

WHEN THE *RUSSKIY MIR* AND THE SPANISH-SPEAKING WORLD MEET: RT AND SPUTNIK IN SPANISH

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As a critical element of a multidimensional political warfare scheme, disinformation represents a serious challenge for European democracies. Convinced that it faces an existential threat from the West, Russia aims to turn some key features of democracy, such as the free flow of information and the open and plural nature of European societies, into a strategic vulnerability. The internet, especially through social networks, offers open access to the heart of liberal democracies. This is where the Kremlin deploys its information warfare with the aim of weakening NATO and the EU in general. Spain, a committed member of both and also a platform for reaching the Spanish-speaking world of Latin America and the United States, is no exception to this rule.

Unlike in Soviet times, Russia is not trying to sell the benefits of its system but to sow doubts and contribute to tensions within Euro-Atlantic countries. It is no longer a case of arguing “we are better”, but of saying we are all equal, which helps to reinforce the Kremlin’s message to its domestic audience regarding what it believes is the hypocrisy and corruption of the West. Similarly, Russia takes advantage of the open Western framework built upon the paradigm of the free flow of information to attack its adversaries. It is an environment that can easily and at low cost be saturated with fake news and tendentious narratives. The political impact of these tools remains to be determined with precision but, in a context of post-truth and as the legitimacy of liberal democracies has been weakened by the economic crisis which has contributed to polarising society, its impact is potentially devastating.

While the diagnosis is clear, the remedy is anything but. The Russian disinformation machine offers sophisticated products that are difficult to unravel and combat and they are adapted to each target audience. On the tactical level, various initiatives have proliferated – among them the EU’s East Stratcom Task Force – to monitor and denounce fake news and provide accurate information. Although necessary, this is only part of the solution and has its own dilemmas, since it will always be easier and cheaper to saturate an environment with fake

information than to debunk it, and it also means that those who disinform get to set the agenda. But what to do at the strategic level remains uncertain. Is it possible and advisable to limit the flow of information? Can it be done in advance without knowing the content and only the source? What is to be done when the authorship is unclear? These questions, so far, have no obvious answers.

Russia and the information warfare

Russia sees a world which is currently going through fundamental and rapid changes because of the emergence of a multipolar international system whose principles, according to the predominant view in the Kremlin, will most likely be forged by conflict and military might. Therefore, for Moscow, stark competition, uncertainty and confronting values are central elements on the immediate horizon. This perspective, which puts the emphasis on threats and dilutes the value of cooperation, is reflected in official reference documents adopted by the Kremlin in recent times such as the *Foreign Policy Concept* (November 2016), the *National Security Strategy* (December 2015) and the *Military Doctrine* (December 2014).

Within this general framework, Russia is aware of its structural disadvantages in terms of economics and conventional military capabilities when facing other major powers. That is why Moscow attaches the utmost importance to both its nuclear deterrence capacity and the asymmetric methods and instruments that allow it to maintain strategic parity, especially with a West perceived as the main adversary and threat to Russia. The emphasis placed on the United States and some European countries that the Kremlin regards as strategically subordinate to Washington is explained by its conviction that they implement a strategy whose ultimate goal is to overthrow the current regime in Russia. This perception, fuelled by recurrent misunderstandings and frustrated Russian expectations in its relationship with both NATO and the EU, has led to the consolidation of a victimhood narrative whose central axis is the antagonism with the Euro-Atlantic powers.

Leading Russian strategists have conceptualised so-called “non-linear warfare” as a reference model for future armed conflicts. The central points are that wars will be undeclared; there will be broad use of kinetic and non-kinetic tools in close coordination; the distinction between the military and civilian domains will become even more blurred; and battles will take place in the information space as well as in physical arenas (Hansen, 2016: 4). Therefore, military and non-military elements will be united in an integrated all-encompassing strategy in which propaganda, disinformation and control over information will be essential elements for securing the success of military operations.

In the discussion on this new way of understanding the war, an article published in February 2013 by General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, proved to be very influential (Gerasimov, 2013). After the annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in Donbas, circulation of this article, popularly known as the

“Gerasimov doctrine”, was boosted since it anticipated many of the elements deployed in these operations. However, two aspects must be highlighted: on the one hand, it is not a doctrine and, on the other, Gerasimov did not *invent* the hybrid war but reflects on what he interprets the West is launching against Russia. In his reading, the Arab Springs play a central role: from the perspective of the Kremlin, they are a continuation of the Colour Revolutions and reveal the potential and importance of the methods and forms of asymmetric intervention. Conventional forces – understood as those that can be clearly identified – should only be used, the Russian general points out, at the end of the conflict once supremacy has been achieved in the battlefield.

Disinformation – the deliberate spreading of false information – becomes thus a decisive element within this multidimensional political warfare scheme. The Russian propaganda and communication machine is therefore conceived as a strategic weapon, but with the purpose of being used massively to undermine, disorient, distract, shake, weaken or paralyse the adversary. The most important and worrying feature is that Russian thinking does not draw a clear distinction between periods of war and peace and entails broad, permanent information warfare.

This approach is in stark contrast with the Western one which, even according to Russian sources, limits the information war to “tactical information operations carried out during hostilities” (Giles, 2016: 4). Similarly, it is worth underlying that for Russia information warfare is a broad and inclusive concept that “can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information [...] The delineation of activities in the cyber domain from other activities processing, attacking, disrupting or stealing information is seen as artificial in Russian thinking” (Giles, 2016: 4, 8). Thus, “distributed denial of services attacks (DDoS), advanced [cyber] exploitation techniques and Russia Today television are all related tools of information warfare” (Smith, 2012: 8).

The Georgia war in August 2008 marked a turning point leading to the current scenario as it prompted deep reflection in the Russian authorities. Russia won the war and achieved the strategic objective of “reinforcing Russian control of Georgia’s separatist regions [but faced] numerous tactical and operational problems [...] the Russian military had to rely on superior numbers instead of quality” (Gressel, 2015:2). Similarly, Moscow interpreted the coverage of major international media during the conflict as a defeat of its communication system.¹ Hence, the Kremlin decided to undertake a profound military reform and rethink its information strategy.

RT, Sputnik and the Kremlin’s propaganda machine

Russia Today – created in 2005 initially to give a more positive image of Russia to English-speaking viewers – was renamed RT in 2009. The channel remained in line with the Kremlin’s agenda but its goal was no longer to provide news about Russia or the Russian point of view on international news: it worked above all to spread anything that questioned and contributed to troubling and eroding the legitimacy of Western countries.

1. The videos of former Georgian President Saakashvili chewing his tie and the interrupted interview with the mother and the South Ossetian girl fleeing the Georgian bombing of Tskhinvali broadcast by the US channel FOX are a recurrent reference in the Russian conspiracy vision.

Similarly, “Russia Beyond the Headlines” was created in 2007 and currently owns 19 web portals in 16 languages, as well as paper formats distributed as supplements with some of the most important newspapers in the world. In 2013 the *Rossiia Segodnya* (“Russia Today”) conglomerate absorbed the RIA Novosti agency and the radio broadcaster “The Voice of Russia” and added the newly created Sputnik News in 2014 (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016). RT is not officially linked to the same media group but its director, Margarita Simonyan, is also the editor-in-chief of Sputnik.² The telephone number of “Russia Beyond the Headlines”, which is part of the TV-Novosti group, is the same as that of RT (although with another extension number), a fact indicating that it also belongs to the same communication project.

The creation of platforms such as Free Video – which since 2009 has offered subscribers free content with high quality images and in 2013 became the Ruptly agency, whose materials are paid for, although at very competitive rates – reflects the intention to reach the maximum possible share of audiovisual markets. Especially relevant was the creation, in January 2015, of Sputnik.Polls, the agency that defines itself as “a project of international public opinion in cooperation with leading research companies such as Populus, IFOP and Forsa”. According to the information provided by Sputnik, “the project organizes regular surveys in the United States, Europe and Asia on the most sensitive political and social issues”.³ However, a brief review of the list of such surveys shows the strong bias when it comes to the selection of the topics, always with a highly favourable approach to Russia, with examples such as “More than a third of Italians and Germans believe that Crimea is part of Russia” or “The US and Europe disagree on the extension of the sanctions against Russia”.

The report by the US intelligence community on the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections indicates that: “The Kremlin spends \$190 million a year on the distribution and dissemination of RT programming, focusing on hotels and satellite, terrestrial, and cable broadcasting” (ICA, 2017: 10). The Hungarian research institute Political Capital in turn calculates that Moscow allocates €370 million per year to its media plan abroad, which also includes Sputnik and “Russia Beyond The Headlines”, as well as other “minor” local media in different countries of interest to Russia, such as the Baltic countries and central and eastern Europe. The same US report notes that “RT states on its website that it can reach more than 550 million people worldwide and 85 million people in the United States”. According to the channel’s own management, “the RT website receives at least 500,000 unique users every day. Since its inception in 2005, RT videos received more than 800 million visits on YouTube (1 million views per day), which is the highest [figure in the world] among news outlets” (ICA, 2017: 10).

The impact that both media claim to have is difficult to verify. Sputnik claims to have offices in more than 20 countries and more than 14 million consumers on social networks in different languages. “Sputnik broadcasts through its websites, analogue and digital radio, mobile device apps and social media. Sputnik cables are published in English, Arabic, Spanish and Chinese on a regular basis” the statement says. It adds that “Sputnik’s websites are available in more than 30

2. See: <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201705311069598363-rusia-simonian-washington-injerencia/>.

3. See: https://mundo.sputniknews.com/trend/sputnik_opiniones_2016/.

languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Serbian, Turkish and French”.⁴ Even more important is the weight of RT. This firm runs channels and online platforms in five languages, in addition to Russian: it broadcasts in English, Spanish and Arabic, and maintains websites in French and German and it has already announced the intention to launch the channel in French. All of them are directed from the headquarters in Borovaya Street in Moscow, although it also owns offices in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Madrid, among other places. 2,300 people from 40 different countries work at RT. However, certain secrecy surrounds these venues, whose addresses and telephones are sometimes difficult to find on the internet.

The ultimate goal of all these media is to promote the Kremlin’s vision on specific topics, to increase its influence and ability to set the agendas and narratives in European public debates. In some of these media you can occasionally find some critical points of view.⁵ However, when dealing with matters the Kremlin regards as strategic, dissonances are not noticed and messages in different media are mutually reinforcing. And since February 2014, when the Russians began intervening in Ukraine, the “Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has been acting as a wartime leader” (Trenin, 2017). The situation is aggravated by the apparent belief among the Kremlin elite of the impossibility of a satisfactory accommodation with the West. Weakening NATO and the EU is therefore a priority goal and operating from within each of the member states, taking advantage, in a pragmatic and non-ideological way, of any crisis or vulnerability seems both effective and efficient.

Thus, Russia feeds both the populist left and the xenophobic right. Its aim is to spread division and distrust among disenchanted audiences, taking advantage of the context created by the crisis and existing prejudices.⁶ Hence RT and Sputnik give space to any politician with an anti-EU or anti-NATO agenda from the xenophobic right – represented by Nigel Farage of UKIP or Marine Le Pen of the Front National – to the populist left of Javier Couso of Izquierda Unida. It is also very frequent to give space to pseudo-experts, some without any other known background than being commentators on RT, Sputnik or Hispan TV.⁷ Others, like the Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, are portrayed by RT as human rights “activists”, while the neo-Nazi Manuel Ochsenteiter is introduced as “an analyst on the Middle East” (Pomerantsev & Weiss 2014: 15).

The generated content is freely disseminated on YouTube with the aim of flooding social networks. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that Facebook allows the audience to be segmented by preferences and opinions. This platform is increasingly the main means by which the bulk of the population gets informed. According to a study by the Pew Center in May 2016, 62% of the adult population in the US currently use this social network as a source of news (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). If we take into account i) the saturation of Facebook with fake news about Hillary Clinton during the election campaign (Silverman, 2016), ii) the narrow margin of just one point by which the electoral result was decided in four key states (Wisconsin, Michigan,

4. Communication by email with the press office of *Sputnik News* on May 23 2017.

5. Especially in the opinion columns by invited authors in “Russia Beyond The Headlines”.

6. The (fake) “Lisa case” about the 13-year-old Russian girl who was allegedly kidnapped and raped by three Muslim refugees is a good example.

7. Hispan TV is an Iranian state-owned news channel.

Florida and Pennsylvania), and iii) the ability to artificially amplify and orient narratives through the use of automated accounts on Twitter by actors such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), known as the St. Petersburg trolls factory, it is easy to see the destabilising potential this machinery and these practices entail for any electoral process that takes place in a free and democratic environment. That is to say, the Kremlin takes advantage of the open Euro-Atlantic framework, converting a democratic strength into a potential strategic vulnerability. At the same time it tries to turn Russia into a digital fortress with traffic and contents strongly controlled by the state and with severe penalties for any minimum infringement of the legislative framework adopted.

RT, Sputnik in Spanish

RT launched its Spanish version in 2009. According to Victoria Vorontsova, director of the Spanish channel, "RT is already watched by some 70 million people in 38 countries around the world. In 10 European countries, including Spain, there are 36 million viewers a week, and the Spanish channel is part of the state broadcaster networks in Argentina and Venezuela. Its contents are as well included in the programming of national channels in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico and other Latin American countries".⁸ Again, it is difficult to verify the accuracy of these figures; however, RT in Spanish is aimed at a global audience of more than 550 million speakers, including about 40 million in the US.⁹ In addition, the Twitter account of the Spanish channel has almost 3 million followers and the Spanish version of its website reaches 24 million page views per month, 15% of which come from Spain, largely redirected from social networks.

Regarding Sputnik's Spanish service, the teams "work mainly from Montevideo, Madrid and Moscow, keeping in close contact with Sputnik journalists from all over the world to [produce] relevant stories for a Spanish-speaking audience". The company declines to discuss the content of the economic agreements reached with Spanish media such as *Público*. When asked about it, the corporation replies: "We only discuss commercial figures with possible commercial partners".¹⁰ It is also worth mentioning the agreements reached by Sputnik with the Costa Rican newspaper *El País* and the Nicaraguan newspaper *El Nuevo Diario* under very advantageous conditions for these journals. The Russian agency also signed a cooperation agreement in March 2017 with the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina in an attempt to boost "the development of Sputnik in Latin America", in the words of its editor in Cuba, Sergey Kochetkov.¹¹

Likewise, the ironclad internal control of the information carried out in both RT and Sputnik is noteworthy. When one of the authors of this article contacted RT's board of directors for a report on the impact of their service in Spanish, they immediately issued a circular prohibiting their staff from speaking with other media, even those reporters willing to give a positive view of their work in the broadcaster. Likewise attempts to interview journalists working for the Sputnik service in Spanish were unsuccessful: the management vetoed these interviews, submitting a standard communication via email in which "official" information about the agency is provided.

8. Interview with Victoria Vorontsova by email in January 2017.

9. According to the Instituto Cervantes, 472 million people speak Spanish as their mother tongue. If those with limited competence and those learning it are included then the number increases to 567 million, including 42 million native speakers in the US and 15 million with limited competence. See: "El español: una lengua viva: Informe 2016," Instituto Cervantes, https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol_lengua_viva/pdf/espanol_lengua_viva_2016.pdf.

10. Communication by email with the press office of Sputnik News, on May 23, 2017.

11. See: http://www.diariodecuba.com/cuba/1490111511_29807.html.

In any case, in contexts such as Latin America, the influence of these media is not negligible. The Venezuelan TV teleSUR directly picks up the RT signal in Spanish for several hours a day, which increases its penetration in several countries of the continent. This places its contents among the most watched in Cuba, where most households do not have access to other television stations except those authorised by the government itself, as is the case with teleSUR. In addition, more than 660 small cable TV providers offer RT in Spanish throughout the American continent and Spain, and some 70 local or national channels fill spaces with their content, according to the coverage data of the chain itself, which also claims to be present in 315 Spanish hotels.¹²

In the Latin American environment, the stance of these media is clearly on the political left, unlike other versions, such as the RT portals in French and German, where the ideas related to the xenophobic right are further enhanced, which has put them in the spotlight since the “shift to the right” experienced by numerous governments in Latin America. In June 2016 Mauricio Macri’s administration ordered the suspension of this channel’s broadcasts on the Argentine Digital Television system (agreed by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Vladimir Putin himself in 2014), a politically motivated decision in the eyes of most observers.¹³ The measure was reversed after the intervention of the Russian Foreign Ministry and intense diplomatic work from Moscow.

The populist left on both sides of the Atlantic usually welcomes the rise of media like RT in Spanish because it offers a platform to amplify its messages. This sector of the left considers that “the multimedia concentration favours the manipulation of messages as the censorship laws imposed by governments [and] the free flow of information [entails] in practice the freedom to monopolize certain markets” (Quirós, 1995: 7).¹⁴ This paradigm explains the interpretation of RT as an extension of the “voices of the debate” and, additionally, as a TV channel that claims to give voice to views that are alternative to and critical of the establishment. It is perfectly summarised by Érika Ortega Sanoja, RT correspondent in Venezuela in her presentation on RT’s website: “RT is a counterweight: an alternative to the transnational hegemonic media that have turned disinformation into a weapon of war. Thus, to practice journalism in this important broadcaster means to be part, as the Liberator Simón Bolívar said, of the ‘artillery of thought’”.¹⁵

However, the Spanish versions of RT and Sputnik have been used for disinformation operations of the highest relevance and impact, such as the fake Spanish air traffic controller, Carlos Spainbuca, who offered information/alternative facts from his alleged location at the Boryspil Airport in Kiev on the crashing of flight MH17 in July 2014. Despite the fact that the Carlos case had already been debunked, President Putin himself did not hesitate to refer to him as a reliable source during Oliver Stone’s interview in September 2015 (Schreck, 2017). Thus, NATO and EU member states such as Spain face an exceptionally disturbing challenge which threatens to convert strengths such as the free flow of information and the open and plural nature of European societies into a strategic vulnerability.

12. See: <https://actualidad.rt.com/acerca/cobertura>.

13. Just few days later, June 29, Macri ordered the cancellation of teleSUR broadcasting as well.

14. Against this background the famous statement made by Pablo Iglesias, leader of the Podemos party, that the “existence of privately owned media is an attack against freedom of speech” can be understood. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebJKDckwUhE>.

15. See: <https://actualidad.rt.com/equipo/view/205904-erika-sanoja>. This correspondent’s profile is particularly noteworthy. She is not only expressing open support for a Bolivarian agenda but takes part actively in politics as a member of the National Assembly as representative of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). A TV anchor in the US, Eva Golinger, also has this mixed profile of journalist and activist, but the team members of RT in Spanish are mostly young journalists with no significant previous professional track record and apparently very limited knowledge of Russia.

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