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Evaluating Putin's Propaganda Performance 2000–2018: Stagecraft as Statecraft

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This chapter analyses the evolution of Vladimir Putin's propaganda machine since he first became Russian president in 2000. It charts the changing functions, messages and methods of the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus during Putin's 18-year tenure at the apex of Russian politics. The chapter analyses both Putin's domestic and foreign propaganda operations. It argues that Putin's domestic support is predicated on his success in the international arena. Although promulgated through different mediums and aimed at different audiences, Putin's domestic and international propaganda practices are mutually reinforcing and interdependent.

Vladimir Putin is a master political performer, but one forced to rely on an increasingly narrow repertoire as his audience dwindles. Stagecraft is at the heart of his statecraft at home and abroad. Putin's propaganda performances have become more dramatic over time (Goscilo, 2013). Plucked from the shadows of Russia's security services to serve as Boris Yeltsin's prime minister in August 1999, Putin entered the national political stage as a virtual unknown. Helped by his friends in the Russian media, Putin used his anonymity to craft a public persona with broad appeal that in March 2000 won him the presidency (Zassoursky, 2004; Gessen, 2012). His background as a security operative allowed Putin to present himself as a Russian patriot, attractive to conservative nationalists. But, equally, his decision to quit the KGB in the twilight days of the Soviet Union to work for the pro-democracy mayor of Leningrad enhanced his support among Russian liberals. Putin's promise to eradicate Chechen terrorism resonated across ideological and class divides. His own propaganda success convinced the new president that to achieve his ambitions to restore the power and prestige of the state, the media must be brought back under Kremlin control. Using a variety of legal and illegal methods, during his first two presidential terms from 2000 to 2008, Putin wrestled Russia's main media outlets away from their private owners (Burrett, 2011).

In the process, he lost the support of liberal opinion at home and abroad.

Since winning a third presidential term in 2012, following a four-year interlude as prime minister while his protégé Dmitry Medvedev served as president, Putin has come to rely on provincial, conservative voters. As a consequence, his propaganda has taken an increasingly nationalist turn, emphasising traditional symbols such as the military and Orthodox Church (Hutchings and Rulyov 2008). Rather than seeking to woo young, urban liberals as he did at the start of his presidency, Putin's propaganda machine now casts them as a fifth column, in league with Russia's enemies abroad (Krastev and Holmes, 2012: 44).

In the foreign policy sphere, Putin came to office believing Russia's international status would be best enhanced through integration with the West. But beginning with the 'colour revolutions' that brought to power pro-Western governments in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) – the latter with assistance from US NGOs – Putin became convinced that Russia would not be accepted into the Western club on equal terms (Sakwa, 2017). His cautious optimism regarding Western relations turned into suspicion and later hostility – changes reflected in Russia's international propaganda practices (Gusinsky and Tsygankov, 2018; Suslov, 2018).

Many features of Putin's propaganda operations today were present from the start of his presidency. From the beginning, Putin's Kremlin promoted the president's personal image as a means of maintaining public support. At the same time as lauding Putin's leadership, the Kremlin and its accomplices in the Russian media character-assassinated his critics (Burrett, 2011; Zassoursky, 2004). After successfully clearing the stage of competing performers, maintaining public interest in the show has become the Kremlin's primary propaganda challenge. To sustain interest in Russia's stage-managed elections, the Kremlin resorts to play fighting with fake opponents (Financial Times, 2018). Surprise is also a vital element of Putin's stagecraft. Domestically, his surprise interventions in Ukraine and Syria were PR masterstrokes, stoking patriotic passions and drawing attention away from everyday hardships while at the same time serving Russia's geopolitical interests (Laruelle, 2016; Suslov, 2015; Teper, 2016). Maintaining the illusion of a strong state and secure society in the face of frequent terrorist attacks, creaking public services and rampant corruption is another key propaganda objective dating from the start of Putin's presidency.

Changes in communication technologies have pushed Putin's propaganda machine away from its initial dependence on national television into other mediums, including social media (Vartanova et al., 2016). Developments in online communications since Putin first took office in 2000 provide his administration with greater access to overseas audiences. The Kremlin has used online platforms to overtly and covertly disseminate its propaganda to foreign audiences, especially as relations with the West declined over the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and Russia's 2014 annexing of Crimea. Russian meddling in US and European elections – a strategy mixing leaks, hacks and misinformation – is a further source of tension. Russia's state-controlled media denounce Western accusations of Russian political interference as evidence of Russophobia (Burrett 2018). The changes in Putin's propaganda operations between 2000 and 2018 are summarised in Table 29.1.

The chapter that follows has two parts. The first section examines Putin's domestic propaganda since 2000. This section begins by analysing the propaganda methods and messages Putin employed to attain and consolidate power. It then discusses the PR tactics used to legitimate Putin's notional transfer of the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev in 2008 and media framing of Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. The section concludes with analysis of Putin's campaign for a fourth

Table 29.1 Putin's Propaganda Operations in 2000 and 2018 Compared

	Propaganda 2000	*Propaganda 2018*
Putin's Domestic Image	Youthful, fit, energetic Pro-business Patriotic Soviet nostalgia Cautiously pro-West Bulwark against Communists Fighting Chechen terrorism	Macho man of action Defender against foreign enemies & fifth column Support for security services Embodiment of strong state Only viable national leader Support for Orthodox Church Fighting global terrorism
Target Domestic Audience	Pro-business lobby Moderate nationalists Anti-Communists	Rural & small town conservatives Anti-globalisers
Domestic Mediums	National state television State & state-friendly press	State television Official websites & social media News websites Non-attributed social media
Target International Audience	Western elites & leaders Russian diaspora in former Soviet states	European & US voters International Russian diaspora
International Mediums	Limited influence Interviews with BBC, Guardian Multilingual television broadcast in former Soviet states	*Russian Today* (now RT) Official websites & social media Non-attributed social media Leaking hacked information Civil society organisations Multilingual television broadcast in former Soviet states
Presentation of USA	Russia's integration with the West Shared concerns, e.g. terrorism Division with Russia over Kosovo	Russophobic Seeking Russia's containment Hypocrisy over election meddling Weak democracy Divided, degenerate society Conflict with Russia over Ukraine & Syria
Presentation of China	Illegal immigrants threaten jobs Territorial encroachment Security threat	Shared values Political and economic partner Building multipolar order

presidential term in 2018. The second section analyses the Kremlin's internationally targeted propaganda since 2000. It traces the downward trajectory of Russia's relations with the West and the corresponding improvement in its diplomatic ties with other parts of the world, most notably with China (Sakwa, 2017). It further analyses how the Russian media frame changing diplomatic relations for domestic audiences and, latterly, the Kremlin's attempts to frame overseas audiences' perceptions of international affairs. Finally, the section examines Russian propaganda efforts to influence the internal politics of other states.

Although Russia's current media environment retains more pluralism than is often credited by Western observers, bringing key communication channels under Kremlin control has been essential to building Putin's propaganda machine (Becker, 2004; Koltsova, 2006; Oates, 2006). Putin's moves to curtail media freedom are documented throughout this chapter. The findings presented in the chapter draw on analysis of Russian media content and on interviews

with journalists working in the Moscow-based media. Survey data is also used to examine the impact of Putin's propaganda on Russian public opinion.

DOMESTIC PROPAGANDA

Vladimir Putin first became Russian president following Boris Yeltsin's surprise resignation on New Year's Eve 1999. As prime minister, Putin became acting president, positioning him to win the March 2000 presidential election. Putin's popularity was boosted by his successful direction of the second war in Chechnya, which began with the Chechen invasion of Dagestan on 7 August 1999. It was the outbreak of war that prompted Yeltsin to promote the little-known Putin – then head of the Security Council – to the role of prime minister. As prime minister, Putin was able to capitalise on the patriotic emotions engendered by the Chechen conflict. Jingoistic coverage of the war on state-owned television helped Putin build his public image as a shrewd commander and strong leader (Zassoursky, 2004).

Prior to his appointment as premier, Putin was a relatively unknown figure outside the political elite. When he took office as prime minister in August 1999, only two percent of Russian voters identified him as their choice to replace Yeltsin (VCIOM, 1999). But Putin's obscurity was an advantage, allowing him to create his public persona from scratch. Television coverage showing Putin planning tough action against Chechen terrorists, inspecting troops and taking part in martial arts competitions transformed him from a rather colourless state security officer into the strong leader Russians desired (Belin, 2000). Basing his 2000 presidential campaign on the ambiguous slogan 'Great Russia', Putin was able to satisfy the competing expectations and interests of diverse domestic constituencies. In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, Putin won by a wide margin, gaining support from neoliberals, post-Soviet communists and Russian nationalists alike.

His own meteoric rise taught Putin the power of the media over public opinion; such a powerful tool could not be left in the hands of Russia's oligarchs. During the Yeltsin era the oligarchs had used their media control to extort favours from the president. Although media-owning oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky backed Putin's 2000 presidential campaign, after the election they quickly proved unreliable partners. The first test of Putin's leadership, and of the loyalty of the media barons to his administration, came with the sinking of the *Kursk* submarine in August 2000. As it became apparent that offers of international assistance had been accepted too late to save the stranded sailors, media indignation became focused on Putin. To his annoyance, news reports in the Berezovsky and Gusinsky media were especially critical of the President (Author's interview with former NTV presenter Vladimir Kara-Murza, September 2003).

The *Kursk* disaster allowed Putin's opponents to question his election promises to restore Russia's national pride and international standing (Sakwa, 2004: 83). Negative media coverage threatened to undermine the president's authority over Russia's political and economic elites by weakening the public support on which it was based. Legal loopholes and the oligarchs' murky financial dealings provided Putin with tools to restructure the media sector. Prosecutions were launched against Berezovsky and Gusinsky, forcing both into exile. In their place, the media became financially beholden to entities close to the Kremlin, with negative consequences for press freedom (Author's interview with former NTV Director Yevgeny Kiselyov, September 2003). By the end of Putin's first presidential term in March 2004, all of Russia's main television channels, and much of its print media, had been brought under either direct or indirect state control (Burrett, 2011).

As well as placing Russia's most popular news providers under Kremlin influence, Putin introduced legal and regulatory changes that further stifled independent reporting. The Kremlin branded coverage of the war in Chechnya as unpatriotic, while criticism of the president was condemned for endangering national security (Ryabov, 2004: 189). In September 2000, Putin introduced the 'Information Security Doctrine'. Identifying Russia's negative international image as a national security concern, the doctrine contained strategies for improving public diplomacy, including the idea of establishing a state-funded English-language news channel. Under the terms of the doctrine, freedom of information was subordinated to the needs of national security and to the preservation of Russian moral values. The doctrine endowed state bodies with new powers to keep certain types of information out of the news, including some economic and environmental issues as well as the expected military and security topics (Panfilov, 2005: 10).

In 2002, Putin's government amended the law 'On Elections' making it harder for journalists to ask candidates probing questions (Lambroschini, 2003). To reduce unfavourable media coverage of the Chechen war, the Kremlin tightened rules governing the accreditation required to report from the province and set up a designated press service to provide journalists with positive information from the front. Putin has further limited his exposure to unwanted questioning by avoiding unscripted press conferences and interviews. At every election since 2000, Putin has refused to take part in televised presidential debates with rival candidates, declaring himself too busy with his duties (EIM, 2000: 38). Putin prefers set-piece interviews to communicate with voters. Most important in this regard is his annual televised Q&A *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, a cross between a town hall meeting and interview format carefully choreographed to look spontaneous (Schuler, 2015: 142).

Although Putin's critics at home and abroad condemned his changes to Russia's media laws and ownership structures, the majority of Russians supported his reforms. Following their information wars with Yeltsin and with each other in the 1990s, media owners Gusinsky and Berezovsky were deeply unpopular with ordinary Russians. The oligarchs' dubious financial dealings helped Putin convince the public that their crooked behaviour, rather than media freedom, was the target of the state's legal proceedings. In this endeavour, Putin was helped by the portrayal of the oligarchs on RTR, the only national television channel that remained fully state owned following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. On Putin's watch RTR, now called *Rossiya*, has become the state's most powerful domestic propaganda tool. At the start of Putin's presidency, the propaganda perpetrated by the channel's flagship news programme, *Vesti*, was often subtle. *Vesti's* commentators, for example, rarely directly attacked Putin's opponents, preferring to invite third party 'experts' to the programme to do it for them. *Vesti* and its Sunday edition, *Vesti Nedeli*, remain important weapons in Putin's propaganda arsenal. But today, compelled by competition from sensationalist reporting online and by palpable public Putin-fatigue, *Vesti's* style is increasingly brash and its claims evermore extreme (The Economist, 2013).

Putin spent his first eight years in office neutering political and media opposition to his administration. As the end of his second term approached, competition to replace him was effectively restricted to within his own ruling group.[1] In particular, rivalries between different clans within the *silovik* – members or veterans of the security services – caused a nasty and protracted turf war (Gulko, 2007: 32). The Kremlin's control over television kept news of the '*siloviki* war' off the airwaves. But, although television was not the site of the *siloviki's* battle, it was through this medium that Putin reasserted his authority to quash the destabilising effects of their war

and to build support for his chosen successor Dmitry Medvedev (Whitmore, 2007).

The biggest obstacle facing the Putin-Medvedev tandem in the March 2008 presidential election was voter apathy. Medvedev needed to win significant voter backing to assert his authority over the *siloviki*. Turnout would be crucial. But with the election looming, there was no obvious threat facing Russia to rally voters behind Putin's preferred candidate. To mobilise support for Medvedev, the Kremlin created a new 'enemy': domestic and international forces bent on overturning Putin's legacy (Lipman, 2007). State-controlled television was used to vilify those who staged public demonstrations against Putin's government ahead of parliamentary elections in December 2007. Protestors were described as 'radical opposition', 'aggressive extremists' and as 'ultra-right and ultra-left radicals'. Only minor broadcasters and the print media reported on the police beating and arresting protestors (Borodina, 2007). At campaign rallies Putin warned cheering crowds to watch out for Russia's enemies. The president accused Western governments of backing 'destructive forces' within Russia that 'scavenge like jackals for money at foreign embassies' (Abdullaev, 2007). Aided by state-controlled media, Putin created a vivid picture of Russia as a besieged fortress with a treacherous enemy within its gates. Higher than usual turnout in the 2007 parliamentary vote suggests this tactic played well. But mobilising hatred is a quick fix with long-term consequences. By invoking anger against internal enemies – real or imagined – Putin exacerbated already deep social divisions and distrust.

Just days after the parliamentary vote, Putin announced Medvedev as his chosen presidential successor. The following day, Medvedev returned the compliment by asking Putin to serve as his prime minister. Without Putin by his side, it was doubtful that the *siloviki* would rally behind the relatively liberal Medvedev. State-controlled television was quickly engaged to reassure elite and mass audiences alike that this change in president would really be no change at all. Putin's patronage was the key theme of Medvedev's campaign for the presidency. Like his mentor, Medvedev dodged participation in the presidential debates. The relatively unknown frontrunner's policies were never probed. Instead, state-controlled television showed an energetic Medvedev jetting around the country, drinking tea with pensioners and cradling babies in gleaming new maternity centres (Arnold, 2007). The strategy succeeded and Medvedev was duly elected with 71 percent of the vote.

Following the 2008 global financial crisis – which hit the resource-dependent Russian economy harder than most – public support for the Putin-Medvedev duo began to decline (Osipov, 2012). In response, Putin's PR rhetoric stepped up its focus on nationalist themes. Putin's on-going campaign to reinvigorate Russian citizens' sense of patriotism is anchored around three main pillars: pride in the state, glorification of the military, and respect for the Russian Orthodox Church. Past military achievements are used to promote patriotism across Russia's diverse citizenry, especially Soviet victory in WW2. Official ceremonies to mark national military holidays and anniversaries have become major media events in Putin's Russia (Hutchings and Rulyov, 2008; Hutchings, 2008). To maximise his patriotic capital, Putin chose Russia's annual holiday commemorating victory in WW2 to make his first visit to Crimea after the peninsula joined the Russian Federation in March 2014 (Luhn and Walker, 2014).

Putin has similarly used the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a platform for building support for the Russian state and to promote Russia's position in other former Soviet states (Admiraal, 2009). On Putin's watch, the ROC has increased its visibility in schools, the military and at national celebrations. In his Christmas address in 2000, Putin declared Orthodoxy as the 'unbending spiritual core of the entire people and

state' (Malykhina, 2014: 53). If Orthodoxy is the nominal state religion, then everyone within the state – and many outside it – can be considered Russian. Closely identifying 'Orthodoxy' with 'Russian' allows Putin to justify interference in the 'near abroad' – especially in Belarus and Ukraine that share the Orthodox faith (Admiraal, 2009: 209). Promoting the ROC therefore serves both Putin's domestic propaganda and foreign policy objectives.

Putin's nationalist rhetoric since 2008 also includes attacks against alleged internal and external enemies of the state. His re-election for a third term in March 2012 was met by major public demonstrations. Putin labelled his domestic detractors as a privileged elite, disconnected from the concerns of the majority of Russians outside Moscow. The best-educated elements of the population were portrayed as traitors, perhaps in the pay of the United States (Krastev and Holmes, 2012: 44). Similarly, in a speech in January 2015, Putin asserted that pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine were not just fighting the Ukrainian army but also a NATO-sponsored 'foreign legion' (Sperling, 2016: 17). The Ukraine crisis gave Putin the perfect opportunity to ignite nationalist sentiments on which to build a new base of anti-Western support for his leadership (Treisman, 2014). Putin's Ukraine strategy worked as intended. Thanks to his role as the embodiment of an internationally resurgent Russia, Putin has managed to improve his popularity during one of the worst economic crises in recent Russian history. Despite tumbling oil prices and Western-led sanctions that sent Russia's economy into recession in 2014, Putin's approval rating hovered around 80 percent (Figure 29. 1).

Putin's dalliance in Ukraine is perhaps the best example of the importance of foreign policy achievements to the successful functioning of his domestic propaganda machine.

The Kremlin's influence over Russian television guarantees Putin's foreign adventurism maximum exposure. Despite the Internet's growing presence, television remains the most important medium of political communication in contemporary Russia. An August 2018 survey by the Levada Center found that 73 percent of Russians consult television news more than any other information source. Television news is trusted

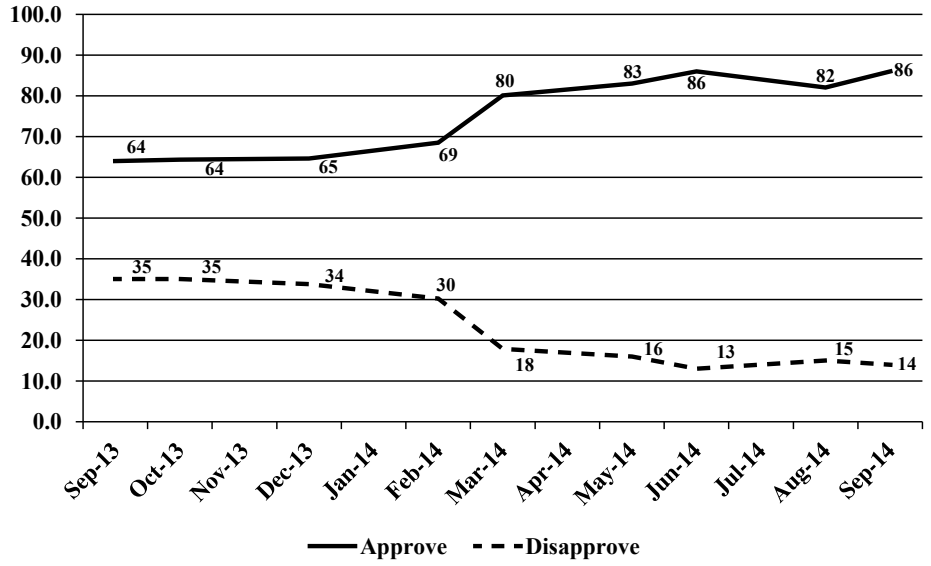

Figure 29.1 Putin Approval and Disapproval Ratings September 2013-September 2014 (%)

Source: www.russiavotes.org.

by 49 percent of Russians, while only 24 percent trust online publications and 15 percent social media (Levada Center, 2018). Among the young and middle-aged, however, the Internet is making significant progress. Following the 2011 protests against election fraud that were largely coordinated online, Putin's propaganda team stepped up their own online operations. Special sites have been established to promote Putin and his policies, including Kremlin.ru, the president's official site, but also unofficial sites like Vladimirvladimirovich.ru. The Kremlin has also set up news sites to control the messages disseminated to Russian voters, including Strana.ru, Vz.ru and Rian.ru (Belousov, 2012, p. 58). The heart of the Kremlin's online operations is the Internet Research Agency (IRA) troll factory that was unleashed on the US 2016 elections. But before the IRA was unleashed overseas, it perfected its arsenal of disinformation tactics on Russian audiences (Polyankova, 2018).

The IRA was instrumental to the Kremlin's campaign to re-elect Putin for a fourth term in March 2018. Along with state-controlled media, the IRA was engaged in a well-financed and coordinated get-out-the-vote campaign. As in every presidential election since 2000, ensuring high turnout to legitimate his mandate was Putin's main propaganda objective. The Kremlin deployed tactics honed over two decades of information manipulation to entice Russians to the polls. Russian television warned voters that high turnout was the only thing protecting the nation from annihilation by the West. Social media accounts spread rumours of Western government plans to interfere in the election while state news agencies alleged that more than a dozen countries had attempted cyber attacks against Russia (Polyankova, 2018). Unattributed videos promoting the election popped up on YouTube. In one, well-known actor Sergei Burunov plays a character waking up after a Communist victory to find an adopted gay man in his kitchen. In another, an attractive woman breaks off her steamy encounter with a man in a nightclub after he confesses he failed to vote (Baryshnikov, 2018). The controversial videos got voters talking about an otherwise dull campaign.

Straight out of the Kremlin playbook, Putin's 2018 presidential rivals were subjected to negative PR and harassment. State media accused Communist candidate Pavel Grudinin of stashing US$1 million in a Swiss bank account. Supporters of liberal Ksenia Sobchak were arrested for defaming the president by spraying 'Against Putin' on a frozen river (Sharkov, 2018). The daughter of Putin's late mentor and St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly, Sobchak was accused of being a Kremlin stooge fielded to encourage liberal voters to come to the polls despite calls for a boycott from other prominent Putin opponents (Financial Times, 2018). To further undermine their appeal, the Russian parliament accused those campaigning for a boycott of receiving funds from foreign governments (Interfax, 2018).

Again, deploying a tried-and-tested tactic, as election day approached, Putin pressed voters' patriotic buttons with boasts of a powerful new nuclear-capable underwater drone that would give Russia an edge over Western powers he accused of attempting to 'contain Russia' (Wesolowsky, 2018). To further enflame patriotic passions, on the eve of voting state television broadcast a feature film about events in Crimea in 2014, the plot centring on a love story between a Russian boy and Ukrainian girl (Tass, 2018). The Kremlin's propaganda machine achieved its desired results with turnout reaching a respectable 67.5 percent and Putin winning 76 percent of votes cast.

INTERNATIONAL PROPAGANDA

Anti-Western propaganda was at the heart of Putin's winning message in Russia's 2018 election. But in 2000, Putin came into office hoping to integrate with the West. At that

time, Russia's new president believed that modernisation, economic growth and international revival were all best served by integration into Western-led institutions. Improving Russia's global image by countering negative Western media stereotypes was a key element of Putin's strategy (Simons, 2014). Following the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, Putin offered Washington broad support for anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. Putin successfully wooed US President George W. Bush, who famously claimed to have looked into his Russian counterpart's soul and found him 'straightforward and trustworthy' (Baker, 2013). At home, Kremlin propagandists used his bromance with Bush to herald Putin's growing global stature and his restoration of Russia's international prestige. By March 2003, Russian voters considered foreign policy the area in which Putin had made the most progress as president, adding to his high approval ratings that averaged around 70 percent (Public Opinion Foundation, 2003).

Russia's integration with the West was deployed as a propaganda tool to excuse Putin's domestic policy failures, as well as to praise his foreign policy successes. The 9/11 terrorist attacks gave Putin an opportunity to link Chechen terrorism at home to the global war on terror. Russian television coverage of the horrific hostage taking by Chechen terrorists at a school in Beslan in September 2004, for example, stressed the international dimension of the crisis. On *Rossiya*, Deputy Chechen Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov declared, 'we know this is international terrorism, wherever it happens—Ingushetia, Ossetia or Chechnya' (Burrett, 2011: 341). Messages of condolence and support from foreign leaders and international organisations were used to add weight and credibility to claims that this was a global war.

Following the Beslan tragedy, the Kremlin moved to expand its control over minor media such as small-audience television channels and, increasingly, the print media (Lipman, 2006). Minor independent broadcaster Ren-TV did not hold back on reporting shocking facts and figures from Beslan. Contradicting the messages given on state-controlled channels, Ren-TV's reporting stressed that the tragedy should not be viewed in geopolitical terms but within the framework of the political situation in Russia. Less than a year later, pressure from the Kremlin brought Ren-TV under new ownership, with links to the state (Coalson, 2008).

Even before the end of Putin's first term, Russian opposition to the US-led war in Iraq began to drive a wedge between Moscow and Washington. US support for Ukraine's 2004 'orange revolution', which saw Putin's preferred candidate Viktor Yanukovich beaten by pro-West Viktor Yushchenko, further deepened tensions. Yanukovich's defeat was also a loss for Putin. The Russian president's biggest mistake in the Ukrainian election was not that he backed the wrong person, but the fact that he backed anyone at all. By involving himself in the election as a combatant, Putin seriously damaged Russia's image overseas and, in particular, its relations with Ukraine and the West. The reasons for Putin's incautious behaviour are rooted in a misunderstanding of the Ukrainian situation, caused in part by the peculiarities of the Russian media system. None of Russia's main media outlets questioned Putin's involvement in Ukraine's democratic process. Taking their lead from the Kremlin, Russian journalists spoke confidently of eventual victory for Yanukovich. In so doing, the media reinforced the authorities' own mistaken assumption. Its control over state-broadcasters allowed the Kremlin to use television to campaign for Yanukovich, just as it campaigned for Putin. Only, unlike their Russian counterparts, Ukrainian voters had access to a pluralist media and a genuine choice of candidate.

Reeling from its loss of influence in Ukraine, in 2005 the Russian government established the English-language news network *Russia Today* (now RT) to present its own spin on international events.

The founding of RT was the first signal of Putin's new information approach to foreign policy. Henceforth, the Kremlin would actively seek to influence foreign audiences, countering one version of the truth with another. From the outset, RT's overarching narrative has been of the West's decline (Dowling, 2017). Owing to its blatant propaganda agenda, in the US, *RT America* has been obliged to register as a foreign agent. In Britain, media regulators have reprimanded *RT UK* a dozen times for a lack of balance (Smith and Ward, 2017). The channel's mix of genuine news stories and fringe conspiracy theories has made it a hit on social media where it forms part of the Kremlin's wider disinformation apparatus.

The death knell of Putin's strategy of integration with the West was struck by his speech at the Munich Security conference in February 2007. In his speech, Putin railed against the United States for 'forcing its will on the world', condemning the concept of a unipolar world and accusing Washington of undermining global security. Putin's speech was designed to position him as leader of a global anti-American resistance, a sentiment growing in states such as China, Iran and North Korea since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The speech was also intended to cement Putin's domestic legacy as a strong, patriotic leader in the lead up to the 2008 election at which he was scheduled to leave the presidency (Yasmann, 2007). Deployment of US missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic in 2007, US recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 and a NATO commitment to eventual membership for Georgia and Ukraine the same year together convinced Putin that the West did not respect Russia as an equal power.

In the context of deteriorating relations with the West over multiple issues – including the 2008 Russo-Georgian war – Putin pivoted to Asia. The West's relative economic decline – accelerated by the 2008 global financial crisis – provided additional impetus for Putin to strengthen his ties with China, India and other emerging political and economic centres (Tsygankov, 2009: 348). In pursuit of a strategic partnership with Beijing, in 2008 Putin settled Russia's last remaining border dispute with China. Bilateral trade has grown enormously from US$21 billion in 2004 to US$95 billion by 2014 (Valdai Club, 2016). The growing importance of ties to Beijing was matched by a change in Moscow's propaganda messaging. A fraught history and fears of Chinese territorial encroachment in its sparsely populated Far East have fuelled Russian public hostility to China – a mentality previously encouraged by the Kremlin. Russian state-media stoked xenophobic attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, deliberately exaggerating the numbers of those illegally crossing the border, as a distraction from Russia's real problems (Repnikova and Balzer, 2009: 9–10). But as Russia's dependence on Chinese trade, investment and loans has grown following Western sanctions against Moscow over Crimea, media talk of a 'yellow peril' has disappeared (Hille, 2016). This change in media rhetoric appears to have influenced public attitudes. In April 2014, 57 percent of Russians reported feeling that China was not a threat to Russia, while 19 percent felt it was a threat. This is a remarkable turnaround from October 2009, when 39 percent believed China was a not a threat, compared to 44 percent believing it was (Figure 29. 2).

Russia's pivot to Asia has also extended to Japan. In light of growing bilateral trade and substantial Japanese FDI, the Russian media has dropped its aggressive posturing over Moscow's Kuril Islands dispute with Tokyo (Burrett, 2014).[2] The Kremlin's more positive propaganda presentation of Japan has borne diplomatic fruit. Although under pressure from Washington, Tokyo has imposed sanctions on Moscow along with the rest of the G7, Japanese leaders have kept their statements on Crimea to a minimum. Despite the sanctions, in December 2017, Japan accepted a visit by Russia's Chief

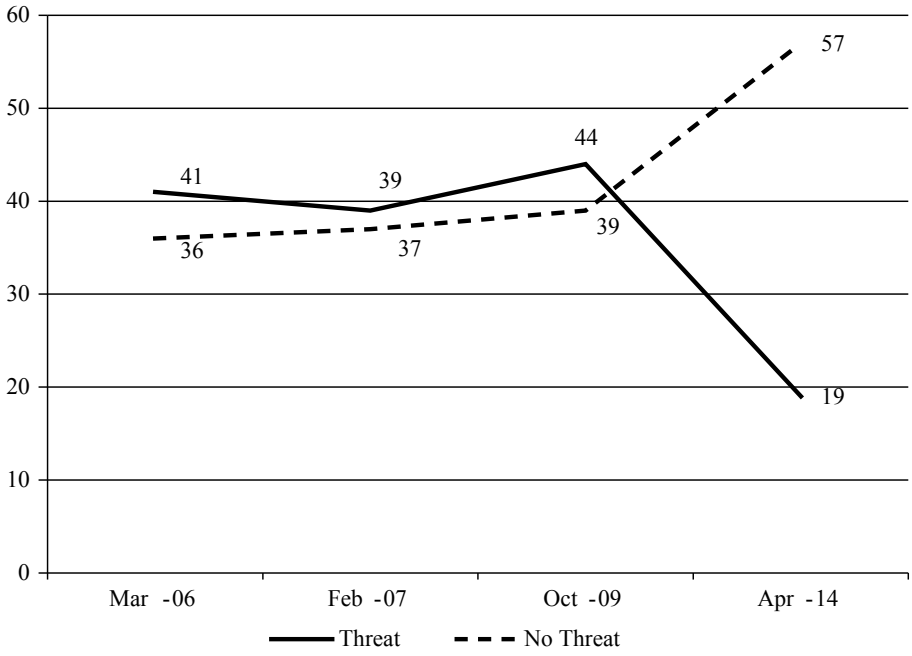

Figure 29.2 Is the Rise of China a Threat to Russia's Interests?

Source: 'Otnosheniya mezhdu Rossiyey i Kitayem [Relations Between China and Russia]' 2014, *Public Opinion Foundation*, viewed 6 July 2018, <http://fom.ru/Mir/11460>.

of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov, author of the controversial 'Gerasimov doctrine' – a security theory focused on non-military means of achieving geopolitical goals (Brown, 2017; Gerasimov, 2013). Emphasizing the importance of informational, economic and political methods of defeating one's opponents, in the West, Gerasimov's theories are widely believed to have inspired Moscow's interference in the 2016 US presidential election (Plekhanov, 2017).

Following Russia's 2014 annexing of Crimea, Putin has abandoned any pretence at playing by diplomatic or democratic rules. Increasingly, Russia's internationally-focused propaganda aims to create discord by targeting Western hegemony in the global system. In relation to Crimea, for example, Russia manipulated residual anti-colonial resentments in India, Brazil and South Africa to convince all three countries not to back Western-led sanctions against Moscow (Pomerantsev, 2014: 23). In a televised speech to the *Valdai Club* in October 2014, Putin accused the United States of imposing a 'unilateral diktat' on the rest of the world and shifted blame for the Ukraine crisis onto the West. Over his long tenure in office, Putin's grudging respect for the West has mutated into just a grudge. Russia's current rulers see the pillars of the post-cold war order – human rights, democracy and the rule of law – as a Western ploy for undermining the legitimacy of Putinism (Gusinsky and Tsygankov, 2018). As the Putin regime's popularity has declined at home, it is increasingly willing to take risks abroad to prove it is still among the world's great powers.

Putin's gloves-off foreign policy has coincided with advances in digital technologies. Cyber operations are the Kremlin's prime weapons in its war with the West, perceived in terms of a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996). By manipulating their media spaces, the Kremlin aims to turn Western countries' openness against them. The Kremlin's strategy leverages the

anonymity and immediacy of online technologies to divide and disorientate its adversaries. In its clash with the West, Russia's leaders see their authoritarianism as an advantage. Control of the domestic media allows the Putin regime to bolster national unity and state power at home while stoking divisions abroad. Almost two decades of experience in manipulating the information fed to Russian audiences has honed the techniques Kremlin propagandists now deploy internationally. Leaks from within the Kremlin's online propaganda agency suggest that the overwhelming majority of its approximately 900 employees remain focused on the domestic information space (Rusyaeva and Zakharov, 2017). The current Russian regime's primary objective is its own survival, a purpose pursued with renewed urgency as Putin enters his fourth and likely final presidential term. The Kremlin's international propaganda is aimed at the same objective. It seeks to destabilise Western societies and the alliances between them to reduce the West's ability to orchestrate regime change in Russia. But the problem with chaos strategies is that they tend to provoke counter measures. In 2015, the EU set up the East StratCom Taskforce to counter Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia, Ukraine and other former Soviet states on the Union's periphery (Smith, 2017: 4). In Eastern Europe, the Kremlin deploys a propaganda strategy that leverages shared elements of the post-Soviet experience to erode trust in democratic institutions and to exploit fears of US abandonment. To conduct these campaigns, Russia uses a mix of state-funded multilingual television, Kremlin-backed news sites, Russian-sponsored civil society organisations and a sophisticated social media operation that includes non-attributable comments on webpages, troll and bot Facebook accounts and fake hashtags and Twitter campaigns. Using its social media accounts at crucial moments, such as during the Ukraine revolution in 2014, Russia can flood news websites with tens of thousands of comments a day. The Kremlin has also sought to manipulate the relatively large Russian-language populations in the former communist bloc who descend from Soviet-era immigrants but who have been denied citizenship in their host countries. Especially in the Baltic States, the Kremlin uses its dominance of regional broadcast media to disseminate pro-Russian propaganda. Russian-speaking social media activists residing in the Baltics also create and distribute their own pro-Russia content without direct support from the Russian state (Helmus et al., 2018: ix–xii).

Western Europe is also subject to Russia's propaganda efforts. In France, Emanuel Macron's presidential campaign databases were the target of hundreds of cyber attacks originating in Russia. Centre-right candidate Francois Fillon was markedly more pro-Russia than eventual winner Macron (Breeden et al., 2017). In the UK, 13,000 Twitterbot accounts were active during the 2016 EU referendum campaign and were deactivated after the ballot (Booth et al., 2017). Russia's Internet Research Agency paid for advertisements related to Brexit on Facebook (Cellan-Jones, 2017). Britain became the target of a huge Russian disinformation campaign following the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergey Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury in March 2018 – an attack pinned on Moscow by Prime Minister Theresa May. Russian television presented the case as a grand anti-Russian plot aimed at provoking a scandal ahead of Russia's imminent presidential election. Kremlin-backed media also claimed that the incident was a British-initiated plot to divert attention from Brexit (Dearden, 2018).

Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, including possible ties between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin, was subject to official investigation. But Russia began escalating its propaganda war against the United States several years before the election. In February 2014, the leaked audio of a phone conversation between America's Europe Secretary Victoria Nuland and Washington's ambassador to Kiev, in which the former

used undiplomatic language about the EU, appeared on YouTube. In the midst of her failed efforts to cajole her European counterparts to do more to avert revolution in Ukraine, Nuland exclaimed 'F—K the EU' in exasperation (Glasser, 2018). The *Kiev Post* first reported the video, leading the Russian media to speculate that the leak came from sources within Ukraine (Miller, 2014; RT, 2014). US suspicion, however, fell on Moscow as a link to the video was quickly posted to Twitter by an aide to Russia's deputy prime minister (Higgins and Baker, 2014). Whether or not the leak came from Moscow, Russia's media make frequent reference to the video as evidence of US meddling in Ukraine's political affairs (Sputnik, 2017). US intelligence agencies knew from 2015 that the Democratic National Committee email servers had been hacked; the emails were later leaked by websites known to be Russian conduits on the eve of the 2016 Democratic National convention nominating Hillary Clinton as the party's presidential candidate. President Obama's failure to take countermeasures following these incidents may have encouraged Russia to step up its election interference. Analysis of Russian television reporting on the US election suggests the Kremlin's aim was to discredit American democracy more than to tip the scales in favour of one candidate over another. The Kremlin sought to show that the US system was not as clean as Washington maintained as a way of legitimating Russia's own flawed electoral system. The Putin administration's propaganda support for Donald Trump was more a means than an end (Burrett, 2018). Social media was the Kremlin's main tool for reaching US voters. In September 2017, Facebook revealed that Russian-influenced political advertising had reached 126 million Americans. Over 1,000 videos aiming to enflame disunity among US citizens were posted on YouTube (Isaac and Wakabayashi, 2017). On Twitter, Russian propaganda efforts relied on automation, with 36,746 Russia-linked accounts generating and disseminating election-related content (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2017: 9). At home, state media portrayed US accusations of Russian election interference as yet more evidence of American hypocrisy, paranoia and Russophobia. Polls show that Russians do not like America. American's bombing of Serbia in the 1990s and its doctrine of regime change in the 2000s have left Russians deeply distrustful of Washington (Mickiewicz, 2014). In April 2018, 83 percent of Russians believed the United States was unfriendly toward Russia (Public Opinion Foundation, 2018). Meddling in US politics benefits the Russian state, not only by sowing discord within American society, but also by reinforcing domestic narratives of the Putin regime's vital role in defending Russia's interests against hostile foreign powers. Furthermore, by playing on Russians' resentment toward the United States, the Kremlin deflects domestic anger over the economic distress caused by Western sanctions.

CONCLUSION

Putin's domestic and international propaganda performances have been interdependent since the outset of his presidency. Initially, Putin's propaganda machine proved adept at both creating and meeting public expectations of his leadership, not least in restoring Russia's position as an important player on the international stage. Putin's popularity at home, in turn, increased his stature among world leaders. Later, however, as gaps appeared between reality in Russia and what was promised, Putin increasingly drew on dramatic gestures and nationalist rhetoric to distract voters from his shortcomings. The propaganda dividends of Putin's surprise interventions in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015) boosted his flagging domestic support – but at the expense of Russia's economic stability and diplomatic relations.

Since the start of his presidency, innovations in communications technologies have allowed Putin to disseminate his propaganda through a growing range of platforms to reach a worldwide audience. But Russia's meddling in overseas elections leaves Putin increasingly isolated and dependent on a narrow range of allies. As the West wises up to Putin's act, Russia may be left a mere bit player in the story of China's rise. Domestically, Putin's propaganda operation is sophisticated and its mediums of delivery pervasive. By 2018, *Reporters Without Borders* ranked Russia 148 out of 180 for media freedom (Reporters Sans Frontières, n.d.). The Kremlin's control of Russia's media landscape and a lack of viable political alternatives means Putin's eventual successor will likely hail from within the current regime. Unless foreign governments step up their countermeasures, Russia's current propaganda activities will persist beyond a change in lead actor. Lessons from Germany, where government preparations appear to have deterred expected Russian interference in the September 2017 federal elections, offer security pointers to other states. As early as spring 2017, the German government sent clear and consistent messages to Moscow through multiple channels stating that attempts at interference would be met by punitive actions (Beuth et al., 2017). German political parties pledged not to use leaked information for campaign advantage, while media organisations set up fact-checking teams to verify the authenticity of material (Schwirtz, 2017). Germany's Federal Returning Officer established a Twitter account to allow swift clarifications of potential fake news (Brattberg and Maurer, 2018). Perhaps most importantly, German politics is not as polarised as in the United States, where partisan enmity provides fertile ground for Russian efforts to create confusion and discord. Putin's domestic propaganda is predicated on his ability to score foreign policy victories over an internally and internationally divided West.

Even if Putin continues to put in a good performance on the world stage, however, appealing to domestic voters will become increasingly challenging as changes in technology and consumption habits fragment audiences. In line with global trends, Russian media theorists expect domestic audiences to splinter as they seek out niche content, delivered across a range of new mediums, including mobile devices and smart TV. The consumption of news content through social media is also expected to grow as access to Wi-Fi and broadband expands across Russia's regions (Hess, 2014; Kachkaeva and Kiriya, 2012; Vartanova et al., 2016). At the same time, it is anticipated that audience share for traditional television will shrink. Future research should focus on how audiences' changing behaviour impacts the nature and success of the Kremlin's information strategies. Attention should also focus on changes in Russia's newsrooms, as audiences' preferences for niche content encourages the recruitment of non-media professionals into journalism. The increasing role of online information aggregators, big data processing and user-made content in Russian election campaigns are other areas deserving greater research.

As the Putin era comes to an end, how his potential successors from within the ruling regime seek to appeal to voters will become an increasingly important avenue for research. A great deal of academic attention is given to how Putin and his government use the media to communicate with Russian voters. More attention should also be given to the information strategies deployed by Putin's domestic political opponents. Russian international propaganda operations are also subject to intensive investigation. Equal attention should be afforded to foreign governments' efforts to target Russian audiences. Putin has kept the spotlight on his leadership for nearly two decades. It is likely he still has a few more surprises to deliver before he exits the domestic and world political stage for good.

Notes

1 Russia's constitution mandates that the president can serve no more than two terms consecutively.
2 In Japan, the four disputed islands, currently under Russian sovereignty, are called the Northern Territories.

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