

Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of *Russia Today* (RT)

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This article explores the use of conspiracy theories by the Russian international television channel *Russia Today* (RT). Based on Mark Fenster's definition of conspiracy theory as a populist theory of power, the article studies the process of how various conspiratorial notions in programmes broadcast by RT legitimise Russian domestic and foreign policies and, in turn, delegitimise policies of the American government. It argues that the conspiratorial component of RT's broadcasting appears as a political instrument in the context of the post-Cold War world and is applied to attract various global audiences with different political views.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; *Russia Today* (RT); public diplomacy; Russian foreign policy

Introduction

The *Guardian* newspaper has described *Russia Today* (RT) – an international television channel sponsored by the Russian government – as 'a view of the world, from conspiracy theories to other, more worrying beliefs, that should give cause for concern' (Bloomfield, 2014). Since being established in 2005, the channel has gained a reputation for serving as the Kremlin's 'propaganda machine', a repository of conspiracy theories and the source of news neglected by the global media juggernauts, such as CNN or BBC World News.

RT's image as the 'mouthpiece' of the Kremlin and its readiness to promote various conspiracy theorists has enabled scholars to overlook its potential as a tool of foreign policy of the Russian government. It has thus far attracted largely journalistic attention (Bidder, 2013; Bullough, 2013; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014), with little academic analysis (Strukov, 2014). In an attempt to fill this gap, this article outlines the political agenda behind the channel and pays particular attention to the conspiratorial aspect of RT's programmes in order to decipher the most controversial aspect of its broadcasting. The article interprets the conspiracy theories that figure within RT's news agenda as a specific tool of Russian public diplomacy aimed at undermining the policies of the US government and, in turn, defending Russia's actions.

The first part of the article will outline a theoretical framework for analysing conspiracy theories. The article will then briefly consider the international broadcasting component of public diplomacy. It will then look at the history of RT and its news agenda, particularly focusing on the political ideas produced by the pro-Putin intellectuals in the 2000s. The final part will be devoted to an analysis of the conspiracy theories voiced in RT's programmes and the channel's effectiveness as a public diplomacy tool.



Understanding conspiracy theories

After decades of debates about the nature of conspiracy theories, scholars have concluded that they are more than just a product of a 'paranoid style' of political thinking (Hofstadter, 1996). The new approach, developed by Mark Fenster (2008), suggests that conspiracy theories can become an important device for the reallocation of power between different political actors and an efficient element in political strategies; they can expose the inequities of a political, economic and social order. Since conspiracy theories are usually disseminated on a political level through populist rhetoric, Fenster (2008, pp. 84–90) has concluded that a conspiracy theory is a 'populist theory of power'. Conspiracy theories possess an important communicative function by helping to unite the audience as 'the people' against the imagined 'Other', represented as a secretive 'power bloc'.

Fenster's argument is built on the broad interpretation of populism introduced by Francisco Panizza and Ernesto Laclau who suggest that populism is 'a mode of identification available to any actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary' (Panizza, 2005, p. 4). The important feature of this concept is its antagonistic division of the social into two camps: between the 'people' and the 'Other' (Laclau, 2005a, pp. 83 and 224). 'The people', united on the basis of popular demand, oppose the 'Other', the power bloc; this represents the typical – for conspiracy theories – juxtaposition of 'Us' versus 'Them'. In Laclau's (2005b, pp. 37–38) words, the social is divided into two camps: 'the power' and 'the underdog'. The latter's appeal is based on popular demands and its role is to challenge the social order and gain power, thereby fulfilling popular demands. Populism performs the function of gathering different elements of the social into a new identity (Laclau, 2005a, pp. 93–101). Accordingly, this reading of populism does not deny its presence in a democratic society; on the contrary, it can manifest a necessary challenge to the existing democratic order when the it fails to address certain cutting-edge issues.

This reading of populism could be applied to the analysis of how conspiracy theories operate on the public level. The invention of 'the people' requires a persuasive image of the 'Other' that can be provided by the conspiratorial narrative through the generation of a fear of subversion. In addition, such discourses address concerns about the inequities of a social system and occasionally pose a positive challenge to the existing social order (Fenster, 2008, pp. 89–90). Hence, the usage of conspiracy theories on the political level helps the actor who disseminates these theories undermine the position and reputation of another actor – the powerful 'Other' who purportedly benefits from conspiring against 'the people'.

In the Russian case, the ultimate 'Other', historically, has often been the West, imagined as 'a single undifferentiated entity ... regarded either as a positive model for Russia to emulate or as a negative example to be rejected', that has served to define the borders of national identity and its place in world history (Tolz, 2001, p. 70). In this context, fears expressed through anti-Western conspiracy in Russia arise as a part of the so-called 'ressentiment' that was born from the recognition of the discrepancy between Russia and its ideal, the 'West', and which operated to demonstrate Russia's equality or superiority to it (Greenfield, 1992, p. 234). In the mind of a Russian nationalist with anti-Western views, the West appears as an ultimate and insidious 'Other' seeking to undermine the progress of the Russian nation towards its glorious future.

This brief description of the theoretical approach to conspiracy theories enables us to abandon traditional readings of conspiracy theories and explore their potential as a tool of foreign policy. As Richard Sakwa (2012) has demonstrated, conspiracy theories could become a 'distinctive mode of engagement' in foreign policies. According to Sakwa (2012, pp. 581 and 590), the inability of Russia's policy makers to efficiently embed conspiracy theories into Russia's foreign policy can explain its inefficiency in the post-Cold War era and especially during the Russo-Georgia War in 2008. The conflict in Georgia indeed became a watershed in Russian foreign policy and triggered rethinking of the country's foreign policy, putting a particular emphasis on international broadcasting as a way of influencing public attitudes on the global scale.

International broadcasting as a public diplomacy tool

Defined as the international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with foreign publics, 'public diplomacy' includes several key components that together help gather feedback, explain policy and increase the attractiveness of a country among foreign publics (Cull, 2009). Public diplomacy is a way of engaging foreign individuals, communities and governments in support of national objectives and foreign policies of an international actor stimulated by the development of global communication (Show, 2009, p. 6). It helps increase awareness of the policies of the international actor, establishing a positive image among international communities and thus increasing its global influence in the world (see, e.g. Carter, 2005). Scholars at the Edward R. Murrow Center (a leading American institute for the study of public diplomacy) see public diplomacy as an integral part of a foreign policy strategy that seeks to communicate with foreign communities, individuals and governments through governmental and NGOs and so influence their opinions.¹

As an integral element of public diplomacy, international broadcasting plays a crucial role in promoting a country's interests among international audiences. It helps deliver messages and images about the country through various mediums, which increases trust and confidence in an international actor (Gass and Seiter, 2009, pp. 154–165). The creation of a favourable news agenda largely underlies public diplomacy strategies. It allows news events to be tailored to the country's strategic goals, creates news messages that reinforce the country's agenda and helps build links with foreign audiences (Leonard, Stead and Smewing, 2002, pp. 10–11).

The Cold War terrain provided multiple chances for the two opposing ideological blocs to master their public diplomacy instruments. The British and American governments have been long-term players in this field, promoting their cultures through such mediators as the BBC World Service and the US Information Agency (Cull, 2009; Webb, 2012; 2014). Soviet public diplomacy actively promoted the communist ideology through a number of international news agencies, such as TASS (*Telegrafnoe agentstvo Sovetskogo Soiuza*) and APN (*Agentstvo pechati Novosti*) (Shultz and Godson, 1984). However, the Soviet collapse and the rise of the 24-hour international channel CNN in 1991 – an iconic example of an international broadcaster capable of influencing the opinions of international audiences – signaled the rapidly changing nature of international relations and the place international broadcasting occupies within it. Growing powers, like Japan, China and Qatar, launched media outlets to promote their 'point of view' on global events and compete with established actors.

The Russian political establishment's turn to active usage of international broadcasting as an instrument of public diplomacy took place in the 2000s. The Doctrine of Information Security

adopted in September 2000 by the Kremlin defined the main objectives for Russia's foreign policy and emphasised the necessity of promoting a new image of Russia abroad.² As Greg Simons (2014) suggests, the Doctrine paved the way for a number of international broadcasting outlets that 'were intended to stem flow of negative and "non-objective" information about Russia in the global information space'.

The goal of these media outlets developed in the 2000s was to counterbalance Western dominance of the media. For this purpose, the Kremlin, with the support of allied intellectuals, developed a conceptual foundation that served to gain people's favour around the world by spreading news critical of Western governments' policies. The next part of the article will be devoted to an analysis of the ideas coined by the pro-Kremlin intellectuals that contributed to shaping of RT's news agenda.

Russia as a global 'underdog'

In the mid-2000s, the Putin administration opted for representation of the US as Russia's ultimate opponent. This representation became a dominant political instrument used to justify semi-authoritarian changes in the country. Defined by the then deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, as a *sovereign democracy*, Russia, in official discourse, started to be juxtaposed to 'the West'. In the view of prominent pro-Kremlin intellectuals (like Gleb Pavlovskii and Nataliia Narochnitskaia), Russia's greatness and the country's history of determining the agenda of global politics were constantly challenged by the West.

The concept of 'sovereign democracy' provided the Russian establishment with a conceptual framework that defined the country's place in global politics and relations with the West. It should particularly be stressed that Surkov's conception defined the West as Russia's competitor, rather than its enemy. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he said: 'The people have attained a new sense of sobriety. The romantic days are gone. We no longer have the feeling of being surrounded by enemies, but rather by competitors' (Klussmann and Mayr, 2005). This rhetorical shift from the notion of a besieged nation, traditional in Russian anti-Westernism, to Surkov's version of political pragmatism in relations with 'the West' helped relocate anti-Western conspiracy theories from the margins of Russian political discourse to its centre. From now on, the idea of economic and political competition with 'the West' could be used by mainstream politicians and supported by factual evidence taken, at times selectively, from the global political agenda. With that reconceptualisation of Russia-West relations, the language of anti-Western conspiracy became an inherent part of mainstream political discourse in Russia and lost its marginal character.

While bilateral relations with European countries were more diverse and sophisticated, Surkov's version of the Russia-West relationship emphasised the dominance of the US in global politics. American dominance has been presented as evidence of an anti-Russian conspiracy and the major threat to global peace; this became particularly manifest in American international policies after the Cold War.

Together with developing a clear anti-American stance, pro-Kremlin intellectuals attempted to attach global significance to Putin by stressing his importance in resisting American global hegemony. In 2007, Gleb Pavlovskii (2007), a long-time advisor to the Putin administration, contended that the Russian global mission was not the 'return to former greatness', but a successful containment of the US, which only Putin was able to achieve:

You cannot invent a global mission, but you can choose it out of a short list of real, eagerly sought goals. Putin did it. In the world of the simultaneously destructive and utopian 'Bush doctrine' the demand for resistance to the US is impossible. However, there is a global demand for this resistance. ... The containment of the US is Russia's function for the subsequent years. The majority of humankind, including its Western part, will tacitly support all Russian actions in this sphere even without openly expressing public support. Putin found a unique niche of unarticulated global demand for particular policies and occupied it.

After his departure from the Kremlin in 2011, following a disagreement with Putin's decision to return to the presidency, Pavlovskii openly admitted that as early as the end of the 1990s, one of the Kremlin's team strategies was juxtaposing Russia to the US. The Kremlin's ideologues aimed at conveying Russia as a 'speaker' on behalf of the third-world nations excluded from the US-led 'New World Order' (Pavlovskii, 2014).

The emergence of *RT* as Russia's public diplomacy tool at that time and the corpus of ideas behind its agenda are directly connected with the will of the Russian political establishment to challenge US dominance in the world. Here, the division of the world into the 'majority' of nations led by Russia against the nations of the so-called 'New World Order' led by the US sheds light on the application of conspiracy theories in *RT*'s programmes. In order to situate carefully anti-American conspiracy theories in *RT*'s broadcasting, we need to look closely at the channel and its news agenda.

***RT*: Russia's 'ministry of information defence'**

RT was launched in 2005 as a part of the large state-funded programme to promote Russia abroad. In contrast to traditional public diplomacy assets aimed at promoting the country's culture, *RT* soon downplayed its straightforward affiliation with Russia by changing the logo 'Russia today' to the more neutral 'RT' (von Twickel, 2010). According to *RT*'s editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, this was done to attract as large an audience as possible (*Sobchak zhiv'em*, 2013). It appears that American and European media coverage of the war in Georgia and its criticism of Russia encouraged *RT*'s management to retune its task. Dropping its initial goal – promoting Russian culture around the world – *RT* was turned into a political tool to undermine the American position in global politics when it proved unable to provide a satisfactory 'Russian' interpretation of the conflict in Georgia.

RT's news agenda is aimed at counterbalancing the 'information monopoly' of Western media (Simonyan, 2013). The main goal of its journalists and presenters is to find the news that would be ignored by the so-called 'mainstream media' and bring it to viewers' attention, thus increasing *RT*'s international popularity (Rossiia na eksport, 2012). According to Simonyan, the channel's audience consists of 'people who understand that the whole truth cannot be told by Anglo-Saxon television channels' (Gabuev, 2012). The belief that the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon media' never tell the truth lies at the heart of *RT*'s agenda and frames the conspiratorial dimension of its programmes. Simonyan's description of *RT*'s editorial policy is the following:

Everybody wants to know what is happening in their backyards. ... We decided that we are going to look for stories that are on the one hand extremely interesting, that can be breathtaking, fascinating for our audience, and on the other hand that have not been reported or hugely underreported in the mainstream media (Kramer, 2010).

As a result, *RT* occupied a specific place in the media reporting on lesser-known news items and international scandals involving the US government. The intellectual underpinning of *RT*'s anti-Americanism is a peculiar case. Whereas Soviet anti-American propaganda was based on a rigid ideological divide between capitalism and socialism, Putin's semi-authoritarian regime has not developed a unified ideological platform (Krastev, 2011, p. 11). The ambiguity and heterogeneity of the ideological foundation of the current Russian political regime makes anti-Americanism the only constant element of *RT*'s agenda.

The intellectual underpinnings of Surkov's ideas allowed *RT* to avoid marginalisation as a mouthpiece of the Kremlin by delivering to viewers alternative, but nevertheless meaningful, news. On the other hand, these ideas helped to carefully shape the news agenda such that it would challenge the American and the European governments. A simultaneous adoption of arguments of left- and right-wing critics of the US gives *RT* leeway to adapt its narratives in relation to different audiences, thereby expanding its global influence. Moreover, the Kremlin's links to both right- and left-wing intellectuals in Europe and the US supplies *RT* with a range of public figures ready to justify Russia's policies to foreign audiences (Orenstein, 2014).

An open stance against the 'mainstream media' allegedly controlled by Western policy makers and business elites helps *RT* to present itself as an 'underdog' demanding that the truth be revealed. This idea is reiterated by Simonyan regularly and became more popular after the conflict in Ukraine erupted in winter 2013/2014. After *RT* was criticised for biased coverage of the Ukrainian conflict, Simonyan (2014) posted a statement on her blog that stressed the underdog character of the channel:

Every single day, every single hour the guys who work for us are told, 'You are liars, you are no journalists, you are the Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece, you've sold yourselves to the Russians, it's time you quit your job', and everybody is laughing at you, so change your mind before it's too late. ... I can see very clearly why I continue to work for a channel that stands alone (!) face to face with thousands and tens of thousands of Western news outlets, showing everybody the other side of the story, under daily attacks from the media that it is hardly managing to fight back.

This approach to news reporting, which is distinctively different from that of the majority of international media outlets, has become *RT*'s recipe for promoting 'Russian' views abroad. In this context, conspiracy theories aimed at exposing the corrupt and elitist policies of the American government appear to be an instrument for spoiling the US's image in the world. Therefore, the next part of this article is devoted to a closer look at conspiracy theories in *RT*'s programmes and their role as a tool of Russian public diplomacy.

The 'truthseeker': conspiracy narratives in *RT*'s programmes

In 2010, *RT* launched *RT America*, which, according to the channel's officials, is specifically tailored to the American audience (Rossiia na eksport, 2012). It is revealing that one of the first reports released by *RT* in the US was entitled '911 Reasons Why 9/11 was (Probably) an Inside Job' (Bridge, 2010). This was an eye-catching way to start a promotion campaign, falling perfectly in line with the aim of finding fascinating stories 'in the backyard' of the US.

The flagship shows of *RT America*, such as *Breaking the Set* or *The Truthseeker*, regularly cover topics that are framed within conspiratorial narratives or openly endorse them. Hence, *RT* challenges an elitist aspect of American politics through populist ideas vocalised by experts

and show hosts. Thus *RT* has successfully tapped into a rich and extensive body of American conspiracy theories that has been circulating for decades. *RT* hosts and correspondents endorse different types of conspiracy theories, both bizarre and well-grounded in actual evidence of governmental cover-up operations. This adoption of conspiratorial narratives, which Peter Knight (2000) defines as a 'conspiracy culture', allows *RT* to infuse the current social and economic inequalities of American society with conspiratorial allegations, thereby generating a distinctly anti-elitist message and winning the attention of domestic audiences.

Among the conspiratorial ideas that feature in *RT*'s broadcasts, two types are of particular interest: the first includes genuinely American conspiracy theories; and the second includes ideas of conspiracy in relations between the US and Russia. The analysis of these two types of conspiracy theories offers an opportunity to explore how they are employed to undermine US domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, it provides an understanding of how these theories support the Russian government's actions, helping Russia's leadership to become a 'spokesperson' on the side of the global community of 'the people' against the global 'Other' – the US.

American conspiracy theories

In an episode of *Breaking the Set* from 11 December 2013, the show's host, Abby Martin, recalled the Iran-Contra Affair, when the American government approved an arms sale to Iran, despite an international embargo, and funded the Nicaraguan Contras (National Security Archive, 2006). The investigation of Gary Webb, a journalist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, in 1996 revealed more hard-hitting details of this affair. Cooperation with the Central Intelligence Agency allowed a number of individuals affiliated with the Contras to smuggle drugs into the US, which likely triggered the influx of crack into African-American neighbourhoods (Webb, 1998). The possible involvement of the CIA in drug trafficking became a hallmark of American conspiracy culture. As a CIA internal investigation showed, several of its employees indeed turned a blind eye to the drug trafficking of Contra affiliates.³ However, the mainstream American press first ignored Webb's investigation, and, later accused him of spreading false allegations and conspiracy theories (Schou, 2006, pp. 126–148).

In her report, Martin briefly narrated this story, but the conclusions she drew were not directly connected to the aforementioned cases and, more importantly, were not backed by the facts presented:

[I]f you just can't comprehend that the same government, which is fighting a multi-billion dollar drug war, is partially responsible for spreading the drugs, one has to look at the cultivation of protection that the US military supplying for opium in Afghanistan. The war-torn country had nearly eradicated the crop prior the occupation and now 90 per cent of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan. So, the next time you hear something dismissed as just a conspiracy theory, maybe take a second to dig a little deeper at what is presented, because you might be surprised at what you find.⁴

This quote exemplifies *RT*'s approach to making use of conspiracy theories. Real government-backed conspiracies of the past allow Martin to shape the criticism of American involvement in the war in Afghanistan within a conspiratorial narrative.

In response to those critics who dismiss *RT*'s news as conspiracy theories, the channel's hosts and experts explain that public criticism of conspiracy theories is unjust. First, the political

establishment uses the libel of conspiracy theories to destroy the reputations of those who want to know the truth behind official information.⁵ Second, in the past, mainstream media and government officials dismissed those who tried to question the official accounts of controversial and dramatic events; the actions of authorities were aimed at covering up illegal activities and at promoting the interests of political and business elites.

This argument is based on the abundant and controversial history of US governmental cover-up operations that provides a basis for current conspiracy fears. As Kathryn Olmsted (2010) has argued, real conspiracies in which the US government was involved have helped conspiracy theories become popular in American society and establish a place in mainstream culture. Conspiracy theories have gained sufficient credibility to be turned into a legitimate trope of explanation because government officials have promoted their own conspiracies, covered-up real plots and suppressed dissent voices (Olmsted, 2010, p. 234). The grounding of governmental conspiracies in more widely accepted facts allows *RT* to express opinions that undermine current actions or statements of US officials, hence attracting the attention of those audiences who mistrust the American government.

The episode of *Breaking the Set* on 22 October 2013 is a case in point of this strategy. It featured a report on the alleged cover-up by the World Health Organisation of birth defects linked to the use of depleted uranium by the occupying forces in Iraq. This story was followed by commentaries from the host on a new government programme that purportedly scans the tweets of people who display signs of mental illnesses. Perhaps in order to bolster the impact of previous stories, these reports were followed by a discussion of five government-led conspiracies that eventually turned out to be true.⁶ It is noteworthy that several of these conspiracies involved tests on human subjects and their disclosures led to accusations of human rights violations by US officials. This link between real conspiracies of the past and current events, which have not received an ample investigation, are aimed at the creation of negative attitudes towards the American government both within the US and globally.

Apart from theories that are well-grounded in historical facts, *RT* gives a voice to American conspiracy theorists. An example is its active coverage of the Bilderberg Club conference – an annual meeting of political, business and media elites that was established in 1954 for cooperation between Western European countries and the US. The Bilderberg conference, whose participants gather behind closed doors to ‘speak candidly without worrying how their words might play in tomorrow’s headlines’ leads to fears of conspiracy.⁷ Accordingly, the Bilderberg conspiracy became one of the major theories that attacks the elitist aspect of the global political and financial establishment. As Alex Jones, one of the proponents of this theory, claimed on *RT*, the Bilderberg group builds a ‘one world corporate fascist government’ to exercise global control.⁸ According to conspiracy theories surrounding the club, Bilderberg allegedly controls governments, handpicks state leaders, and defines global economic and political agendas (Estulin, 2007). *RT*’s reports on the Bilderberg conferences feature interviews with activists who, apart from conspiratorial claims, contend that security measures for the Bilderberg meetings are funded from taxpayers’ money while the world undergoes a severe economic crisis.⁹ Another report on the Bilderberg meeting in Chantilly in May 2012 featured images of anti-Bilderberg protesters who called the participants of the conference ‘Criminal Bankers’, ‘War Profiteers’ and ‘Fat Cats’.¹⁰ This distinctly populist appeal to ordinary people suffering economically has been integral to the American conspiracy tradition for decades, helping reinforcing anti-elitism and nurturing a sense of ‘people-hood’ within the

country (Goldberg, 2001, p. 20). In this case, the anti-Bilderberg protesters' demand that the power of businessmen and corporations be limited, and given to 'the people', is wrapped into conspiracy theory. Following Fenster's (2008) concept, the anti-Bilderberg conspiracy theories express concern about the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the business and political elites.

It is perhaps the clearly anti-elitist character of the notions spread by the anti-Bilderberg conspiracy theories that explain *RT's* active coverage of the event. The constant reiteration of the fact that these meetings are not covered by the mainstream press – but should be, as they gather together the most powerful people of the Western world – helps *RT* establish its image as the only media source able to bring meaningful information to its audience. These reports and guest experts, who are rarely invited onto other channels, help *RT* promote itself as a place where people can share their ideas freely, as opposed to the 'mainstream media'.

The fears of the all-powerful Bilderbergers and governmental organisations in control of the US could be understood as an anxious manifestation of ordinary Americans about the representation of individuals in current political and social life. Timothy Melley (2001, p. 65) defined this anxiety as 'agency panic' – the unease of individuals about changes in communication and the ways in which modern society operates. The images of omnipotent financial tycoons and faceless governmental corporations reflect the powerlessness of the individual to resist institutions. The aforementioned conspiracy theories sprout from this context and become a 'weapon of the weak' in attempts to delegitimise the current social and political system. *RT* provides a stage for vocalising these theories in the public space, thus using them instrumentally in order to damage the image of the US.

Anti-Russian conspiracy theories

A significant part of *RT's* broadcast is devoted to coverage of the Russian news or news that affects Russia. This coverage is delivered from a distinctly 'Russian' perspective, which prompts criticism from foreign journalists and politicians as well as accusations of propaganda (Rothman, 2014). In turn, *RT's* management explains the peculiar angle of its coverage in terms of the necessity to provide an alternative view of Russia amid the dominant and extremely biased narrative of the Western media (Bullough, 2013).

The conspiratorial narratives in *RT's* reports and programmes regarding Russia serve as an explanatory tool for depicting the threat of American world dominance. US officials, as well as governmental and NGOs, are depicted as elements of the global machine of control; Russia's policies, in turn, help provide a balance in international relations and justify the Kremlin's disagreement with the US. In addition, the conspiratorial interpretation of American activities in the post-Soviet world might serve as a justification for future actions of the Russian government.

An exemplary case is *RT's* coverage of the Ukrainian conflict in 2013/2014 where anti-US conspiratorial discourse played a pivotal role in explaining Russia's actions. The official Russian narrative of events in Ukraine has been based on the assumption that the US provoked the revolution and toppled president Yanukovich. In February 2014, a recording of an alleged conversation between Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State of the Department for Europe, and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoff Pyatt was leaked onto the internet. The recording was of a telephone call between the two high-ranking US officials discussing the Ukrainian opposition leaders and their capability to lead the country.¹¹ *RT* quickly picked

up the story and interpreted it as evidence of American ‘scheming’ to oust a democratically elected president. In a newscast broadcast on 7 February 2014, *RT*’s reporter described the conversation as the two officials ‘playing a game with the opposition leaders as if they were pieces on a chessboard’¹² – a metaphor that presented the image of an omnipotent power capable of manipulating politicians from behind the scenes.

The leaked conversation contributed to a framing of the events favourable to Russian officials, who stated that the US was causing the unrest in Ukraine.¹³ The fact that US officials did not deny the authenticity of the recording reinforced the conspiratorial narratives in the story and legitimised the use of conspiracy theories for analysis of the situation in Ukraine.¹⁴ The instrumental conspiratorial interpretation thus helped connect the images of the US as a malignant power in pursuit of regime change and justified Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a legitimate act of resistance to American intervention.

The image of the US as a ‘puppet master’ that overthrows dissenting regimes was further developed in an episode of the investigative-reporting-style programme *The Truthseeker*. Its broadcast on 9 March 2014 described prominent NGOs as an ‘arm’ of the American government. The National Endowment for Democracy and Amnesty International were accused of forging evidence to legitimate the US invasions during the conflicts in Libya and Afghanistan. According to the programme’s expert on the post-Cold War era, NGOs operate as subversive agents in states that resist Washington’s agenda of globalisation. One of the experts, reportedly involved in the work of NGOs in the past, suggested that all American-affiliated NGOs should be expelled because ‘you can’t have agents of foreign governments running around promoting coup d’états and things of that nature’.¹⁵ At the end of the programme, the presenter tied together the allegations made during the programme with the Ukrainian crisis and concluded: ‘If history is any guide NGOs will do everything to turn Ukraine into international war. When the organizations tasked with preventing conflict are the ones provoking it, the world is in a dangerous place.’¹⁶

This conspiratorial reading of US policies towards Ukraine likely aims at a twofold goal. On the one hand, a dissemination of ideas about the US as a global force conspiring against other nations contributes to the formation of anti-American attitudes in the world and hence undermines public support for US policies. On the other hand, the conspiratorial allegations of *RT* provide reasons for further attacks against civil society in Russia. If the Russian government decides to suppress NGOs within the country in the future, the explanation of the ‘true’ nature of American-based NGOs will serve to counter international criticism.

Measuring the success

Conspiracy theories are indeed an attractive and powerful way to grab people’s attention. However, two key questions require investigation: how powerful and accurate can this instrument of public diplomacy be, and who is its target audience?

One of the central issues in public diplomacy is how to measure impact and if audiences ‘buy’ the messages being presented. The question of how to trace causality between public diplomacy efforts and changes in attitudes in the targeted country occupies the minds of academics, practitioners and politicians (see Brown, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Wilding, 2007). Lack of credible information regarding the audience and the impact of actions may give rise to obstacles in strategic planning for further implementation of policies as well as for financial reports to sponsors. As scholars note, when it comes to assessing the impact of information on

people and the effects it has, it gets even more difficult to measure the influence. Existing methodology (such as framing analysis and measuring interest by counting posts, readership, etc.) can indeed provide some data; however, it is almost impossible to trace the causal links between policies and their effects (Jones, 2011).

Given these methodological obstacles and the lack of open data about the popularity of *RT*, it is virtually impossible to measure the channel's success and influence. Currently, it is only possible to make assumptions based on the information provided by the channel itself. Another way of gauging the success of *RT* could be through the ever-growing government investment in the channel. This could be interpreted as a sign of the Kremlin's approval of *RT*'s work (Kurilenko, 2014). However, the absence of credible information about the process of decision making in the Kremlin does not allow this proxy to be accepted as a sufficient measuring instrument.

Just as it is difficult to measure the channel's popularity, so too is it hard to define its audience and the efficiency of its message. Anti-American and, in general, anti-Western stories attract a certain audience around the world. By going behind the scenes of American politics and challenging statements made by White House officials, *RT* most probably targets left- and right-wing audiences. *RT*'s motto 'Question more' primarily appeals to those who distrust the American government, especially since the release of the Wikileaks cables and revelations about the National Security Agency's global espionage programmes. However, as a public diplomacy instrument, *RT* struggles to make its message compelling to an audience wider than these groups, or to provide one that would be able to influence the agenda of Western governments. For instance, several rounds of economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the US have not been prevented; neither have they generated criticism among Europeans and American citizens. These failures to influence key audiences illustrate the limits of the chosen foreign policy tactic.

Perhaps, approaching groups who share anti-US attitudes could be an efficient 'entry strategy' that would allow *RT* to become the leading alternative news channel. However, its capacity as a public diplomacy tool to advocate for the policies of the Russian state and the difficulties it faces in providing balanced news coverage undermines its reputation among wider audiences.

Conclusion

As Richard Sakwa (2012, p. 607) has noted, the post-Cold War order of international relations is a rich terrain generating myths and discourses of competition between former superpowers, thus providing fruitful ground for the development of various conspiracy theories. Within this terrain, Russia's active development of public diplomacy instruments has been tidily connected with the need to counterbalance criticism from foreign countries and international organisations. The global media campaign criticising Russian military involvement in Georgia in 2008 stimulated the Russian authorities to take action and tailor one of its instruments to a specific need: counterbalancing American global dominance. Hence, *RT* could be defined as a peculiar instrument of Russian public diplomacy called upon to erode a positive image of the US in the world and thus challenge the US's own political potential.

The analysis of the conspiratorial component of *RT*'s news agenda allows us to draw several conclusions about the use of conspiracy theories as Russia's public diplomacy tool. First, conspiracy theories work to sap the positions of the American government, both from within the US and globally. The populist, anti-elitist claim of conspiracy theorists in *RT*'s programmes

aims at uniting the imagined global community of 'the people' against the dangerous 'Other', represented by the US establishment. Interpreted as one element within a broader array of political strategies aimed at exposing the inequities of the political and economic order, conspiracy theories shed light on the socio-economic problems of the US and challenge the dominant representation of the 'American dream'. Second, criticism of the US government backed by facts of real conspiracies in the past helps diminish possible criticism of Russia and reallocate legitimacy from the US to Russia in the global arena. *RT* exposes American involvement in world conflicts and depicts it as a major international threat. Thus, these reports justify Russian government policies and create an image of Russia as the leader of global resistance to the US.

As Sinikukka Saari (2014, p. 63) has noted, the post-Soviet Russian approach to public diplomacy significantly differed from the Soviet approach. The key difference is the lack of any ideological component, values or responsibilities to help achieve short-term goals. The deliberate lack of clear ideological principles to guide the news agenda of the channel, which is compensated for by a clear anti-American stance and an instrumental engagement with conspiratorial discourses, enables the Kremlin to benefit from disagreements with Western governments and foster critical views of American politics among sub-national communities within Western societies. *RT* is able to reach the domestic audience of its counterpart, thereby transforming international broadcasting into a phenomenon affecting the American domestic scene. *RT*'s emergence, even though it should not be exaggerated, nevertheless suggests that the spatial order of the post-Cold War world is undergoing a crucial reconfiguration through the means of global media. Therefore, further careful scrutiny of conspiracy theories as a tool of foreign politics will facilitate our comprehension of the political potential of Russia's foreign policy strategies more generally.

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Notes

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