject disinformation, conspiracy theories, and obscurantist vitriol into Western information channels, with the aim of stoking civil discord and undermining public faith in the integrity of the democratic process. In service of establishing a chaotic and illiberal multipolar order, the Kremlin thus hopes to destabilise the

² Bullough, O. (2013). “Inside Russia Today: Counterweight to the Mainstream Media, or Putin’s Mouthpiece?” *New Statesman*. 10 May 2013. <www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/world-affairs/2013/05/inside-russia-today-counterweight-mainstream-media-or-putins-mou>

³ See: <www.rt.com/about-us/>

⁴ Pomerantsev, P. & Weiss, M. (2014). “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money”. *The Interpreter*, pp. 10; Rawnsley, G. D. (2015). “To Know Us Is to Love Us: Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting in Contemporary Russia and China”. *Politics* 35.4, pp. 273-286.

There is an extensive historical literature showing that Russia’s extant media strategy derives directly from methods of information and psychological warfare that were deployed by the Soviet Union against the West throughout the Cold War. For some introductions, Anderson, J. (2006). “The Chekist Takeover of the Russian State”. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 19.2, pp. 237-288; Becker, J. (2004). “Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System”. *European Journal of Communication* 19.2, pp. 139-163; Snegovaya, M. (2015). “Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare”. *Russia Report* 1, Institute of the Study of War; Vázquez Liñán, M. (2009). “Putin’s Propaganda Legacy”. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25.2, pp. 137-159; Walther, U. (2014). “Russia’s Failed Transformation: The Power of the KGB/FSB from Gorbachev to Putin”. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 27.4, pp. 666-686.

⁵ Quoted in: Pomerantsev & Weiss (2014), pp. 9.

transatlantic alliance and manipulate international public opinion to Russia's political advantage. In November 2016, the EU Parliament passed a resolution intended to fight these propaganda activities, including the Kremlin's funding of "anti-EU forces" such as far-right parties that "deny the basic values of liberal democracies".⁶ Predictably, the Russian Foreign Ministry decried the resolution and promised to take retaliatory measures, should the work of Russian media be impeded on European soil. Meanwhile, in a now-customary twist, Putin cast himself as the true custodian of liberal values, telling reporters that the vote represents "a certain, quite obvious, degradation [...] of how democracy is understood in Western society".⁷

With an annual budget of nearly \$310 million, 21 bureaus in 16 countries (including two in the US), broadcasting in six languages, and over four billion YouTube views, *RT* is the crown jewel of Putin's vast media arsenal and the chief purveyor of Russian strategic deception at the global level. As Jill Dougherty explains, the Kremlin's media strategy is two-pronged: at home, the media is used to propagate "a single, unchallenged narrative to unite the nation", while internationally, it is designed "to undermine the viewer's faith in the Western media and inundate them with a tidal wave of 'alternative' information".⁸ **RT's objective, accordingly, is not to apprise its audience of Russia's perspective on world affairs, but to disseminate "forms of discourse that kill the possibility of debate and a reality-based politics", and exploit "the ideal of freedom of information for the purpose of spreading disinformation".⁹** Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine over three years ago, *RT* has intensified its disinformation campaign against the West, peddling conspiracy theories, half-truths and outright lies to sow doubt, confusion, and mistrust in the public mind. The campaign "is calibrated to confuse, befuddle and distract" – not to offer meaningful answers or foster public debate but rather to "provoke doubt, disagreement and, ultimately, paralysis" within the EU and the United States, and thus weaken their political clout.¹⁰

This Report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of *RT*'s background, political agenda, editorial strategy, and evidence of impact on Western public opinion and government policy. Section 3. summarises the network's history and evolution since its founding in 2005. Section 4. examines the two chief constituting elements of *RT*'s political agenda and editorial strategy: anti-Westernism and conspiracism. Two case studies of *RT* broadcasting (section 5.) subsequently demonstrate how this editorial strategy functions in practice. Section 6. describes *RT*'s organisational structure and broadcasting format, as well as the network's credibility strategy via the recruitment of 'useful idiots' in the West. Section 7. summarises the network's perception amongst public institutions in Europe and the US, while section 8. summarises the as-yet nascent research into *RT*'s impact on international public opinion.

⁶ Samuels, G. (2016). "EU Approves Resolution to Fight Back Against Russian 'Propaganda Warfare'". *The Independent*. 24 November 2016. <www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/eu-approves-resolution-to-fight-back-against-russian-propaganda-warfare-a7436036.html>

⁷ Quoted in: ibid.

⁸ Dougherty, J. (2015). "How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons". *The Atlantic*. 21 April 2015. <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/>

⁹ Pomerantsev & Weiss (2014), pp. 16.

¹⁰ Lucas, E. & Nimmo, B. (2015). "Information Warfare: What is It and How to Win It?" CEPA Infowar Paper No. 1, Center for European Policy Analysis, pp. 1.

3. Russia Today: Background and strategic objectives

I. 2005 – 2008: A public diplomacy mandate

Russia Today was founded in 2005 as part of a broader public diplomacy initiative by the Kremlin to improve international attitudes towards Russia following consternation about its negative representation in Western media since the end of the Cold War. In 2001, for example, an aide to President Vladimir Putin complained that “Russia’s outward image is [...] gloomier and uniformly darker compared with reality”.¹¹ Jointly conceived by former media executive and Putin adviser Mikhail Lesin and Kremlin press spokesman Aleksei Gromov, *Russia Today* was thus launched with the benign intention to boost cultural perceptions of Russia abroad. Margarita Simonyan, *RT*’s first and current editor-in-chief, stated that *Russia Today* would “be a perspective on the world from Russia”, and would adhere to “the professional format developed by such TV channels as the BBC, CNN, and Euronews.”¹² However, the network had trouble gaining traction with international audiences, and its apolitical, culturally-minded programming failed to offset negative coverage of Russia in the mainstream international press.

II. 2008 – 2009: Reaction to the Russo-Georgian War

A breakthrough arrived in August 2008 with the five-day Russo-Georgian War. Provoked by widespread Western condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Georgia, *Russia Today* shot back with highly defensive, pro-Russian coverage of the conflict, framing Georgia as the aggressor against the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹³ In particular, its false reports of genocide in Ossetia by the Georgians captured international attention for their brazenness and cemented the network’s reputation as a mouthpiece of the Kremlin.¹⁴ Ultimately, an EU post-mortem report revealed that responsibility for the conflict had been divided between Georgian initiative and a disproportionate Russian response; neither the Western nor Russian narratives about the war had been factually accurate.¹⁵ However, *Russia Today* remained unrepentant about its bias, claiming that it had been an intentional stratagem to counter the anti-Russian bias of Western media. Margarita Simonyan proudly declared that *Russia Today* gained greater international visibility and recognition for being the only English-language outlet “giving the other side of the story – the South Ossetian side”.¹⁶ In a 2012 interview, Simonyan explained that the conflict underscored Russia’s need for a soft power defence against the West; she admitted that *Russia Today* had waged an information war to defend Russia’s

¹¹ Yastrzhembsky in: Avgerinos, K. (2009). “Russia’s Public Diplomacy Effort: What the Kremlin is Doing and Why It’s Not Working”. *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 20, pp. 121.

¹² Quoted in: “RIA Novosti Launches TV Channel, Russia Today”. *Sputnik News*. 7 June 2005.

<www.sputniknews.com/russia/2005060740484511/>

¹³ Ioffe, J. (2010). “What is Russia Today?” *Columbia Journalism Review*. September 2010.

<www.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php>

¹⁴ See for example: “Georgia vs. South Ossetia: A Story of Genocide”. *RT*. 10 August 2008.

<www.youtube.com/watch?v=epQTYfR8mCo>

¹⁵ “Georgia Started ‘Unjustified War’”. *BBC*. 30 September 2009. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8281990.stm>>

¹⁶ Quoted in: Rowland, K. (2008). “Russia Today: Youth Served”. *The Washington Times*. 27 October 2008.

<www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/oct/27/russia-today-youth-served/>

actions in Georgia and described its role as the soft power equivalent of Russia's Ministry of Defence.¹⁷

III. 2009 – Present: The transition to ‘alternative news’

By way of this episode, *Russia Today* forged a new identity, finding its voice as a challenger to Western hegemony and alleged media bias through “coverage of what it calls ‘other’, or ‘unreported’, news”.¹⁸ In 2009, the network rebranded itself as the more neutral-sounding *RT*, signifying its editorial shift away from Russia-centred broadcasting to international news. Margarita Simonyan stated that the purpose of this rebranding was to broaden *RT*'s appeal and attract a larger audience, since international viewers are not “interested in watching news from Russia all day long”.¹⁹ Indeed, today *RT* rarely reports about Russia. Its broadcasting instead falls under two umbrella themes: 1) anti-Westernism (especially anti-Americanism) and 2) conspiracy thinking. These two leitmotifs, subsumed under the iconoclastic slogan ‘Question More’, reveal the essence of *RT*'s editorial strategy: to pollute the information space with disinformation and speculative noise, incite doubt about the veracity and impartiality of mainstream news, and ultimately undermine democratic stability by fracturing public consensus about fact-based reality. The next section examines how *RT* applies these themes in practice.

¹⁷ «Нет никакой объективности» [“There is No Objectivity”]. *Kommersant*. 7 April 2012.
<www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>

¹⁸ Pomerantsev, P. (2015). *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*. London: Faber & Faber, pp. 56-57.

¹⁹ Quoted in: Von Twickel, N. (2010). “Russia Today Courts Viewers with Controversy”. *The Moscow Times*. 23 March 2010. <www.rbt.com/articles/2010/03/23/230310_rt.html>

4. RT's agenda: Anti-Westernism and conspiracism

I. RT's editorial strategy

Explicitly pro-Kremlin reports – like those that Georgians are committing genocide in Ossetia, or, in the lead-up to the annexation of Crimea, that fascists are overtaking Ukraine – constitute only a minority of *RT*'s broadcasting, such that the average viewer will not immediately register them. These extreme stories are instead cushioned within a much broader, dynamic output – one that gives substantial airtime to controversial, ‘anti-establishment’ figures typically sidelined by the Western press and “experts of dubious pedigree”, including conspiracy theorists, anti-globalists, and members of both the far right and far left.²⁰ At the same time, to widen its reach and bolster perceptions of legitimacy, *RT* occasionally sacrifices its counter-hegemonic philosophy to feature industry heavyweights such as Larry King, Ed Schultz, and Chris Hedges, all of whom have their own shows on the network and leverage their reputation to attract other high-profile guests (see section 6.).

First, it is essential to understand that ***RT*'s epistemology is rooted in the denial of the very possibility of objective, verifiable truth**. The goal of this epistemology is to trigger a sense of ‘reality limbo’, whereby viewers’ ability to use facts and reason to make sense of their world is subtly undermined, engendering uncertainty, confusion, and doubt at the individual level, and destroying the possibility of meaningful civic discourse and organisation at the societal level.

In describing *RT*'s editorial strategy, Peter Pomerantsev recounts a conversation with the network’s managing editor:

“There is no such thing as objective reporting,” the editor says.

“But what is a Russian point of view? What does *Russia Today* stand for?”

“Oh, there is always a Russian point of view,” the editor replies. “Take a banana. For someone it’s food. For someone else it’s a weapon. For a racist it’s something to tease a black person with.”²¹ Margarita Simonyan has similarly echoed that “there is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many voices as possible”.²² The logic of this extreme relativism – that there are always two or more sides to a story – is immune to factual rebuttals because *RT* does not strive “to win factual arguments, but merely to spread confusion” and “create doubt and cynicism in the public mind”.²³ The chief goal of this pollution of the information space is twofold: to undermine trust in government and other Western political institutions and, furthermore, to block “the possibility of a reality-based political discourse”.²⁴ **At its extreme, this strategy promises comprehensive civic paralysis; a state of ‘learned helplessness’ resulting from the erosion of informed opinion, logical reasoning, and**

²⁰ Alpert, L. (2014). *Kremlin Speak: Inside Putin's Propaganda Factory*. New York: Tatra.

²¹ Pomerantsev (2015), pp. 55.

²² Quoted in: “Russia Today’s Editor-In-Chief: ‘The West Never Got over the Cold War Stereotype’”. *Der Spiegel*. 13 August 2013. <www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-interview-russia-today-editor-in-chief-margarita-simonyan-a-916356.html>

²³ Lucas & Nimmo (2015), pp. 9, 11.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 10.

notions of social responsibility that are indispensable to civic and political agency in democratic society.²⁵

II. Anti-Westernism

In pursuit of these aims, *RT* brings together a bizarre amalgamation of speakers and viewpoints that often contradict each other ideologically but are united in their anti-Westernism (especially anti-Americanism) and suspicion of ‘the establishment’. *RT* reports little about Russia. Instead, consistent emphasis is placed on the failings and apparent hypocrisies of Western society, by which any criticism of Russia is likewise dismissed on the basis of the West’s double standards and self-interest. Tropes like “the decline of Europe, the rise of other powers, the crisis of global capitalism, and the redefinition of liberal interventionism and misguided democracy promotion” are central to this narrative.²⁶ One report explains that for *RT*,

“it does not matter what the parties in question stand for, as long as they are against the West. Thus *RT* has amplified the messages of ultranationalists in France and former Communists in Italy; it has shown clear bias in political events such as Scotland’s independence referendum and the election of the leader of the UK Labour Party. The unifying factor behind those it supports can be summed up in the word ‘anti’: they are anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-nuclear and anti-American, as well as being, in many cases, anti-each other. Strengthening them weakens the West”.²⁷

A good example of *RT*’s staunch anti-Americanism (and proclivity for whataboutism²⁸) is its coverage of the 2015 Baltimore and Ferguson protests in the US. In July 2015, the author of this Report conducted an informal analysis of this coverage with colleagues at the University of Oxford. Comparisons across four of *RT*’s YouTube channels – *RT International* (the English-language flagship), *RT Arabic*, *RT Spanish* and *RT German* – revealed a consistent refrain: “the oppression of blacks in the US has become so unbearable that the eruption of violence was inevitable”, and that the US therefore lacks “the moral high ground to discuss human rights issues in countries like Russia and China”.²⁹ *RT*’s coverage focused narrowly on police militarisation and brutality, “protesters burning the American flag, and the dissolution of the US judicial system”.³⁰ The protests were repeatedly analogised with Euromaidan and the colour revolutions, with the US government portrayed as “racist,

²⁵ See: Orlov, M. (2016). “We Need More Hell”: Russian Free Speech and the Market of Attention”. *Free Speech Debate*. 29 March 2016. <www.freespeechdebate.com/en/debate/we-need-more-hell-russian-free-speech-and-the-market-of-attention/>

²⁶ Wilson, A. (2015). “Four Types of Russian Propaganda”. *Aspen Rev.* 4. <www.stopfake.org/en/andrew-wilson-four-types-of-russian-propaganda/>

²⁷ Lucas & Nimmo (2015), pp. 8.

²⁸ Whataboutism is a propaganda technique originally employed by the Soviet Union and subsequently continued by post-Soviet Russia that seeks to refute any Western criticism of Russia on grounds of hypocrisy. Whataboutism thus represents a case of *tu quoque*, a logical fallacy, that is defined by the attempted invalidation of an adversary’s position by accusations of hypocrisy without directly disproving their argument.

²⁹ Richter, M. (2015). “The Strange Success of RT on YouTube”. *Free Speech Debate*. University of Oxford. 29 July 2015. <www.freespeechdebate.com/en/discuss/the-strange-success-of-rt-on-youtube/>

³⁰ Ibid.

incompetent, and abusive".³¹ Video footage of the protests was also artificially darkened and included unsettling music to foster a sense of ominousness.³² *RT* even produced a documentary entitled "Ferguson: Life Matters" consisting of interviews with local residents about the problems of the inner-city area.³³ The documentary is openly sympathetic to the plight of the protesters and relies solely on interviewees' opinions, which are accepted at face value without any fact-checking or contextual analysis to gauge their merit. Crucially, while *RT* does not (typically) lie outright in its reporting, it presents "facts in a way that distorts the reality of the situation and leads viewers to certain conclusions. [...] Important bits of context and key facts are ignored if these would undermine the idea being presented".³⁴

For the sake of fairness, it must be acknowledged that despite these malign intentions, *RT* has enjoyed a small handful of journalistic accomplishments. For example, its coverage of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Guantanamo Bay hunger strikes, and the 2010 WikiLeaks scandal was incisive, with the former two earning *RT* International Emmy Award nominations. However, the critical point here is that ***RT's treatment of these events is not motivated by a genuine commitment to principled, balanced journalism, but rather by opportunism to demonise the US government for its apparent contradictions and democratic shortcomings.*** Internal reports confirm this agenda: according to former anchor Liz Wahl, *RT*'s mission is "to make America look bad and Russia look good, no matter what the truth is".³⁵ Moreover, while the network employs native English speakers to provide a veneer of authenticity, its senior management is almost entirely Russian. This vertical power structure ensures adherence to the appropriate narrative and bars independent journalism. Additionally, no politically sensitive material is permitted to air without approval from the Russian foreign ministry.³⁶ *The Moscow Times* interviewed internal sources who explained that "foreigners hired by *RT* will often be 'cookie cutter' leftists, ideologically driven against the West [...] believing they will be given a platform to challenge establishment narratives in their home countries".³⁷ These reporters – most of whom are young and inexperienced – typically know little about Russia and lack political introspection.³⁸

III. Conspiracism

The second element of *RT*'s coverage, buttressing its counterhegemonic and anti-Western slant, is its "conspiratorial ethos".³⁹ Wahl has stated that *RT* "thrive[s] off of conspiracy", using it "to stir

³¹ Ibid.

³² For example, see: "Baltimore Clashes: Cops Pepper-Spray Protester in Face at Point Blank Range". *RT*. 3 May 2015. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1gXqrUsZYM>

³³ "Ferguson: Life Matters" *RT*. 2015. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ1DnJjZuYs>

³⁴ Alpert (2014).

³⁵ Quoted in: Alpert (2014); also see: Gray, R. (2014). "How the Truth Is Made at Russia Today". *BuzzFeed*. 14 March 2014. <www.buzzfeed.com/rosiegray/how-the-truth-is-made-at-russia-today>

³⁶ Alpert (2014).

³⁷ Bodner, M., Kupfer, M. & Jardine, B. (2017). "Welcome to the Machine: Inside the Secretive World of *RT*". 1 June 2017. <www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/welcome-to-the-machine-inside-the-secretive-world-of-rt-58132>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hutchings, S. et al. (2015). "Staging the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 on Russia Today and BBC World News: From Soft Power to Geopolitical Crisis". *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 12.1, pp. 642.

confusion".⁴⁰ She explains that *RT* recruits conspiratorially-minded reporters and pundits who "believe the U.S. to be a power so evil it orchestrated 9/11 and other 'false flag' operations".⁴¹ (Wahl also notes that these individuals "enjoy the most rapid career progression" at the network.⁴²) Among others, *RT* gives significant airtime to 9/11 truther, Obama birther, and New World Order conspiracies and has raised questions about the CIA's involvement in the Arab Spring.⁴³ Featured guests include the likes of Webster Tarpley, author of *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in USA*, who claims that "a joint production" of the CIA, MI6, and Mossad is leading "death squads" and "terror commandos" in Syria.⁴⁴ British conspiracy theorist Peter Eyre has similarly claimed that international Zionism is to blame for the war in Syria, which was "planned back in 1997 by Paul Wolfowitz".⁴⁵ *RT* has also run advertisements implying Anglo-American collusion vis-à-vis the Iraq War (see Figure 1 below). This conspiratorial mindset is designed to cultivate paranoia and paradoxically – given *RT*'s rejection of objective reality – insinuates that there is an ultimate truth to be exposed by special 'experts' that is being suppressed by mainstream media and governments (for example, one of *RT*'s popular past shows is called *Truthseeker: Seek Truth from Facts*).⁴⁶ Of course, the failure to ever uncover such a 'truth' only serves to obscure reality even further. Conspiracy theories serve *RT*'s counterhegemonic agenda by functioning as a "weapon of the weak" against the Western socio-political order, and thus draw audiences who are already distrustful of this "global machine of control".⁴⁷

RT's conspiratorial ethos is encompassed by its slogan, 'Question More', which was introduced in 2010 by way of a highly provocative advertising campaign.⁴⁸ The ads involved superimposed, incongruous images accompanied by conspiratorially suggestive questions – for example, one poster asked 'Who poses the greater nuclear threat?' with superimposed portraits of US President Barack Obama and Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Another fused images of a polar bear and an alien with the caption, 'Climate change: science fact or science fiction?' (see Figure 2 below). These ads are extremely savvy: one of the 2010 billboard posters even won the British Awards for National Newspaper Advertising 'Ad of the Month'.⁴⁹ Indeed, **part of what makes *RT*'s brand of propaganda and disinformation so shrewd and difficult to counter is its perversion of traditional liberal-democratic principles of free speech, critical journalistic inquiry, and independent thought.** The

⁴⁰ Quoted in: Alpert (2014).

⁴¹ Wahl, L. (2016). "Discrediting the West – An Insider's View on Russia's RT". *The Institute for Statecraft*. 4 March 2016. <www.statecraft.org.uk/research/discrediting-west-insiders-view-russias-rt>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Alpert (2014).

⁴⁴ "CIA, MI6 and Mossad: Together Against Syria". *RT*. 21 November 2011. <www.rt.com/news/syria-terrorism-cia-destabilization-863>

⁴⁵ Quoted in: Moynihan M. (2012). "Disinformation: 'Pravda' May Be Gone, but Now There's 'Russia Today'". *Tablet* 13 February 2012. <www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/90971/disinformation/2/>

⁴⁶ Hutchings et al. (2015), pp. 645-646.

⁴⁷ Yablokov, I. (2015). "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of *Russia Today* (RT)". *Political Studies Association*, pp. 9.

⁴⁸ The ad campaign was developed by the British advertising agency McCann Erickson. It was banned in US airports. Harding, L. (2009). "Russia Today Launches First UK Ad Blitz". *The Guardian*. 18 December 2009.

<www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/18/russia-today-propaganda-ad-blitz>

⁴⁹ "RT's Controversial Advertising Is Ad of Month in UK". *RT*. 3 March 2010. <www.rt.com/news/rt-controversial-advertising-award/>



Figure 1: RT's Conspiratorial Advertisements about the Iraq War

slogan 'Question More' sounds very compelling at first blush: it appears to advocate media literacy, encouraging people to think critically and to maintain a healthy scepticism about media content. But the underlying message is in fact far more pernicious and manipulative, suggesting that any mainstream narrative in the news cannot be trusted because it has been planted by the government or some behind-the-scenes element of the political establishment. Anything labelled 'official' is untrustworthy; it's all propaganda, it's all lies, the truth cannot be known, democracy is a sham. The objective of this conspiracist insinuation is to erode social trust and cohesion and to discredit the belief – essential to the survival of a democratic society! – that *democracy works* (i.e., that civic participation in the democratic process has a direct impact on public policy and the nation's future). It paints a picture of chaos, helplessness, and widespread societal breakdown caused by a weak and compromised democratic process. And in this nihilistic version of reality, the Russian model accordingly emerges as the only viable solution: a model of paternal, top-down leadership embodying stability, strength, and traditional values.

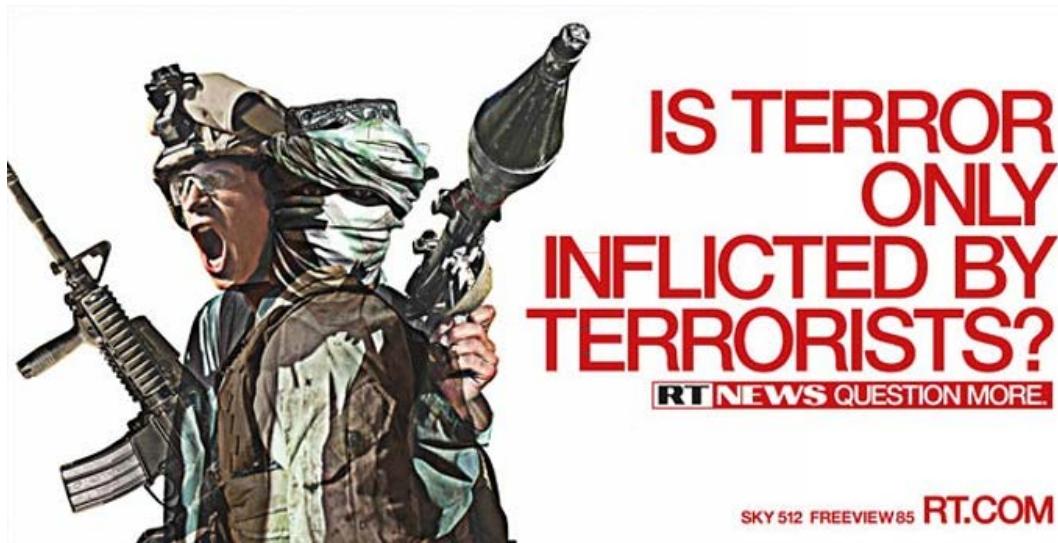
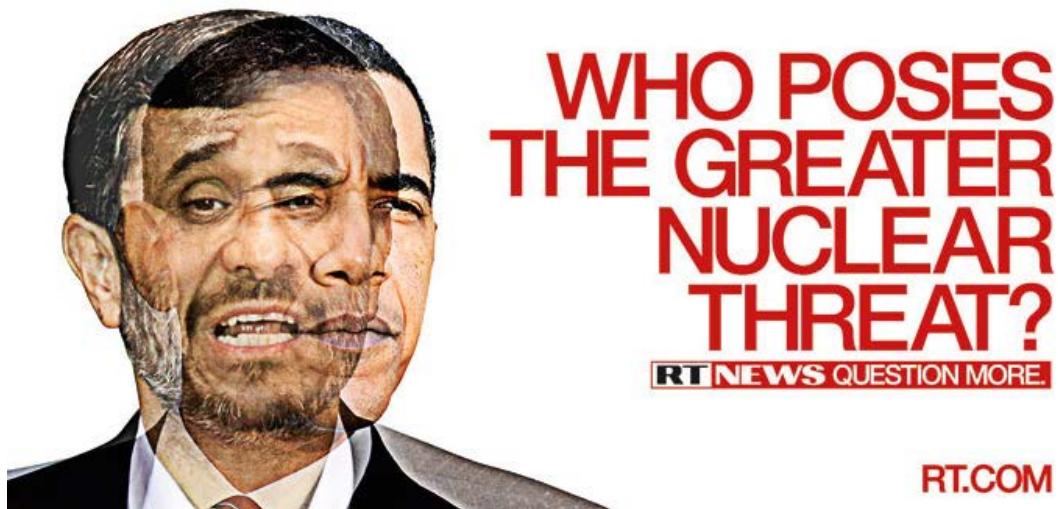


Figure 2: Ads from RT's 2010 'Question More' Advertising Campaign

Through the propagation of conspiracist tropes, *RT* conveniently provides something for everyone with an axe to grind: “European right-nationalists are seduced with an anti-EU message; the far left is co-opted with tales of fighting US hegemony; US religious conservatives are convinced by the Kremlin’s fight against homosexuality”.⁵⁰ When it is called out for its deceptive practices, the network is unrepentant. In the US, for example, the Southern Poverty Law Center has denounced *RT America* for uncritically featuring militia members, white supremacists, Holocaust deniers, and other conspiracy theorists, as well as advocating various other discredited myths.⁵¹ In Britain, the government-approved media regulation authority, Ofcom, has sanctioned *RT UK* for propagating misleading reports about Ukraine and Syria. Confronted with these charges, Margarita Simonyan continues to claim pride in *RT*’s public service and maintains that such controversy is central to the network’s appeal. **Indeed, *RT* uses such criticism to its advantage, employing a narrative of victimhood and political persecution by Western governments that aligns neatly with the Kremlin line that the West is trying to weaken Russia in order to sustain its hegemony. *RT* thus casts itself as an embattled challenger to the Western imperial order and defender of free speech, vilified simply for daring to question the mainstream media orthodoxy.** For instance, in October 2016, when Britain’s National Westminster bank made news for announcing that it was preparing to close down the accounts of *RT UK* for unspecified reasons, the Russian foreign ministry issued a withering statement condemning the decision as “a crude violation of the freedom of speech and the press on part of ‘one of the oldest democracies in the world’, as the British people call themselves”.⁵² Margarita Simonyan issued a similar reply on behalf of the network: “Ironically, calls to restrict *RT* often come from the same quarters that exalt [sic] the virtues of diversity and democracy. Now, they wish to silence a rare voice that dissents from their favored delineation”.⁵³

Of course, as we have already seen, the term ‘dissent’ is an absurd euphemism for *RT*’s editorial agenda. The next section presents two case studies of *RT*’s coverage – the annexation of Crimea and the Flight MH17 crash – to illustrate how *RT* concretely exploits anti-Westernism and conspiracism in the construction of its narratives.

⁵⁰ Pomerantsev (2015), pp. 276.

⁵¹ Scherr, S. (2010). “Russian TV Channel Pushes ‘Patriot’ Conspiracy Theories”. *Southern Poverty Law Center*. 1 August 2010. <www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2010/russian-tv-channel-pushes-patriot-conspiracy-theories> Also see: “Dubious ‘Experts’ Seen on Many Networks”. *Southern Poverty Law Center*. 21 November 2014. <www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2014/dubious-broadcast-%E2%80%98experts%E2%80%99-seen-many-networks>

⁵² Bond, D., Buckley, N. & Belton, C. (2016). “Russia Lambasts UK Freeze on Broadcaster’s Bank Accounts”. *Financial Times*. 18 October 2016. <www.ft.com/content/6c812886-9464-11e6-a1dc-bdf38d484582>

Other Russian officials and media representatives echoed this line, accusing Britain of double standards for attempting to silence a news outlet that was embarrassing to its political establishment. Many were also quick to suggest a murky collusion between NatWest, which is mostly state-owned, and the British government, despite both the Treasury and Prime Minister’s office denying any involvement in the decision.

⁵³ Simonyan, M. (2015). “On The Washington Post and Fear of RT”. *RT*. 3 November 2015. <www.rt.com/op-edge/320636-washington-post-rt-fear/>

5. Case studies

I. Coverage of the annexation of Crimea

Since the early days of the Ukraine crisis, *RT* has been at the helm of Russia's efforts to influence international public opinion about its annexation of Crimea and to obfuscate its role in the conflict. In the first days of March 2014, before Russia officially annexed Crimea but after 'little green men' – Russian troops bearing no insignia – took over the Supreme Council of Crimea, *RT* was already working feverishly to set the stage for the impending takeover, reporting that Crimea could 'take care of itself' without governance from Kiev, and that hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians were fleeing to Russia 'as humanitarian crisis looms' (see Figure 3).⁵⁴ On March 2, 2014, *RT* ran a story titled "Tea, sandwiches, music, photos with self-defense forces mark peaceful Sunday in Simferopol" (see Figure 4).⁵⁵ These are the same 'self-defence forces' that later turned out to be Russian military servicemen in unmarked uniforms who were deployed by Moscow to capture strategic locations in Crimea in preparation for annexation. The story includes a series of photographs of locals posing enthusiastically with the troops, with captions emphasising Crimea's apparent stability and goodwill towards Russia – e.g., "Armed conflict seems to be the last thing on these locals' minds, as self-defense forces provide a welcome if not unexpected change" (see Figure 5).



Figure 3: Screenshot of RT News Headlines (March 2, 2014)

Meanwhile, another article describes that Ukrainian troops in Crimea are "resigning on a massive scale", and are leaving their "living quarters, weapons and ammunition [...] under the protection of the so-called 'self-defense' forces", which are "run by the local population" to "preserve order on the

⁵⁴ De Carbonnel, A. (2014). "How the Separatists Delivered Crimea to Moscow". *Reuters*. 13 March 2014.

<www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-aksyonov-idINL6N0M93AH20140313>

⁵⁵ "Tea, Sandwiches, Music, Photos with Self-Defense Forces Mark Peaceful Sunday in Simferopol". *RT*. 2 March 2014. <www.rt.com/news/ukraine-crimea-photos-tweets-434/>

streets of Simferopol".⁵⁶ And yet another story declares that "Russian authorities have identified definite signs that a '*humanitarian catastrophe*' is brewing in Ukraine", leading to an "estimated 675,000 Ukrainians [leaving] for Russia in January and February [2014], fearing 'revolutionary chaos'".⁵⁷

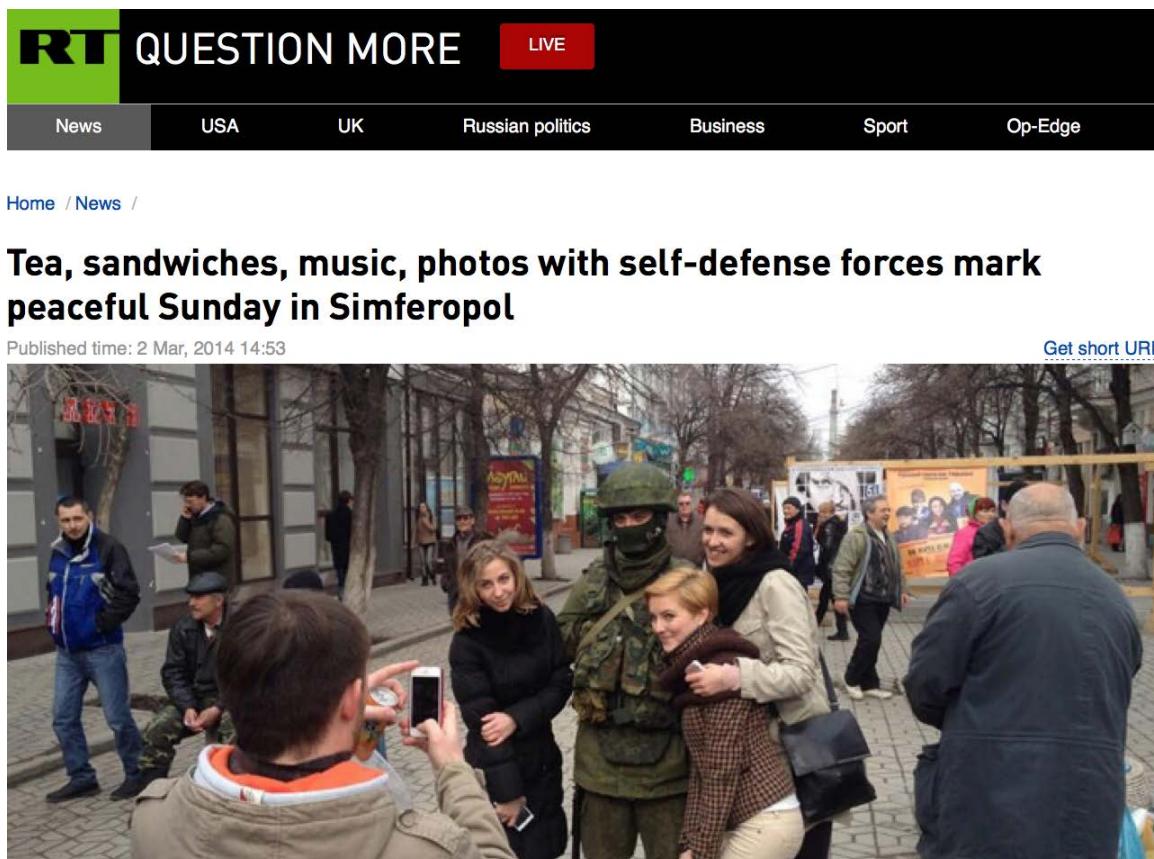


Figure 4: Screenshot of RT Article about Crimea (March 2, 2014)

As evidence of this 'chaos' and alleged 'humanitarian catastrophe', *RT* zeroed in on the Ukrainian parliament's repeal of a 2012 law that conferred official status to any given language in a given region spoken by at least 10% of the local population. The law disproportionately affects the Russian language – which meets this criterion in almost half of Ukraine's oblasts – and its abrogation thus elicited vehement condemnation from Russia as being "a brutal violation of ethnic minority rights".⁵⁸ Many Western leaders also criticised the parliament's decision, and it was ultimately vetoed by then-acting Ukrainian President, Oleksandr Turchynov.⁵⁹ But *RT*'s coverage of the legislative context

⁵⁶ "Ukrainian Troops Dispatched in Crimea Switch to Region's Side". *RT*. 2 March 2014. <www.rt.com/news/ukraine-military-russia-resign-437/>

⁵⁷ "675,000 Ukrainians Pour into Russia as 'Humanitarian Crisis' Looms". *RT*. 2 March 2014. <www.rt.com/news/ukrainians-leave-russia-border-452/>

⁵⁸ Konstantin Dolgov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's human rights commissioner, in: *ibid.*

⁵⁹ "Ukraine's 2012 Language Law to Stay Until New Bill Ready – Turchynov". *Sputnik News*. 3 March 2014.

surrounding the decision omitted crucial details that blatantly misrepresented reality: for example, public deliberation about the status of the Russian language in Ukraine had been ongoing for many years, especially since the 2004 Orange Revolution, but never yielded enough support for legislative action. Ultimately, the 2012 law was pushed through by then-President Viktor Yanukovych's party as a pre-electoral bid to placate his voter base, which was concentrated in southeast Ukraine where the population is predominantly Russian-speaking. The Council of Europe notably dismissed the law as an election tool.⁶⁰ In Ukraine, the law was highly controversial due to fears that it would undermine Ukraine's post-Soviet identity and divide the country.⁶¹ Above all, however, the notion that the Russian language is existentially threatened in Ukraine is farcical considering that the Ukrainian constitution protects the right to speak Russian.⁶² Moreover, Russian-language media and information resources are more widely available than Ukrainian ones, while Russian remains the dominant language of business and faces no usage restrictions in the workplace, including government offices.⁶³ Several cross-national surveys support this conclusion, indicating that Russian language discrimination and/or suppression does not concern the vast majority of Ukrainians. Yet RT's coverage of events in Ukraine completely sidesteps this background, leaving one with the impression of a starkly different reality – one in which Kiev's extremist government actively tyrannises its Russian-speaking minority and renders it second-class.

Armed conflict seems to be the last thing on these locals' minds, as self-defense forces provide a welcome if not unexpected change.



<www.sputniknews.com/world/20140303/188063675/Ukraines-2012-Language-Law-to-Stay-Until-New-Bill-Ready--Turchynov.html>

⁶⁰ Kuzio, T. (2015). *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, pp. 244.

⁶¹ Elder, M. (2012). "Ukrainians Protest Against Russian Language Law". *The Guardian*. 4 July 2012.

<www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/04/ukrainians-protest-russian-language-law>

⁶² Blacker, U. (2014). "No Real Threat to Ukraine's Russian Speakers". *openDemocracy*. 4 March 2014.

<www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/uillearm-blacker/no-real-threat-to-ukraine%E2%80%99s-russian-speakers-language-law-ban>

⁶³ Ibid.

The question of what's more dangerous in close combat - high heels or a machine gun - remains open.



Figure 5: Screenshots of Images and Captions from RT Article about Crimea (March 2, 2014)

II. Coverage of the Flight MH17 crash

Perhaps the most notorious example of *RT*'s smokescreen coverage of events in Ukraine was its account of the Flight MH17 crash. Lukas Alpert gives the play-by-play of the story development in his book *Kremlin Speak*, an exposé of the network's propaganda strategy.⁶⁴ *RT* initially blamed the Ukrainian military for the tragedy – a claim based first on the fact that Ukraine possesses the missiles

⁶⁴ Chapter 1, "The Plane Mythology", in: Alpert (2014).

widely assumed to have downed the plane, and second, that in 2001, its military accidentally shot down a civilian plane flying from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk. *RT* failed to mention, however, that the Ukrainian military had not once used anti-aircraft weaponry against the pro-Russian separatists because they did not have any aircraft. Within a few hours, *RT* (along with other state-run Russian outlets) intensified its speculation: the real target of the missile strike was President Putin's personal plane, which had passed through the same airspace as the MH17 airliner at around the same time. The two planes looked similar, both bearing markings in red and blue – details that supposedly could be distinguished from the ground!⁶⁵ The following day, the plot thickened further when *RT* suggested that MH17's minor deviation from its flight path – which brought it over the conflict zone – had been ordered by Ukrainian officials, and thus implied their intent to blame the crash on Russia and the separatists.⁶⁶ An additional bizarre twist developed on *RT Spanish*, which latched on to a Twitter post by a man named Carlos who claimed to be a Spanish air traffic controller at Kiev's Boryspil International Airport. Carlos claimed that two Ukrainian fighter jets were tailing the plane before it crashed and could have shot it down.⁶⁷ *RT* gave his comments serious consideration, despite the Twitter account being deleted shortly thereafter and both Ukrainian officials and the Spanish Embassy denying that any Spanish employee worked at the airport. The following week, Russia's Ministry of Defence declared it had radar evidence showing a Ukrainian SU-25 fighter jet tailing the MH17 plane.⁶⁸ However, as numerous sources clarified, Ukrainian fighters cannot fly higher than 2300 meters, which is 1000 meters below MH17.⁶⁹

The one theory that *RT* never seriously considered was the one that was accepted by virtually everybody else and has since been reinforced by the investigative findings of the Dutch Safety Board: Flight MH17 was downed by a Russian-made Buk missile fired from territory held by pro-Russian forces (and almost certainly supplied by Russia).⁷⁰ Instead, in the days following the tragedy, *RT* broadcast a number of reports hysterically blasting the US and European "Main Scream" media for unfoundedly "pressing the blame [...] on Russia" and "brushing off all evidence to the contrary as propaganda".⁷¹ In July 2014, Sara Firth, a London-based *RT* reporter, resigned in protest of the network's coverage of the accident, stating that "it was the most shockingly obvious misinformation

⁶⁵ "Reports that Putin Flew Similar Route as MH17, Presidential Airport Says 'Hasn't Overflown Ukraine for Long Time'". *RT*. 17 July 2014. <www.rt.com/news/173672-malaysia-plane-crash-putin/>

⁶⁶ "Questions Over Why Malaysian Plane Flew Over Ukrainian Warzone". *RT*. 18 July 2014. <www.rt.com/news/173792-malaysian-plane-diverted-warzone/> Also see: Engdahl, W. (2014). "Ukraine MH17 May Be CIA False Flag and It Ain't Flying". *RT*. 1 August 2014. <www.rt.com/op-edge/177388-mh17-cia-false-ukraine/>

⁶⁷ "Amenazan de Muerte a un Español en Ucrania por Opinar Sobre la Crisis [A Spaniard in Ukraine Is Threatened with Death about the Crisis]". *RT*. 8 May 2014. <www.actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/127516-amenazar-controlador-espanol-ucrania-crisis>

⁶⁸ "Why Did Ukraine SU-25 Fly Same Path as MH17, Simultaneously at Same Altitude?" – Russian Military". *RT*. 21 July 2014. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEbiSRFYTZY>

⁶⁹ Razumovskaya, O. (2014). "Russia Presents Its Account of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 Crash". *The Wall Street Journal*. 21 July 2014. <www.wsj.com/articles/russia-presents-its-account-of-malaysia-airlines-flight-17-crash-1405952441>

⁷⁰ "MH17 Ukraine Disaster: Dutch Safety Board Blames Missile". *BBC*. 13 October 2015. <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34511973>

⁷¹ "Main Scream Media: Western Press Pin Blame for MH17 Crash on Russia". *RT*. 23 July 2014.

<www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOigZWn-APU> Also see: "CrossTalk: MH17 Spin". *RT*. 23 July 2014. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=yy8r9hbeerk>

and it got to the point where I couldn't defend it anymore".⁷² *RT*'s press office responded with stock truth-denialism:

"Sara has declared that she chooses the truth; apparently we have different definitions of truth. We believe that the truth is what our reporters see on the ground, with their own eyes and not what's printed in the morning London newspaper. In our coverage, *RT*, unlike the rest of the media, did not draw conclusions before the official investigation has even begun. We show all sides of the story, even if everyone else has already decided which side is to blame."⁷³

But it was *RT* that decided from the get-go which side was *not* to blame. Following the publication of the Dutch report in October 2015, *RT* has echoed the Kremlin's declaration that its findings are "unsubstantiated and inaccurate", and reported alternate findings of a Russian probe that placed the missile's launch point in Ukrainian-controlled territory.⁷⁴ To this day, *RT* – along with other state-run Russian news outlets – continues to maintain that pro-Russian rebels were not responsible for the crash and that claims otherwise are simply slander against Russia.

⁷² Quoted in: Plunkett, J. (2014). "Russia Today Reporter Resigns in Protest at MH17 Coverage". 18 July 2014. <www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/18/mh17-russia-today-reporter-resigns-sara-firth-kremlin-malaysia>

⁷³ Quoted in: *ibid*.

⁷⁴ "Final MH17 Crash Report 'Unsubstantiated, Inaccurate', New Russian Probe Says". *RT*. 14 January 2016. <www.rt.com/news/328883-mh17-dutch-report-inaccurate/>

6. Format and operations

RT is registered as an autonomous non-profit organisation that is funded by the Federal Agency on Press and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation (FAPMC).⁷⁵ In 2005, Russia's former international news agency, RIA Novosti (dissolved in 2013), established ANO TV-Novosti (Autonomous Non-profit Organisation TV-News) to function as the parent organisation for *Russia Today*. According to Russian law, autonomous non-profit organisations operate fully independently of their founders; thus, *RT*'s executive management body, the Supervisory Council (Board of Directors), retained total editorial and operational independence from RIA Novosti.⁷⁶

RT's founding budget in 2005 was \$30 million, divided between the Russian government and pro-Kremlin private banks. From 2007 to 2011, the annual budget grew from \$80 million to an all-time high of \$380 million. Since then, it has hovered around \$310 million per year, with plans for an increase of \$19 million over the next two years (2017-2019).⁷⁷

Currently, *RT* comprises six regional/language channels and digital platforms:

- *RT International* (flagship English-language channel)
- *RT Arabic* (Rusiya Al-Yaum, launched in 2007)
- *RT Spanish* (RT Actualidad, launched in 2009)
- *RT America* (launched in 2010)
- *RT UK* (launched in 2014)
- *RT German* (RT Deutsch, launched in 2014)

RT is planning to launch a seventh channel in France by the end of 2017.⁷⁸ The network also has a documentary channel, *RTDoc* (launched in 2011), that airs in both English and Russian, and *RUPTLY*, a subsidiary video news agency. As of July 2017, *RT* has 21 bureaus in 16 countries; these include two in the US (Washington DC and New York City), as well as in London, Paris, Kiev, Delhi, Cairo, and Baghdad. *RT*'s signal is carried by 22 satellites and more than 230 operators; the network claims availability to more than 700 million people in more than 100 countries across 5 continents.⁷⁹ Unlike most cable television channels, which broadcasting companies must pay to air, *RT* has had to pay for access to the biggest US cable markets.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ The parent agency of the FAPMC is the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications. The agency director is Mikhail Seslavinsky. See: <www.fapmc.ru>

⁷⁶ "RIA Novosti Does Not Control RT Television – Russian Media Experts". *RIA Novosti*. 6 February 2012. <www.wayback.archive.org/web/20120210025703/http://en.rian.ru/agency_news/20120206/171179459.html>

⁷⁷ "Kremlin Boosts Budget for TV Channel RT". *The Moscow Times*. 1 December 2016. <www.themoscowtimes.com/news/rt-channel-gets-additional-12-bln-rubles-56375>

⁷⁸ Waterson, J. & Perrotin, D. (2017). "Russia Today Is Expanding in France and Preparing to Launch a French TV Channel". *BuzzFeed*. 10 February 2017. <www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/russia-today-is-expanding-in-france-and-preparing-to-launch>

⁷⁹ See: <www.rt.com/about-us/> These availability numbers are not indicative of viewership; see section 7. for this analysis.

⁸⁰ van Zuylen-Wood, Simon (2017). "At RT, News Breaks You". *Bloomberg*. 4 May 2017. <www.bloomberg.com/features/2017-rt-media/>

RT also maintains an active presence on social media (especially YouTube), and claims to be “the top non-Anglo-Saxon TV news network in terms of online PC audience”.⁸¹ *RT*'s YouTube channel currently has over 4.5 billion views; in 2013, it became the first television news channel to break one billion views on the platform.⁸² However, *RT* is notorious for exaggerating its viewership numbers and these figures should therefore not be taken at face value. For example, several studies have revealed that much of *RT*'s YouTube viewership comes from non-political content, like footage of natural disasters and animal videos, for which *RT* has merely purchased broadcasting rights. By some accounts, this tendency to exaggerate its numbers is motivated by budgetary considerations; in order to continue receiving funding from the government, *RT* must provide evidence of its viability.⁸³ Section 8. addresses the question of *RT*'s audience and public impact in greater detail.

Internal reports by former *RT* employees paint a picture of organisational chaos on the one hand and strict editorial supervision on the other.⁸⁴ *The Moscow Times* reports that *RT*'s editorial line is “rarely stated explicitly” but rather “enforced in various ways depending on the employee’s nationality and political sympathies”.⁸⁵ If journalists deviate from this line – i.e., to promote Russia’s point of view and emphasise opinions absent from mainstream media – they are quickly reined in and reprimanded for not upholding *RT*’s “angle”.⁸⁶ For example, when foreign staff objected to *RT*’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis, the management simply removed them from that coverage and gave their assignments to Russian staff instead. Some senior managers also task their subordinates with writing opinion pieces based on pre-set viewpoints. One source explained that *RT* employees are “merely an instrument through which to communicate a message”.⁸⁷ Sources also claim that amid the Ukraine crisis in 2014, *RT* adopted non-disparagement agreements to prevent former and current employees from speaking publicly about their experiences with the network. *The Moscow Times* reports that one such document stipulated “a \$50,000 fine, without proof of loss, in the event that the signatory disparages *RT* at any time.”⁸⁸

I. *RT*'s credibility strategy: Recruiting ‘useful idiots’

RT broadcasts primarily in a 24-hour rolling news format, but some of its channels (predominantly the English-language ones) also feature political talk shows. These range from serious (e.g., *SophieCo*, *Worlds Apart*, *Politicking with Larry King*) to paranoid (e.g., *Watching the Hawks*, *The Keiser Report*, *CrossTalk*) to outright caustic (e.g., *Sam Delaney’s News Thing*, *Redacted Tonight*).⁸⁹ To augment its perceived credibility and blur the line between trustworthy broadcasting and disinformation, *RT* recruits well-known media and journalism personalities from Europe and the US to front its shows: among

Rupert Murdoch employed this same strategy when launching FOX News.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Orlova, K. (2016). “The Snake Eats Itself”. *The American Interest*. 20 May 2016. <www.the-american-interest.com/2016/05/20/the-snake-eats-itself/>

⁸⁴ Bodner, M. et al. (2017).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Quoted in: ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *RT*'s shows and episodes are archived online at: <www.rt.com/shows/>

others, Larry King (*Larry King Now*, *Politicking with Larry King*), Chris Hedges (*On Contact*), Ed Schultz (*The News with Ed Schultz*), Thom Hartmann (*The Big Picture*) and Afshin Rattansi (*Going Underground*) all currently host shows on the network. These individuals in turn use their industry status to interview high-profile guests who would otherwise be out of league for the average *RT* journalist; in so doing, they lend *RT* a veneer of legitimacy that allows it to mask its propagandistic intentions and instead portray itself as a serious, reliable newscaster.

Indeed, *RT* has hosted a remarkable number of prominent figures on its shows over the last half decade, including hundreds of Western politicians, journalists and writers, academics, and other influential public personalities. ***RT's accumulative legitimisation via these guest appearances by Western leaders and persons of influence is a major concern requiring urgent redress: even unintentional complicity with the Russian propaganda machine makes its influence that much harder to counter.*** To indicate the magnitude of this problem, the Appendix of this Report presents a short excerpt of *RT*'s guest list, compiled by Kremlin Watch in April 2017 on the basis of *RT*'s online show archives. We consider it likely that the majority of these guests (particularly the one-timers) agree to interviews due to a fundamental lack of awareness about *RT*'s political agenda – indeed, prior to the fallout over Ukraine, a common assumption was that *RT* is merely an insignificant tool of Russian public diplomacy. In some circles, this perception persists even today, borne of incomprehension of the Russian threat and the Kremlin's manipulative agenda, and moreover bolstered by arguments from free speech and truth-relativism: i.e., that Russia is perfectly justified in publicising its own interpretation of world affairs and that this perspective may also bear apposite lessons and critiques for the West and the rest of the world. Individuals who explicitly support *RT*'s counterhegemonic orientation and feature frequently on the network include, to name a few:

- Ron Paul
- Jesse Ventura
- Jill Stein
- Ken Livingstone
- Alex Salmond
- Yanis Varoufakis
- Katrina vanden Heuvel
- Robert Kennedy Jr.
- John Nichols
- Greg Palast
- Nomi Prins
- Peter Schiff
- Stephen Cohen
- Steve Keen
- Richard D. Wolff

While the last three years have prompted growing public awareness about *RT*'s agenda and ambitions, there has not yet been a corresponding decline in guest appearances by Western public figures. ***It is therefore crucial to establish an understanding within relevant circles that RT is an instrument of the Kremlin, not an independent international broadcaster, and, consequently, that appearing on the network makes one a 'useful idiot' to a hostile foreign power.***

7. What do Western public institutions think of RT?

I. The European Union

Concrete European efforts to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda first began to take shape in 2015, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ensuing attempts to influence European public opinion about the conflict.⁹⁰ In March 2015, the European Council tasked High Representative Federica Mogherini, in cooperation with EU institutions and member states, to submit a strategic communication action plan specifically aimed at addressing Russia's ongoing disinformation tactics.⁹¹ Presented in June 2015, the Action Plan on Strategic Communications stipulated three goals:⁹²

1. Effective communication and promotion of EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood;
2. Strengthening the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in EU Member States, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media;
3. Improved EU capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors.

To advance these goals, the EEAS East StratCom Task Force was established in September 2015; it currently comprises about a dozen multilingual communications experts from EU institutions or seconded by member states who analyse disinformation trends and engage in proactive strategic communications campaigns both within the EU and in the Eastern Partnership region to explain key EU policy areas and promulgate positive narratives about the EU. Importantly, the Task Force does not engage in counter-propaganda; it seeks to promote EU policy vis-à-vis the Eastern Neighbourhood in positive terms and additionally identifies and refutes disinformation narratives.

As part of its myth-busting activities, the Task Force publishes the *Disinformation Review*, a weekly newsletter available in eighteen languages that summarises the latest news and analysis on pro-Kremlin disinformation in different countries, and the *Disinformation Digest*, which analyses how pro-Kremlin media see the world and provides a platform for independent Russian voices. A myth-busting network of more than 400 experts, journalists, officials, NGOs, and think tanks from over 30 countries contributes to the *Review* by reporting cases of disinformation to showcase the scope of the campaign.⁹³ The *Digest* primarily follows key trends on Russian social media to better enable the

⁹⁰ Some EU member states (namely the Baltics, as well as Sweden and Finland) have sought to counter Russian disinformation for a decade or more, while others continue to ignore the threat even today. These divergent national strategies are summarised here:

Janda, J. et al. (2017). "Overview of Countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's Subversion Operations". *Kremlin Watch Program, European Values Think-tank*. 16 May 2017. <www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Overview-of-countermeasures-by-the-EU28-to-the-Kremlin%20%99s-subversion-operations.pdf>

⁹¹ See point 13 in: European Council Meeting (19 and 20 March 2015) Conclusions. *General Secretariat of the European Council, Brussels*. <www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

⁹² See: <www.eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/2116/%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20about%20the%20East%20StratCom%20Task%20Force>

⁹³ See: <www.eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/9443/disinformation-review_en>

contextualization of pro-Kremlin narratives.⁹⁴ However, as we at Kremlin Watch have already stated in an open missive to Federica Mogherini, the Task Force in its current form constitutes a feeble response to Russia's vast and well-resourced disinformation campaign; it is absurdly understaffed and lacks anywhere near an adequate budget.⁹⁵ **To be effective, the Task Force requires considerable expansion, both in terms of manpower and funding.**

The most recent attempt to formulate a framework for understanding and responding to the multifaceted scope of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign came in November 2016, with the European Parliament calling on the EU and individual member states to increase their efforts to counter Russian "disinformation and propaganda warfare".⁹⁶ A 59-point resolution authorising a committee report (also calling for stronger countermeasures against ISIS/Daesh propaganda) passed by a substantial majority of 304 to 179 votes.⁹⁷ According to Eugen Freund, an Austrian MEP, the report aims "to explain how various Russian entities, Russia TVs, Sputnik and so on are trying to influence the audience in Europe. They are trying to split Europe and the United States, they are trying to belittle what the United States, what the European Union is doing."⁹⁸ RT is named explicitly as an agent of Russian disinformation in point 8:

"the Russian Government is employing a wide range of tools and instruments, such as think tanks and special foundations (e.g. Russkiy Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual TV stations (e.g. RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e.g. Sputnik), cross-border social and religious groups, as the regime wants to present itself as the only defender of traditional Christian values, social media and internet trolls to challenge democratic values, divide Europe, gather domestic support and create the perception of failed states in the EU's eastern neighbourhood".⁹⁹

Anna Fotyga, the author of the report and former Polish foreign minister, stated that the report itself "was also a target of hostile propaganda" by Russia during the course of its preparation.¹⁰⁰ Unsurprisingly, MEPs on both the far right and far left opposed the resolution: France's National Front, UKIP, and Italy's 5-Star movement all voted against. Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, a spokesman for the National Front, condemned the report as "lying European propaganda", while James Carver of UKIP described it as "worryingly reminiscent of the Cold War".¹⁰¹ Many MEPs on the centre-left abstained from the vote on grounds that the resolution inappropriately equates Russian media and broadcasting with the comparatively more devious propaganda of ISIS/Daesh. According to *Reuters*, "left-wingers

⁹⁴ See: <www.eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/9506/Disinformation%20Digest>

⁹⁵ "Open Letter of European Security Experts to Federica Mogherini: Please Start Taking the Russian Disinformation Threat Seriously!" *Kremlin Watch Program, European Values Think-tank*. 21 March 2017.

<<http://www.europeanvalues.net/mogherini/>>

⁹⁶ Macdonald, A. (2016). "EU Lawmakers Denounce Russian Info Tactics, Anger Putin". *Reuters*. 23 November 2016.

<www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-russia-propaganda-idUSKBN13I2OP>

⁹⁷ The full resolution is available here (points 7-15 pertain to Russia):

<www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0441+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

⁹⁸ Quoted in: "EU Passes Anti-Propaganda Resolution, Angers Russia's Putin". *Euronews*. 23 November 2016.

<www.euronews.com/2016/11/23/eu-passes-anti-propaganda-resolution-angers-russia-s-putin>

⁹⁹ See ft. 97.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in: Samuels (2016).

¹⁰¹ Quoted in: Macdonald (2016).

denounced 'neo-McCarthyism' that risked harming media freedom by treating suspect outlets as agents of Moscow and said the report could stoke confrontation with Russia".¹⁰²

RT has also faced censure from other institutions and officials in Europe. In the UK, *RT* was sanctioned by the media regulator Ofcom for a series of misleading programmes on the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria; Ofcom alleged that *RT* breached the broadcasting code four times on three programmes.¹⁰³ One episode on *RT*'s show *Truthseeker* (discontinued in 2014) claimed that the *BBC* staged a chemical weapons attack attributed to the Assad regime in Syria, while another episode claimed that a government-sponsored genocide was underway in eastern Ukraine.¹⁰⁴ Since *RT* began broadcasting in the UK a decade ago, Ofcom has recorded a total of thirteen breaches of broadcasting regulations.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, the most explicit condemnation of *RT* by a European leader has come from French President Emmanuel Macron, who labelled the network and companion outlet *Sputnik* as "agents of influence and propaganda" in a joint press conference with Putin in May 2017.¹⁰⁶ Following suspected Russian hacking and a last-minute leak of thousands of documents from Macron's presidential campaign, combined with the Russian media's undisguised favouritism for far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, Macron was firm in his reproach: "When news outlets spread despicable lies, they are no longer journalists. They are organs of influence. *Russia Today* (*RT*) and *Sputnik* did not behave as media organizations and journalists, but as agencies of influence and propaganda, lying propaganda – no more, no less."¹⁰⁷ **We command President Macron's resolve to publically name and shame *RT*, and express our sincere hope that other European leaders will follow suit in officially recognising the subversive objectives of *RT* and other pro-Kremlin Russian media.**

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Jackson, J. (2015). "RT Sanctioned by Ofcom Over Series of Misleading and Biased Articles". *The Guardian*. 21 September 2015. <www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/21/rt-sanctioned-over-series-of-misleading-articles-by-media-watchdog>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. The full Ofcom report, detailing the play-by-play of these fabricated broadcasts, is available here: <www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/50507/issue_288.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Jackson, J. (2017). "NatWest Reverses Decision to Close RT's Bank Accounts in UK". *The Guardian*. 30 January 2017. <www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jan/30/natwest-reverses-decision-close-rt-russia-today-bank-accounts-uk>
Other Ofcom reports that have found *RT* in breach of broadcasting regulations on topics including Crimea, Turkey, and NATO are available here: <www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/47635/obb266.pdf>

<www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/46621/issue_308.pdf>
<www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/96012/Issue-319-of-Ofcoms-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin,-to-be-published-on-19-December-2016.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in: Serhan, Y. (2017). "Macron, Standing Alongside Putin, Says Russian Media Spread 'Falsehoods'". *The Atlantic*. 30 May 2017. <www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/05/macron-rt-supnik-are-agents-of-influence/528480/>

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in: Wildman, S. (2017). "French President Emmanuel Macron Just Went After Russia – To Putin's Face". *Vox*. 30 May 2017. <www.vox.com/world/2017/5/30/15712296/macron-putin-standing-up-to-russia-rt-propaganda>

II. The United States

The United States remains several steps behind Europe both in understanding and countering Russian disinformation. Although the US government and security agencies acknowledged and condemned Russia's disinformation campaign surrounding the Ukraine conflict, they did not characterise this informational subversion as a direct threat to American national security until Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election. Promisingly, many government and intelligence officials are now becoming increasingly outspoken about their concern. For example, in a testimony before Congress on May 8, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper declared, "If there has ever been a clarion call for vigilance and action against a threat to the very foundation of our democratic political system, this episode [of Russian electoral interference] is it."¹⁰⁸

Russian disinformation and cyber hostilities against the United States were identified by the US intelligence community in mid-2016: the CIA determined that Vladimir Putin was directly connected to a cyber campaign aimed at disrupting the presidential election, specifically by undermining the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, and helping elect the Republican candidate, Donald Trump.¹⁰⁹ However, the Obama administration was slow in formulating a policy response and concerned about appearing unduly partisan during the campaign.¹¹⁰ After the election, President Obama finally retaliated by expelling 35 Russian diplomats accused of being spies, sanctioning two Russian intelligence agencies and four top intelligence officials, and seizing two compounds suspected of use for Russian intelligence activities.¹¹¹ A bill to "counter foreign propaganda and disinformation" was also introduced in Congress and referred to the House and Senate Committees on Foreign Relations, but went no further.¹¹² These largely symbolic penalties were a vastly insufficient response to what was, by many assessments, the political crime of the century.

Meanwhile, President Trump's persistent denialism regarding Russia's interference in the election (not to mention his personal chumminess with Putin) and the capitulation of many in the Republican Congress to partisan interests at the expense of national security – i.e., defending the White House at all costs and attempting to discredit the special investigation by Robert Mueller – have protected the Kremlin from proportional punishment. The Russia connections of many present and former Trump associates are additionally deeply concerning, such as those of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who received \$45,000 from *RT* for giving a speech in Moscow in 2015 and ultimately resigned following revelations that he misled the Vice President about his communications with

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in: Calabresi, M. (2017). "Inside Russia's Social Media War on America". *Time*. 18 May 2017.

<www.time.com/4783932/inside-russia-social-media-war-america/>

¹⁰⁹ Miller, G. et al. (2017). "Obama's Secret Struggle to Punish Russia for Putin's Election Assault". *The Washington Post*. 23 June 2017. <www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/obama-putin-election-hacking>

¹¹⁰ Recent reports have revealed that national security officials alerted the Obama administration as early as 2014 of the Kremlin's mounting intelligence operations against the US, but neither the White House nor key agencies were willing to act with sufficient force to deter the Kremlin.

Watkins, A. (2017). "Obama Team Was Warned in 2014 about Russian Interference". *Politico*. 14 August 2017.

<www.politico.com/story/2017/08/14/obama-russia-election-interference-241547>

¹¹¹ Bergmann, M. & Kenney, C. (2017). "War by Other Means". *Center for American Progress*. 6 June 2017.

<www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/06/06/433345/war-by-other-means/>

¹¹² See: <www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/2692>

Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Most recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson rejected \$80 million allocated by Congress to the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), which works to combat disinformation from state and non-state actors.¹¹³ Following considerable congressional pressure and a public outcry, Tillerson finally approved \$60 million for use by the GEC at the end of August.¹¹⁴ **The Trump administration's resistance to address Russia's attack on the electoral process raises serious concerns about future, possibly more audacious, assaults on American democratic institutions and the United States' capacity to defend itself against them.**

Despite the obstructionism of President Trump and some Republicans, nascent congressional efforts have been underway since early 2017 to legislate countermeasures against the Kremlin's malign influence operations. High-profile hearings on Russian intelligence activities and influence efforts began in January 2017 and have been followed by a handful of legislative proposals in both the House and Senate, including the 'Commission to End Russian Interference in United States Elections',¹¹⁵ the 'Counteracting Russian Hostilities Act of 2017',¹¹⁶ and the 'Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017'.¹¹⁷ In March, Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) introduced a bill in the Senate to determine whether *RT America* coordinated with the Kremlin to "spread misinformation".¹¹⁸ In June, Congressmen David Cicilline (D-RI) and Matthew Gaetz (R-FL) introduced another bill to eliminate a loophole in foreign agent registration requirements that RT exploited during the election.¹¹⁹ While none of these bills have moved past their introductions, a bipartisan sanctions bill was finally passed in July 2017 that targets Russia, North Korea, and Iran and, most notably, limits executive power to ease these measures.¹²⁰ Despite predictable opposition from the White House, congressional support for the bill was so high it pre-empted potential presidential veto.¹²¹ This legislation is undoubtedly a positive first step towards penalising the Kremlin; however, it is unlikely to be a sufficient deterrent against future aggression. **More comprehensive and punitive measures, combined with**

¹¹³ Toosi, N. (2017b). "Tillerson Spurns \$80 Million to Counter ISIS, Russian Propaganda". *Politico*. 2 August 2017. <www.politico.com/story/2017/08/02/tillerson-isis-russia-propaganda-241218>

¹¹⁴ Toosi, N. (2017a). "Tillerson Moves Toward Accepting Funding for Fighting Russian Propaganda". *Politico*. 31 August 2017. <www.politico.com/story/2017/08/31/rex-tillerson-funding-russian-propaganda-242224>

¹¹⁵ See: <www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/27>

¹¹⁶ See: <www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/94>

¹¹⁷ See: <www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1221>

¹¹⁸ van Zuylen-Wood (2017).

¹¹⁹ "Cicilline Introduces Bipartisan Bill to Close Russia Today Loophole". Congressman David Cicilline, US House of Representatives. 7 June 2017. <www.cicilline.house.gov/press-release/cicilline-introduces-bipartisan-bill-close-russia-today-loophole>

Though this legislation has not moved forward, as of September 2017, the Department of Justice has allegedly requested that individuals associated with RT in the US register as foreign agents, in accordance with the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Sputnik is also under FBI investigation for potential breaches of FARA.

See: Kutner, M. (2017). "RT Claims Its Associates Asked to Register as Foreign Agents in U.S.". *Newsweek*. 11 September 2017. <www.newsweek.com/rt-russia-today-spies-foreign-agents-registration-act-sputnik-trump-mike-flynn-663094> and Moore, J. (2017). "Sputnik News Under FBI Investigation as Russian Propaganda Arm". *Newsweek*. 11 September 2017. <www.newsweek.com/russian-network-sputnik-under-fbi-investigation-possible-kremlin-propaganda-662844>

¹²⁰ Nussbaum, M. & Schor, E. (2017). "Trump Signs Russia Sanctions Bill but Blasts Congress". *Politico*. 2 August 2017. <www.politico.com/story/2017/08/02/trump-signs-bipartisan-russia-sanctions-bill-241242>

¹²¹ The bill passed in the House of Representatives by 419-3 and the Senate by 98-2.

corresponding strategic responses at the executive, institutional, and civic levels, are necessary for a viable long-term defence.

The initial impetus for these legislative efforts was the declassified intelligence report published jointly by the CIA, FBI, and NSA in January 2017, which names the Russian threat in unequivocal terms. The report asserts that Vladimir Putin had ordered a multi-pronged “influence campaign” to help elect Donald Trump and identifies Russian propaganda and deception efforts as a central component of that campaign:

“Russia’s state-run propaganda machine – comprised of its domestic media apparatus, outlets targeting global audiences such as RT and Sputnik, and a network of quasi-government trolls – contributed to the influence campaign by serving as a platform for Kremlin messaging to Russian and international audiences.”¹²²

The report devotes considerable attention to *RT*, describing at length the network’s contrasting coverage of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and pointedly observing its connections to WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange. As putative evidence of *RT*’s impact, the report indicates its substantial social media footprint, pointing out that *RT*’s most popular video on Hillary Clinton, “How 100% of the Clintons’ ‘Charity’ Went to [...] Themselves,” had more than 9 million views on social media, while its most popular video on Donald Trump, “Trump Will Not Be Permitted to Win” (featuring Julian Assange), had 2.2 million views. Yet in a remarkable analytical oversight, the report does not contextualise these figures; there is no mention of the well-documented fact that *RT* habitually inflates its viewership numbers to appear more successful than it really is (see section 8. for more on this). Indeed, as Masha Gessen has argued, the report’s focus on *RT* is overblown and ultimately misleading.¹²³ The 25-page document – which includes six filler pages plus a table of contents – devotes a 7-page appendix to an overview of *RT*’s efforts to portray the US electoral process as ‘undemocratic’ during the 2012 presidential campaign. Its tone is alarmist: *RT*’s audience is growing rapidly, suggesting that its anti-American messaging resonates with the public. In reality, however, *RT*’s viewership is so low that the network is excluded from Nielsen rankings.

Overstating *RT*’s impact is problematic for several reasons. First, doing so plays directly into *RT*’s hands by serving as proof of its success, which justifies its continued funding and operational expansion. The intelligence report was thus a boon for *RT*. Second, overemphasising *RT*’s influence perpetuates that belief at the public level, which is counterproductive for efforts to reduce such influence. Third, a flawed understanding of how *RT* utilises the media ecosystem to gain influence and spread disinformation inhibits our ability to develop appropriate countermeasures. Accordingly, the next and final section aims to provide a more nuanced, sober analysis of *RT*’s impact that leaders and policy-makers may find useful in the formulation of response strategies.

¹²² The full report is available here: <www.assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3254237/Russia-Hack-Report.pdf>

¹²³ Gessen, M. (2017). “Russia, Trump & Flawed Intelligence”. *New York Review of Books*. 9 January 2017. <www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/01/09/russia-trump-election-flawed-intelligence/>

8. Evidence of impact on public opinion

Quantifying *RT*'s efficacy – that is, its influence on public opinion and the primacy of mainstream media – is a thorny task. If the US intelligence community is to be believed, *RT* is a singularly pernicious agent of information influence – an indictment triggered by *RT*'s apparent synchronicity with Russian hacking efforts during the 2016 presidential election and its favour on pro-Trump websites (including *Breitbart* and *InfoWars*) and amongst alt-right trolls. But other Russia watchers and media experts dispute this assessment: Thomas de Waal of Carnegie Europe claims that *RT* “has a small audience” and that “the U.S. intelligence agencies grossly inflated its importance”.¹²⁴ Ellen Mickiewicz also describes *RT*'s audience as “extremely small” and notes that in the US, *RT* does not even make it into the ranking of the top 94 cable news channels, where the lowest channel in that survey has less than a 1% share of all cable news viewers.¹²⁵ That *RT* has to pay for access to the cable market is also indicative of its limited appeal. In Britain, too, *RT* carries less than 1% of the overall television audience.¹²⁶ (*RT* touts the US and Britain as its largest markets.) Stefan Meister of the German Council on Foreign Relations concludes that “we shouldn't overestimate *RT*. The main success of the Russians is the link to social media through bots and a network of different sources”.¹²⁷

I. Television viewership

The anatomy and extent of *RT*'s influence are difficult to pin down for several reasons. First, *RT*'s advertised television viewership statistics are unreliable; the network is notorious for exaggerating its popularity by conflating actual audience numbers with potential reach.¹²⁸ A 2015 Ipsos study commissioned by *RT* put its US weekly audience at eight million, according to which it ranked amongst the top-5 international news channels in the country.¹²⁹ The same study found that 36 million people in ten European countries watch *RT* weekly, also placing it in the top-5 pan-regional news channels. A Nielsen report commissioned in 2014 determined that almost three million people watch *RT* on a weekly basis across seven of the largest US metropolitan areas (Washington DC, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Diego) – more than watch *Deutsche Welle*, *France 24*, or *Euronews*.¹³⁰ But *RT* never disclosed the methodology for these studies, making it

¹²⁴ Quoted in: Dempsey, J. (2017). “Judy Asks: Can Europe Defeat Russian Disinformation?” *Carnegie Europe*. 11 January 2017. <www.carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=67646>

¹²⁵ Quoted in: Erickson, A. (2017). “If Russia Today is Moscow’s Propaganda Arm, it’s Not Very Good at its Job”. *Washington Post*. 12 January 2017. <www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/12/if-russia-today-is-moscos-propaganda-arm-its-not-very-good-at-its-job/>

¹²⁶ “*RT*’s Propaganda Is Far Less Influential than Westerners Fear”. *The Economist*. 19 January 2017. <www.economist.com/news/europe/21715031-kremlin-backed-network-inflates-its-viewership-youtube-disaster-videos-rts-propaganda>

¹²⁷ Erlanger, S. (2017). “Russia’s *RT* Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.” *The New York Times*. 8 March 2017. <www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html>

¹²⁸ For a detailed analysis of this misrepresentation, see: Zavadski, K. (2015). “Putin’s Propaganda TV Lies about its Popularity”. *The Daily Beast*. 17 September 2015. <www.thedailybeast.com/putins-propaganda-tv-lies-about-its-popularity>

¹²⁹ “*RT* has TV Audience of 70 Million Weekly Viewers in 38 Countries – Ipsos”. *RT*. 10 March 2016. <www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-largest-audience-europe/>

¹³⁰ “*RT* Audience in US Doubled in a Year”. *RT*. 15 July 2014. <www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-audience-us-doubled-year>

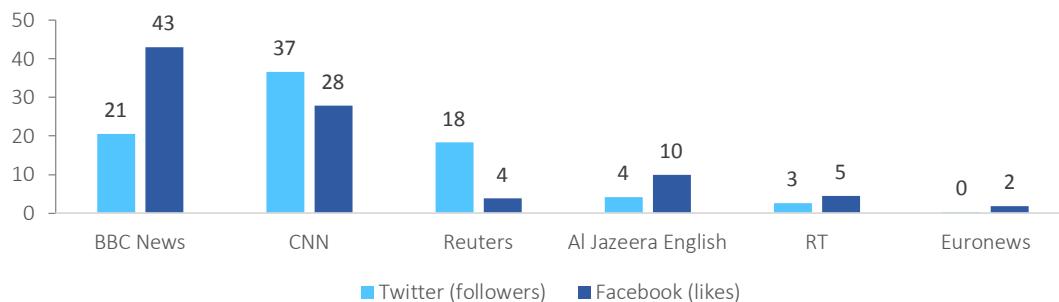
impossible to ascertain how these numbers were reached, whether they represent actual viewers, and if so, how much time these viewers actually spent watching *RT*.

II. Online presence

Second, *RT* is heavily active online, where its stretch and impact are difficult to trace. A 2016 study by comScore (also commissioned by *RT*) puts the network's total monthly audience at 49 million unique users, with the largest share (9.1 million) coming from the US.¹³¹ However, as with the aforementioned viewership surveys, it is unclear what criteria were used to calculate these figures. *RT* has also made much ado about its ostensible success on YouTube, where it became the first news network to reach one billion views and today calls itself the most popular news network on the site in terms of view count, which exceeds 4.5 billion across all its channels. A press release from October 2016 claims, "RT is the absolute leader among international TV News Channels, including CNN and BBC. In total, the aggregate number of views on RT's channels is more than twice as many as that of CNN, three times as many as Euronews, and more than seven times as many as the BBC's YouTube news channels combined".¹³²

But these figures likewise cannot be accepted at face value: it is unclear, for example, which *BBC* channels *RT* included in its estimate; overall, the *BBC* network has a considerably larger following on YouTube. Additionally, it is possible that *RT*'s online viewership numbers have been artificially inflated, for example through the use of bots – a common Russian practice for infiltrating and distorting online information spaces. Furthermore, investigations into *RT*'s YouTube consumption have revealed that the vast majority of its views come from wholly apolitical material, namely footage of natural disasters, accidents, animal videos, and the like, for which *RT* purchases broadcasting rights. Finally, *RT*'s following on other social media platforms does not mirror its putative success on YouTube: as the chart below shows, *RT* has a dramatically smaller following on Twitter and Facebook as compared with the *BBC*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, and even *Al Jazeera*.

**News Organisations' Twitter and Facebook Followers, July 2017
(Millions)**



[double-us/](#)

¹³¹ "RT's Online Audience Approaches 50 Million Unique Users Monthly". *RT*. 29 February 2016. <www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-audience-digital-web/>

¹³² "RT Reaches Record Four Billion Views on YouTube". *RT*. 27 October 2016. <www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-youtube-four-billion/>

III. Empirical research

It is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about *RT*'s impact or effectiveness from these superficial numerical observations. Overall, expert consensus leans towards the conclusion that *RT* enjoys far less public appeal and influence than its management and the Kremlin would have us believe. But without hard data backing it, this conclusion does not inspire a high degree of confidence, as indicated by the alarmism now stemming from the US intelligence community. **Acquiring such hard data about *RT*'s impact should be a research priority for all organisations and governments interested in countering Russia's disinformation campaign.** This research, ideally both quantitative and qualitative in scope, should answer at minimum the following questions:

- Who is *RT*'s audience?
- Is this audience aware of *RT*'s symbiotic relationship with the Russian government?
- What other news (fringe or mainstream) does the average *RT* viewer consume?
- What core socio-political beliefs and values does the average *RT* viewer hold?
- What aspect(s) of *RT*'s broadcasting most appeals to its audience? In other words, what need does *RT* fulfil for its viewers?
- Which of *RT*'s specific narratives have been most popular with its audiences in Europe and the US? Which have been least popular?
- Does exposure to *RT*'s broadcasting (on different subjects, over a period of time) alter people's beliefs?

At present, empirical research into these and other questions of impact is sorely lacking; Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo have likened the dearth of systematic measurement to "worrying about the capabilities of a new gun or tank, without knowing how many have been manufactured and where they have been deployed."¹³³

A preliminary attempt to quantify *RT*'s effects on Western public opinion was conducted in 2016 (by the author of this Report) and involved a controlled survey experiment that tested the short-term attitudinal impact of exposure to *RT*'s coverage of the Ukraine conflict.¹³⁴ The experiment involved participants' exposure to two competing narratives about sovereignty and national self-determination in Ukraine: 1) a video clip from *RT* arguing that the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine are under threat from Kiev and the West, and 2) a video clip from the *BBC* (representing the mainstream Western view of the conflict) arguing that Ukraine's right to sovereignty is under threat from Russia. Participants were randomly divided into groups and shown either one or both clips, then asked a series of questions about their views. Those shown the *RT* treatment were more likely to express a negative view of Western policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and believe that Russian-speaking Ukrainians faced a greater threat to their self-determination than ethnic Ukrainians. (Participants prone to conspiracism were also

¹³³ Lucas & Nimmo (2015), pp. 11.

¹³⁴ Richter, M. (2016). *The Postmodern Pravda: Can Russian International Broadcasting Sway Western Public Opinion?* Unpublished MPhil thesis, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. 25 April 2016.

For a summary, see: Kennedy, D. (2016). "Putin TV Channel Twists the Thinking of Western Viewers". *The Times*. 1 August 2016. <www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-tv-channel-twists-the-thinking-of-western-viewers-l8pwfdmss>

slightly more susceptible to the *RT* line.) However, this effect deteriorated in the treatment groups where participants viewed both video clips, signifying that *RT*'s impact potential is limited in a competitive media environment.

Of course, the engineered nature of experimental studies entails caveats for external validity (i.e., the conclusions hold true within the limited context of the experiment and cannot be automatically transposed to the real world). It is therefore essential to build upon these findings through other methods of research that, in tandem, can paint an accurate and comprehensive picture of *RT*'s impact.

IV. Impact by proxy

As the foregoing discussion shows, *RT*'s direct impact on public opinion appears to be very limited, and should be soberly recognised as such. Certainly, *RT* does not produce the 'hypodermic needle' effect postulated by traditional propaganda theory, according to which the media is able to 'inject' specific cognitions directly into viewers' minds through exposure to persuasive messaging. Particularly in today's highly heterogeneous and consumer-driven media environment, it is fanciful to attribute such power to any news organisation, let alone a second-rate network like *RT*. At the same time, however, its oblique effects as a pollutant within the information space should not be dismissed as inconsequential. Those same features of media heterogeneity and consumer choice enable *RT*'s self-selected audience to form echo chambers and amplify *RT*'s message in pursuit of their own beliefs or political agenda. In an interview for the *New York Times*, Peter Pomerantsev emphasises that merely focusing on *RT*'s ratings as a measure of influence misses the point: "Ratings aren't the main thing for them. These are campaigns for financial, political and media influence".¹³⁵ Ben Nimmo likewise explains that *RT*, together with related media outlets like *Sputnik*, furthers these influence campaigns by generating fodder for other propagators of misinformation and fake news, thus expanding its reach through other channels.¹³⁶

Numerous examples affirm this trend. In 2016, a Dutch populist website successfully obtained more than the 300,000 required signatures to hold a referendum on the EU trade agreement with Ukraine.¹³⁷ The campaign to reject the agreement sourced most of its marketing materials from *RT* and *Sputnik*, and ultimately won the popular vote by two thirds of the 32% turnout. Indeed, *RT* has many fans amongst the European far right who willingly proselytise its message. In Germany, *RT* is especially popular with the virulently anti-immigrant movement Pegida.¹³⁸ "We like Russia here", says Lutz Bachmann, Pegida's leader. "For a stable Europe, you need a friendship with Russia."¹³⁹ In the US, as already mentioned, right-wing websites like *Breitbart* and *InfoWars* actively amplified *RT*'s anti-Clinton coverage during the 2016 US presidential election. Through these proxies, several *RT* stories obtained so much traction they penetrated the mainstream media and even White House statements. In one

¹³⁵ Quoted in: Erlanger (2017).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Applebaum, A. (2016). "The Dutch Just Showed the World How Russia Influences Western European Elections". *Washington Post*. 8 April 2016. <www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/russias-influence-in-western-elections/2016/04/08/b427602a-fcf1-11e5-886f-a037dba38301_story.html>

¹³⁸ Shuster, S. (2015). "Inside Putin's On-Air Machine". *Time*. 5 March 2015. <www.time.com/rt-putin/>

¹³⁹ Quoted in: ibid.

case, an *RT* commentator proposed the conspiracy theory that President Obama had asked British intelligence to surveil the Trump campaign. Judge Andrew Napolitano, a *Fox News* pundit, saw this story and repeated it on air, where it was picked up by then-Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who repeated it again at a White House press briefing.¹⁴⁰ In another instance, Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort cited a false story during a *CNN* interview about a made-up attack on a NATO base in Turkey. The story, which originated on Twitter, was actively circulated by *RT* and *Sputnik*.¹⁴¹ President Trump himself has echoed propagandistic claims originating in Russian state media, like that President Obama and Hillary Clinton 'founded ISIS' and that Clinton's election would lead to World War III over Syria.¹⁴²

RT's impact, in terms of penetrating the information space and warping public discourse, derives primarily from the secondary circulation its content garners from domestic proxies and 'useful idiots'. This is the frontline of the battle against *RT*'s influence. Disrupting the chain of circulation between *RT* and its proxies, crucially at the level of government and mainstream media, will significantly neutralise its impact. ***Politicians and media organisations should publically commit to a higher degree of fact-checking rigour when sharing news and information in public fora.*** Given the rate at which dis- and misinformation travel in the digital environment, it is incumbent upon leaders and those who wield influence over public discourse to take extra caution to ensure that their communication is factually accurate. Meanwhile, those who are reluctant to make such a commitment should be named and shamed for their abdication of civic responsibility.

¹⁴⁰ Nussbaum, M. (2017). "How the U.K. Spying Claim Traveled from an Ex-CIA Blogger to Trump's White House". *Politico*. 18 March 2017. <www.politico.com/story/2017/03/trump-gchq-spying-larry-johnson-intelligence-community-236220>

¹⁴¹ Bergmann, M. & Kenney, C. (2017). "War by Other Means". *Center for American Progress*. 6 June 2017. <www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/06/06/433345/war-by-other-means/>

¹⁴² Applebaum, A. (2016). "Why Is Trump Suddenly Talking About World War III?". *Washington Post*. 28 October 2016. <www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/why-is-trump-suddenly-talking-about-world-war-iii/2016/10/28/be44cc0e-9d24-11e6-a0ed-ab0774c1eaa5_story.html>

9. Conclusion

Key points

1. **RT's raison d'être is to denigrate the West at all costs and undermine public confidence in the viability of liberal democracy. On these grounds, RT categorically qualifies as a Kremlin disinformation outfit and, more specifically, as an instrument of 'hostile foreign influence'.** Its claim to be a meaningful, legitimate alternative to the 'biased' mainstream news media is nothing but a smokescreen for this malign agenda.
2. **RT's epistemology is rooted in the denial of the very possibility of objective, verifiable truth** (see section 4.). The goal of this epistemology is to trigger a sense of 'reality limbo', whereby viewers' ability to use facts and reason to make sense of their world is subtly undermined, engendering uncertainty, confusion, and doubt at the individual level, and destroying the possibility of meaningful civic discourse and organisation at the societal level. In practical terms, *RT* pursues this epistemology via two themes that consistently define its broadcasting:
 - a. **anti-Westernism (particularly anti-Americanism)**, and
 - b. **conspiracism**.

These two themes reveal the essence of *RT*'s editorial strategy: to pollute the information space with disinformation and speculative noise, provoke doubt about the veracity and impartiality of mainstream news, incite distrust in Western governments and institutions, and ultimately undermine democratic stability by fracturing public consensus about fact-based reality.

3. **RT disguises the malicious objectives of this editorial strategy by claiming to uphold traditional liberal-democratic ideals like free speech, critical journalism, and independent thought** (see section 4.3.). *RT*'s shrewd perversion of these principles through rhetorical ploys like the 'Question More' ad campaign – which appears to advocate media literacy, critical thinking, and reasonable scepticism about media content – can seem highly convincing to the untrained eye. This exploitation of the language of liberal democracy renders *RT*'s messaging difficult to counter, particularly with less sophisticated audiences who do not see through the strategy and buy into *RT*'s ruse that it is a 'brave underdog' attempting to stand up to an 'evil, corrupt establishment'.
 - a. For example, when criticised, *RT* employs a narrative of victimhood and political persecution by Western governments that aligns neatly with the Kremlin line that the West is trying to weaken Russia in order to sustain its hegemony. *RT* thus casts itself as an embattled challenger to the Western imperial order and defender of free speech, vilified for daring to question the mainstream media orthodoxy.
4. **RT uses guest appearances by Western politicians, journalists and writers, academics, and other influential public personalities to boost its credibility** (see section 6.1.). Regardless of their intent, these appearances amount to complicity with the Russian propaganda machine, and thereby render its influence that much harder to counter. *RT* is not a neutral media platform; per point 1, its raison d'être is to disparage and demoralise the West at

all costs, and all content it airs is calibrated to serve this purpose. Thus, even guest appearances made in good faith – e.g., motivated by the desire to offset some of *RT*'s more toxic and hyperbolic narratives – are counterproductive.

- a. It is crucial to establish an understanding within relevant circles that *RT* is a tool of the Kremlin, not an independent international broadcaster, and, consequently, that appearing on the network makes one a 'useful idiot' to a hostile foreign power.

5. Expert consensus suggests that in terms of attitudinal influence on viewers, *RT*'s impact is minimal to modest (see section 8.). At present, definitive conclusions about *RT*'s impact are impossible due to lacking empirical evidence. Acquiring hard data about *RT*'s specific effects should be a research priority for all organisations and governments interested in countering the Kremlin's disinformation campaign.

- a. **In terms of penetrating and distorting public discourse, *RT*'s impact derives primarily from the secondary circulation its content garners from domestic proxies and 'useful idiots' (e.g., politicians and local or national media that uncritically repeat material originating on *RT*)** (see section 8.4.). This is the frontline of the battle against *RT*'s influence. Disrupting the chain of circulation between *RT* and its proxies, crucially at the level of government and mainstream media, will significantly neutralise its impact.

- b. **Politicians and media organisations should publically commit to a higher degree of fact-checking rigour when sharing news and information in public fora.** Given the rate at which dis- and misinformation travel in the digital environment, it is incumbent upon leaders and those who wield influence over public discourse to take extra caution to ensure that their communication is factually accurate. Meanwhile, those who are reluctant to make such a commitment should be named and shamed for their abdication of civic responsibility.

6. While the security hazard of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign and influence operations should not be taken lightly, it is imperative to not overinflate the threat of individual influence agents like *RT* and *Sputnik*. Such a reaction is counterproductive: it further empowers these agents, allowing them to claim excessive success and consequently obtain more funding from the Kremlin to expand their operations.

- a. In the big picture, *RT* is a second-rate news network with an abysmal reputation and dubious audience numbers that lies about its popularity to appear more relevant than it actually is. An effective mitigation strategy will acknowledge this reality, even if intelligence concerns remain about its ability to plant disinformation and distort public discourse.
- b. Our approach to *RT* should be similar to that of dealing with a bully: as a rule, never let him know he is getting under your skin; ignore him as long as possible and, when that fails, use humour and public derision to disarm him.

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Appendix: Select RT guest list¹⁴³

I. US politicians and political figures, government representatives (incl. diplomats), and military leaders

Name	Title/Position	Number of Appearances	Shows
Karl Denninger	Tea Party founder	29	The Keiser Report, Boom Bust
Ron Paul	3-time US Presidential candidate (Libertarian and Republican Party) and US Rep., R-TX (former)	26	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Watching the Hawks, SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann, Boom Bust, Politicking with Larry David
Jesse Ventura	Governor of Minnesota (former)	19	The News with Ed Schultz, Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp, Watching the Hawks, SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann, Larry King Now, Politicking with Larry David
Alan Grayson	US Rep., D-FL (former)	17	The News with Ed Schultz, Watching the Hawks, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Jill Stein	2-time US Presidential candidate (Green Party)	14	On Contact with Chris Hedges, The News with Ed Schultz, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp, Watching the Hawks, SophieCo, Sputnik Orbiting the World, Boom Bust, Politicking with Larry David
Pippa Malmgren	Special Assistant to President Barack Obama for Economic Policy	13	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Boom Bust
Mark Pocan	US Rep., D-WI (incumbent)	13	The News with Ed Schultz, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Nina Turner	Ohio Democratic state senator (former)	11	The News with Ed Schultz, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Ralph Nader	Six-time presidential candidate (third parties) and political activist	10	America's Lawyer with Mike Papantonio, SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann, Politicking with Larry David
Lawrence Wilkerson	Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell	8	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Watching the Hawks, SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann

¹⁴³ This list is up-to-date as of April 30, 2017. For an explanation of its compilation, please see the full document, available here: <www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/RT-Guest-List.xlsx>

David Stockman	US Rep., R-MI (former)	6	The Keiser Report, Boom Bust
Bernie Sanders	2016 US Presidential candidate and US senator, I-VT (incumbent)	5	The News with Ed Schultz, Politicking with Larry David
Jack Kingston	US Rep., R-GA (former)	4	The News with Ed Schultz
Cynthia McKinney	US Presidential candidate (Green Party) and US Rep., D-GA (former)	4	Watching the Hawks, SophieCo
Bob Ney	US Rep., R-OH (former)	4	The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Bill Richardson	Governor of New Mexico (former)	4	Politicking with Larry David
Dana Rohrabacher	US Rep., R-CA (incumbent)	4	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo, Politicking with Larry David
Lincoln Chafee	US Senator, R-RI (former) and Governor of Rhode Island (former)	3	The News with Ed Schultz, Politicking with Larry David
Peter DeFazio	US Rep., D-OR (incumbent)	3	The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Keith Ellison	US Rep., D-MN (incumbent) and Deputy Chair of the DNC	3	The News with Ed Schultz, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Michael Flynn	US National Security Advisor (former) and retired US Army lieutenant general	3	The News with Ed Schultz, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo
Kevin Cramer	US Rep., R-ND (incumbent)	3	The News with Ed Schultz
George Mitchell	US Senator, D-ME (former) and Senate Majority Leader (former)	3	The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann, Politicking with Larry David
Robert Reich	Liberal commentator and US Secretary of Labor (former)	3	Watching the Hawks, Politicking with Larry David
Ann Wright	Retired US Army colonel	3	SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Marsha Blackburn	US Rep., R-TN (incumbent)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Pat Buchanan	Conservative commentator and politician	2	SophieCo, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann

Wesley Clark	Retired General of the US Army	2	Politicking with Larry David
William Cohen	US Secretary of Defense (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Tulsi Gabbard	US Rep., D-HI (incumbent)	2	The News with Ed Schultz, Watching the Hawks
Marc Ginsberg	US Ambassador (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Mike Gravel	US Presidential candidate (Libertarian Party) and US Senator, D-AK (former)	2	The Keiser Report, Watching the Hawks
John E. Herbst	US Ambassador (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Gary Johnson	Two-time US Presidential candidate (Libertarian Party) and Governor of New Mexico (former)	2	SophieCo, Politicking with Larry David
David Jolly	US Rep., R-FL (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Jack Matlock	US Ambassador (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo
Chris Murphy	US Senator, D-CT (incumbent)	2	The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann, Politicking with Larry David
Carter Page	Foreign policy advisor to the US Presidential campaign of Donald Trump	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Tim Ryan	US Rep., D-OH (incumbent)	2	The News with Ed Schultz, Politicking with Larry David
Brad Sherman	US Rep., D-CA (incumbent)	2	Watching the Hawks, SophieCo
Sean Spicer	White House Press Secretary and communications director of the RNC (former)	2	The News with Ed Schultz, Politicking with Larry David
John Sununu	White House Chief of Staff to President George H. W. Bush and Governor of New Hampshire (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Donald Trump	Current US President (not at the time of RT appearances)	2	Politicking with Larry David

Jeff Weaver	Manager for the 2016 US Presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders	2	The News with Ed Schultz
Anthony Weiner	US Rep., D-NY (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David
Joseph Wilson	US Ambassador (former)	2	Politicking with Larry David

II. British politicians and political figures, government representatives (incl. diplomats), and military leaders

Name	Title/Position	Number of Appearances	Shows
George Galloway	British MP, Labour Party and Respect Party (former)	Former host	Sputnik Orbiting the World
Lembit Öpik	British MP, Liberal Democrats (former)	55	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
Ken Livingstone	Mayor of London, Labour Party (former)	21	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing, SophieCo, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Alex Salmond	First Minister of Scotland, Scottish National Party (former)	13	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo
Vince Cable	Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (former) ad British MP, Liberal Democrats	8	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Andrew Mitchell	British MP, Conservative Party	7	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
William Patey	British Ambassador (former)	7	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Kwasi Kwarteng	British MP, Conservative Party	6	The Keiser Report, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
John Prescott	Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (former) and British MP, Labour Party (former)	6	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
Crispin Blunt	British MP, Conservative Party	5	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Richard Burdon	Shadow Secretary of State for Justice, Shadow Lord Chancellor, and British MP, Labour Party	5	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World

Nigel Farage	Leader of the UK Independence Party (former) and British MEP, UKIP	5	Sam Delaney's News Thing, Sputnik Orbiting the World
John McTernan	Director of Political Operations for Prime Minister Tony Blair	5	Sam Delaney's News Thing, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Nazir Ahmed, Baron Ahmed	Member of the British House of Lords, unaffiliated	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Natalie Bennett	Leader of the Green Party of England and Wales (former)	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing, Politicking with Larry David
Jeremy Corbyn	Leader of the Labour Party, Leader of the Opposition (British MP at time of <i>RT</i> appearances)	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
David Davies	British MP, Conservative Party	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Nigel Evans	British MP, Conservative Party and independent	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
Peter Ford	British Ambassador (former)	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Mike Freer	British MP, Conservative Party	4	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Barry Gardiner	British MP, Labour Party	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Zac Goldsmith	British MP, Conservative Party	4	The Keiser Report, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Jerry Hayes	British MP, Conservative Party (former)	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
John McDonnell	Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and British MP, Labour Party	4	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Tony Brenton	British Ambassador (former)	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Douglas Carswell	British MP, UKIP and independent	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
David Coburn	Leader of the Scottish UK Independence Party and British MEP, UKIP	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo, Boom Bust
Chris Huhne	Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (former) and British MP, Liberal Democrats (former)	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi

Dave Lammy	British MP, Labour Party	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
Ian Lavery	British MP, Labour Party	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Johnny Mercer	British MP, Conservative Party	3	Sam Delaney's News Thing
John Morris	Secretary of State for Wales (former) and British MP, Labour Party (former)	3	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Diane Abbott	Shadow Home Secretary and British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh	British MP, Scottish National Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Norman Baker	British MP, Liberal Democrats (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Anne Begg	British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Alastair Campbell	Downing Street Press Secretary for Prime Minister Tony Blair	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Bill Cash	British MP, Conservative Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo
Charles Clarke	Home Secretary (former) and British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Simon Danczuk	British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Michael Fabricant	British MP, Conservative Party	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Neil Hamilton	UKIP Group Leader and British MP, Conservative Party (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sam Delaney's News Thing
Carolyn Harris	British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Kate Hoey	British MP, Labour Party	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Neil Kinnock	Leader of the Labour Party (former) and British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Edward Leigh	British MP, Conservative Party	2	SophieCo, Sputnik Orbiting the World

Peter Lilley	British MP, Conservative Party (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Caroline Lucas	Co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Khalid Mahmood	British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Claude Moraes	British MEP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo
Chi Onwurah	British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Vicky Pryce	Joint Head of the United Kingdom's Government Economic Service (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Alan Sked	Founder of the UK Independence Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, SophieCo
Dennis Skinner	British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Jack Straw	British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo
Keith Vaz	British MP, Labour Party	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Ann Widdecombe	British MP, Conservative Party (former)	2	Sam Delaney's News Thing
Hywel Williams	British MP, Plaid Cymru	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi
Brian Wilson	British MP, Labour Party (former)	2	Sputnik Orbiting the World
Steven Woolfe	British MEP, independent	2	The Keiser Report, Sam Delaney's News Thing

III. European politicians and political figures, government representatives (incl. diplomats), and military leaders

Name	Title/Position	Number of Appearances	Shows
Yanis Varoufakis	Greek Minister of Finance (former)	16	The Keiser Report, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Boom Bust

Birgitta Jónsdóttir	Icelandic Member of Althing, Pirate Party	5	The Keiser Report, Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Watching the Hawks, The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Luke 'Ming' Flanagan	Irish MEP, independent	3	The Keiser Report, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Hans Blix	Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs (former)	2	SophieCo
Rick Falkvinge	Founder of the Swedish Pirate Party	2	The Keiser Report, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Jean-Marie Guéhenno	French diplomat (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo
Václav Klaus	President of the Czech Republic (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo
Marine Le Pen	President of the French National Front Party and French MEP, NF	2	SophieCo
Tomislav Nikolić	President of Serbia (former)	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, SophieCo
David Norris	Irish Senator, independent	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko, Sputnik Orbiting the World
Romano Prodi	Two-time Prime Minister of Italy and 10th President of the European Commission	2	SophieCo
Eamon Ryan	Leader of the Irish Green Party	2	The Big Picture with Thom Hartmann
Wolfgang Schüssel	Chancellor of Austria (former)	2	SophieCo
Peter Sutherland	Attorney General of Ireland (former)	2	Going Underground with Afshin Rattansi, Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko
Sahra Wagenknecht	Member of the German Bundestag, Left Party	2	SophieCo
Lamberto Zannier	Italian diplomat and Secretary-General of the OSCE	2	Worlds Apart with Oksana Boyko

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