

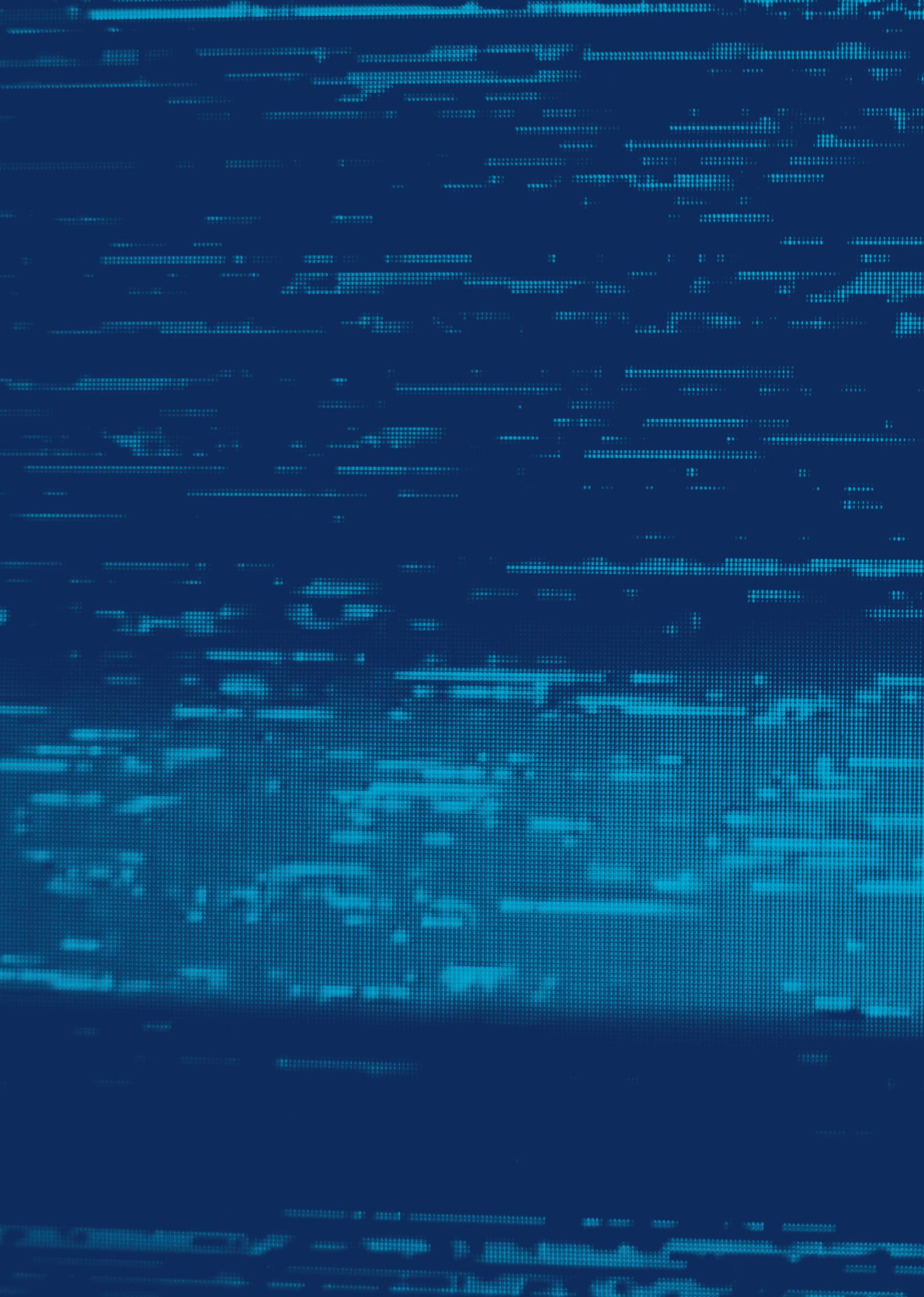
THE
POLICY
INSTITUTE
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY
OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATION
& POWER

KING'S
College
LONDON

Weaponising news

RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation

Dr Gordon Ramsay
Dr Sam Robertshaw



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The case study of Ukrainian news included in this report was conducted in collaboration with Texty.org.ua, a Kyiv-based data journalism agency that promotes transparency and accountability by developing high-quality data journalism, specialising in interactive infographics and web applications.

Thanks to Professor Sarah Oates (Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland) for advice throughout the project and for reviewing interim drafts of this report, and to Dr Valentina Feklyunina (Newcastle University) for comments and advice on the final draft.

This project was funded by the **Open Society Foundation**

About the authors

Dr Gordon Ramsay has been conducting and publishing media and communication research for the past decade. He holds a PhD in Political Communication from the University of Glasgow (2011) and is the co-author, with Dr Martin Moore, of UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign and Monopolising Local News. He has co-developed the content analysis research tool Steno with the developer Ben Campbell, and has previously published research on media regulation and policy at the Media Standards Trust, the University of Westminster, and Cardiff University. Email: g.ramsay@westminster.ac.uk

Dr Sam Robertshaw has a PhD in Politics from the University of Glasgow. He has conducted research on society-military relations in the UK and in Russia. His research has been published in Global Affairs and European Security.

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1.

Executive summary

Overview

This report contains three separate analyses of English-language news content published by RT and Sputnik and its implications for news organisations in Western democracies. These analyses are linked, but may be of interest to different audiences. Together, the analyses comprise a comprehensive analysis of how Russian state-linked news outlets play a variety of roles in different situations, ranging from coordinating damage-control messaging, to amplifiers of Russian prestige and aggregators of negative content about Western domestic politics:

- **Flooding the zone: RT, Sputnik and Russian framing of the Skripal incident.** This analysis shows how Russian news outlets inserted over 130 competing and often contradictory narratives into their extensive coverage of the March 2018 Salisbury poisoning incident. The study shows how state-linked news outlets operate in a ‘crisis management’ situation, mobilising a ‘parallel commentariat’ to air dozens of narratives explaining events and the motivations of Western actors, as well as amplifying provocative statements from senior Russian government officials.
- **Heads we win, tails you lose: projecting Russian strength.** This analysis demonstrates how Russian news outlets portray Russian military prowess and Western military weakness to English-speaking audiences. It demonstrates how RT and Sputnik generate a large volume of coverage critical of NATO and extensive reports on the potency of Russian prototype weapons. The susceptibility of Western news outlets to eye-catching details of Russian military strength is demonstrated through evidence of directly and indirectly replicated information on Russian weapons published by UK news outlets.
- **Division and dysfunction: how RT and Sputnik portray the West and construct news agendas.** The final analysis records how Russian English-language news outlets publish a steady stream of articles about domestic politics and events in the USA and Europe that focus on political dysfunction, institutional failure, social division and the negative effects of immigration. It also shows that RT and Sputnik act as negative news aggregators, harvesting, repackaging and translating stories from local news outlets across Europe, before publishing them for English-language audiences. A software-driven text-matching analysis also demonstrates the extent to which UK news organisations (primarily tabloid news sites) gather and republish content from RT and Sputnik, as well as showing how the Russian outlets replicate content from UK news sources in return.

Project scope and methods

- In total, 151,809 online articles published by UK national news outlets and 11,819 articles on the English-language sites of RT and Sputnik were analysed across two four-week samples from May-June 2017 and March 2018.
- The search and tagging functions of the digital content analysis tool Steno were used to conduct large-scale content analyses of Russian English-language news output, and to determine key themes and frames deployed by RT and Sputnik in their coverage of the Skripal poisoning, Russian military capacity and Western democratic politics.
- The ‘Steno-Similar’ text-matching tool, created for this project, allowed researchers to compare databases of Russian and UK news content to determine the extent to which content produced by news outlets based in one country was replicated in the other.

RT, Sputnik and Russian framing of the Skripal incident

- Coverage of the Skripal incident on RT and Sputnik was abundant, with 735 articles on the story published across both sites over the four weeks following the discovery of the poisoning.
- In total, 138 separate – and often contradictory – narratives explaining the incident and its aftermath were published by RT and Sputnik during this period, ranging from interpretations of Western motives, to explanations of the origins of the nerve agent used in the poisoning, to full-blown conspiracy theories.
- Narratives often appeared following public interventions by Western governments. Following Theresa May’s speech to the UK Parliament on 12th March in which Russia was accused and the nerve agent ‘Novichok’ identified, a flurry of narratives contesting the origins and existence of Novichok appeared on RT and Sputnik, and narratives framing the incident as defined by geopolitics and Western domestic political problems began to emerge.
- The most frequently repeated narratives supporting the Russian position asserted that Russia’s willingness to cooperate was being rejected by the West, that there was no evidence to prove Russian guilt, and that the Western response was driven by ‘Russophobia’ and hysteria. Theresa May’s accusation of Russian guilt was frequently cited, but often immediately rebutted by editorial statements by RT or Sputnik.

- 215 separate sources were quoted as providing one or more narratives on the Skripal incident and its aftermath. Many of these were non-governmental Russian and ‘expert’ non-Russian sources, columnists and fringe or right-wing politicians who formed a ‘parallel commentariat’ supplying pro-Russian or anti-West interpretations of events.
- Elite Russian government sources – individual and institutional – were prominent in coverage on RT and Sputnik and supplied a range of narratives ranging from the conciliatory to the conspiratorial. Their elite status and use of combative and confrontational language towards Western counterparts resulted in substantial coverage by mainstream UK media. This was the most successful means by which pro-Russian narratives were inserted into Western news content.
- These four UK publications frequently used Russian-sourced information on weapon specifications and capabilities and emphasised the destructive capacity and effectiveness of many Russian weapons. Many of these claims relied on Russian quotes, and contained Russian government-supplied embedded video, sometimes taken from RT and Sputnik.
- Text-matching analysis found a small number of examples of ‘churnalism’ in articles about Russian weaponry in UK media. Ten articles were found that contained significant passages of text taken from RT and Sputnik coverage. In six of these articles the Russian news source was credited. In the remaining four no information was supplied to indicate to audiences the provenance of the content. One *Express* article was found to be almost entirely replicated from an RT article published the previous day, with certain identifying phrases removed.

Projecting Russian strength

- Coverage of NATO by RT and Sputnik was both prominent and overwhelmingly negative. 617 articles mentioning NATO were published over the eight weeks sampled in 2017 and 2018, approximately 5% of total output by the Russian sites; of these, 80% contained criticism of the alliance.
- NATO was characterised as both aggressive and threatening, and simultaneously weak and incapable: 280 articles criticised NATO as expansionist and aggressive, as illegal or illegitimate, as being untrustworthy or duplicitous to its own members and to opponents, or outlined instances of failures, mistakes or incompetence by NATO personnel. 181 articles focused on disharmony and conflict within NATO, and international friction between member states. 80 articles contained the assertion or implication that NATO membership had a detrimental effect on (particularly new or smaller) members, and 168 articles justified Russian military build-up or offensive policies as a valid and necessary response to NATO.
- RT and Sputnik cover Russian military issues extensively, with many articles acting effectively as ‘fact files’ on Russian weapon specifications and capabilities, with embedded videos and quotes from Russian government and military officials, and military analysts.
- Certain parts of the UK media draw heavily from content of this type when publishing articles about Russian weaponry. 83 articles were identified containing 120 different mentions of Russian prototype or cutting-edge weapons. Almost nine-tenths of these mentions were found in four publications: the *Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Star*.

Political dysfunction: how RT and Sputnik portray the West

- Political dysfunction is a key overarching narrative in RT and Sputnik coverage of politics and society in Western countries. Of 2,641 articles about domestic issues in the UK, US, France, Germany, Sweden, Italy and – from Eastern Europe – Ukraine, 2,157 (81.7%) contained one or more frames relating to political dysfunction.
- In coverage of UK domestic issues by RT and Sputnik, 90% of 956 articles contained one or more political dysfunction frames. The most common frames associated with the UK (excluding those related to the terror attacks that occurred during the 2017 sample) were: ‘government failures’ (166 articles); ‘political party failures’ (157 articles) and ‘social conflict’ (including immigration and religious tension), which featured in 141 articles.
- Coverage of the US on RT and Sputnik focused most heavily on ‘violence/crime’ (243 articles), ‘institutional conflict’ (224 articles) and ‘government failures’ (195 articles)
- Outside anglophone countries, RT and Sputnik published English-language content that accentuated social conflict, particularly immigration and crime in the case of Germany, immigration and cultural tensions in Sweden, Political failures by governments, institutions and parties in Italy and France, and undemocratic practices and government failure in Ukraine.

- The news agendas of RT and Sputnik were more likely to focus on immigration and Islam than UK news outlets, and considerably more likely to cover terrorism (13.8% of combined total coverage, compared with 7.1% of UK news articles published in the same period). Approximately 13% of articles on immigration published by RT and Sputnik were identifiable from major wire agencies, while the reliance of both news outlets on local German and Swedish news sources for articles on immigration in those countries indicates that RT and Sputnik use content harvested from other news outlets to build their own narratives about aspects of political dysfunction in Western democracies.
- Using text-matching software to compare datasets of Russian and UK articles, 21 articles in UK national media outlets were found in which a large portion of content from RT (16 articles) or Sputnik (5 articles) was detected. All 21 articles were published on the sites of UK tabloid newspapers. While some of the replicated articles were of strange or sensational stories such as UFO sightings and apocalyptic prophecies, more than half were about political or military issues, including Russian-friendly narratives on the Russian military and the European Union.
- The text-matching analysis also found 32 instances of articles first published in UK media being replicated by RT and Sputnik. 22 of these articles were about political issues in the UK and EU, many of which contained subject matter that sustain the RT and Sputnik narratives of political dysfunction in the West, including articles about immigration, child sex abuse and terrorism. The Guardian (10 articles) was the most commonly replicated source by the Russian outlets.

Case study: Russian-language news in Russia and Ukraine

- To test the applicability of the Steno analysis and comparison tools in a different linguistic environment, a case study was conducted in collaboration with Kyiv-based investigative and open data journalism organisation Texty.org.ua to assess how Steno could be deployed in a Russian-language analysis.
- Steno was used to monitor whether content produced by Russian state-linked media outlets could be detected in Ukrainian Russian-language news sites, or whether there was any movement of information in the opposite direction. Content was collected from the Russian outlets RT, TASS and RIA Novosti, and the Ukrainian sites Vesti.ukr.com, Strana.ua, Podrobnosti.ua, Newsone.ua, 112.ua, Obozrevatel.com and Korrespondent.net. The Steno analysis and comparison tools were then tested to determine how easily they could be applied in this context.
- Content-scraping and analysis found evidence of heavily negative coverage of the 2018 Independence Day of Ukraine parade on sampled Russian news sites, repackaged for Russian domestic audiences. Use of the Steno content comparison tool on a separate pre-existing database of articles covering the recognition of independence for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church found some evidence of Ukrainian news sites replicating content from TASS, and multiple instances of Russian outlets repackaging Ukrainian news content with added emotional or partisan language.

2.

Introduction

Churnalism as information warfare

This project was devised in response to two events. The first was the publication of a fascinating but relatively unheralded article by Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew Rossback in the *New York Times* on 7th June 2017.¹ As the UK was a day away from the denouement of a remarkable general election campaign, it is perhaps unsurprising that little attention was paid to the article at the time, but the story the reporters told has profound implications for Western journalism in a period when business models are collapsing, newsrooms are shrinking, competition for audiences has exploded, and motivated political actors have the means and resources to turn journalism into a tool of information warfare.

The *New York Times* article summarised an investigation from the previous month by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) on how a fake story about Russian military capability spread into mainstream Western media.² The detailed investigation shows how an obscure Russian satirical article published in 2014 (following an incident between a US Navy destroyer and a Russian attack aircraft in the Black Sea) was recycled three years later on Vesti, one of Russia's main state-run television news programmes. The Vesti report retained the fake central claim of the original satirical article – that the Russian pilot used cutting-edge technology to disable the US warship by jamming its electronic systems – but with added false quotes from a senior US military official. Within two days, the Vesti website had published an English translation with an embedded subtitled video of the original television segment, and two days later the story (and the video) had been picked up and republished on the websites of three UK national newspapers – the *Sun*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Star* – and by Fox News in the US.³

The process by which this happened was relatively simple: eye-catching content was gathered by a Russian state news outlet (in this case an entirely false claim about Russian military capability), repackaged with video content and (again, false in this instance) quotes from elite sources, and published in English.

Within days, major news outlets in the English-speaking world had run the story largely uncritically, spreading it to English-speaking audiences and onto social media, where it was shared tens of thousands of times.

Nobody could accuse those British newspapers or Fox News of a lack of patriotism, and all present themselves as enthusiastic defenders of their national militaries. Yet, unwittingly, they had picked up and passed on false information about Russian military technology and – by extension – the weakness of Western defences. The elements of the story give some clues as to why: a futuristic weapon; danger to the West; a (fabricated) quote from an elite source; video content including computer-graphic simulations of the 'weapon' in action. All contain some appeal to news values, particularly in the digital age, and the story looks too good to miss from the perspective of a pressured journalist with quotas to fill. It took a forensic investigation from DFRLab to unpick the falsehoods in the story; journalists rarely have that time.

This is not a wholly new phenomenon. The second event that influenced the creation of this report is the discovery a decade ago of the extent of 'churnalism' in UK media. In 2008, researchers at Cardiff University discovered that over half of all articles in selected UK newspapers contained material from PR press releases, with 19% of articles being wholly or largely constructed from public relations material.⁴ The practice became known as 'churnalism' – the repackaging of corporate or public relations (PR) content as news – and sparked a number of follow-up studies, including the creation of a tool (since discontinued) created by UK think-tank the Media Standards Trust, Churnalism.com, that allowed the public to check online news articles against a constantly-updating database of press releases to detect where content had been replicated.

1 MacFarquhar, N. and A. Rossback (2017) 'How Russian Propaganda Spread From a Parody Website to Fox News,' *nytimes.com*, 7th June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/07/world/europe/anatomy-of-fake-news-russian-propaganda.html> (Accessed 10th January 2018)

2 Digital Forensic Research Lab (2017) 'Russia's Fake "Electronic Bomb"', *Medium.com*, 9th May 2017, <https://medium.com/dfriab/russias-fake-electronic-bomb-4ce9dbbc57f8> (Accessed 10th January 2018)

3 Fox News has since removed the article. The *Sun*, *Express*, and *Daily Star* articles remain online:

'Russian media claims country can wipe out entire US Navy with a single 'electronic bomb' in bizarre propaganda report,' *thesun.co.uk*, 19th April 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3360129/russian-media-claims-country-can-wipe-out-entire-us-navy-with-a-single-electronic-bomb-in-bizarre-propaganda-report/> (Accessed 28th September 2018)

'WATCH: Russia claims it can WIPE OUT US Navy with 'ELECTRONIC bomb' amid WW3 fears,' *express.co.uk*, 19th April 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/793548/world-war-3-russia-electronic-bomb-jamming-vladimir-putin-us-navy> (Accessed 28th September 2018)

'Russia boasts it can WIPE OUT entire US Navy with 'electronic bomb' as war fears grow,' *dailystar.co.uk*, 19th April 2017, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/606530/Russia-war-Putin-missiles-electronic-bomb-US-navy-Trump-Kim-Jong-un-video> (Accessed 28th September 2018)

4 Lewis, J., A. Williams and B. Franklin (2008) 'Four Rumours and an Explanation: A political economic account of journalists' changing newsgathering and reporting practices,' *Journalism Practice*, 2:1, 27-45

The Cardiff study was conducted at a time when news organisations were struggling to cope with the financial pressures the growth of the internet was bringing to bear on the century-old business model of journalism. As advertising revenue migrated online and as audiences fragmented, their attention focused on a near-infinite range of alternative sites and activities, most news organisations reduced costs by cutting their editorial staff and sought to maximise online revenue by increasing the volume of articles published. The arithmetic is simple – fewer journalists producing more stories to constant deadlines. With harassed journalists hungry for eye-catching content, PR staffers stepped in. A keen awareness of the vulnerability of resource-starved journalists to an easy, newsworthy story – many of the journalists let go by newspapers moved straight into PR – led public relations officials to bombard journalists with press releases, often constructed like news content and ready to be slotted into articles.

As the Cardiff study shows, the method worked: news in respected national outlets was often seeded by organisations with a vested interest in reaching and influencing the public. As the practice became more routine, journalists were often unable to detect blatant falsehoods in fake press releases.⁵ The financial pressures facing journalism have only increased since 2008, and the vulnerability of news outlets to targeted information has grown.

There are some clear similarities between the Russian superweapon story and PR-driven churnalism. In both instances a well-resourced, motivated actor – a Russian state-linked news outlet in the first instance, corporate PR teams in the second – crafted content designed to fulfil certain news values, and made it available to journalists in a target market. Though the mechanism of transmission is different (churnalism traditionally relies on direct emails to journalists; the Vesti story was translated into English and published online), audiences will be unaware of the provenance of the content.

In recent years the Russian state has significantly increased its news production for consumption outside Russia. Russia Today was launched in 2005 providing Russia-related news content in English, with Arabic and Spanish versions introduced in 2007 and 2009. The channel subsequently rebranded as RT, presented as an ‘alternative’ news source for international audiences, with a broad international agenda. In 2010 RT America launched, in 2013 an associated video platform, Ruptly.tv was set up and based in Germany, while in 2014 RT UK went on-air alongside RT Deutsch. A French-language channel was launched in December 2017. Sputnik was launched in 2014 as a multimedia news platform, built out of the Russian government’s Voice of Russia radio service, and owned by Rossiya Segodnya, a company established by executive order in 2013. The Presidential decree tasked Rossiya Segodnya with generating ‘coverage abroad of the state policy of the Russian Federation and public life in the Russian Federation.’⁶

Russia’s foreign-language news output increased just as relations with the West collapsed following the annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine. RT’s rebranding as an ‘alternative’ news source for international audiences could more properly be described as ‘adversarial,’ with commentators and guests critical of European and North American governments and the frequent airing on RT and Sputnik of unverifiable conspiracy theories alleging criminality of the part of Western governments and organisations.⁷ The UK broadcast media regulator Ofcom has made a series of rulings against RT in relation to its coverage of the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts since 2014⁸; in May 2018 the regulator had 11 ongoing investigations into due impartiality in RT news and current affairs programmes.⁹ In November 2017 RT was obliged to register as a foreign agent by the US government.¹⁰

5 Sabbagh, D. (2011) ‘Churnalism, journalism and the story of the penazze,’ *theguardian.com*, 23rd February 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/feb/23/churnalism-journalism-story-penazze> (Accessed 28th September 2018)

6 President of Russia (2013) ‘Указ о мерах по повышению эффективности деятельности государственных СМИ’ [Decree on measures to improve the performance of state-run media], President of Russia Website, 9th December 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54513> (Accessed 12th May 2018)

7 Yablokov, I. (2015) ‘Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)’, *Politics*, 35:3
Watanabe, K. (2018) ‘Conspiracist propaganda: How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online,’ Paper presented at ECPR General Conference 2018, Hamburg, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/56301432-fdec-4081-a777-90ac49609aa5.pdf> (Accessed 10th September 2018)

8 Ofcom (2015) Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin, Issue number 288, 21st September 2015, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/50507/issue_288.pdf (Accessed 21st September 2018)

9 Waterson, J. (2018) ‘Russian broadcaster RT faces three new Ofcom investigations,’ *theguardian.com*, 21st May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/may/21/russian-broadcaster-rt-three-new-ofcom-investigations> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

10 Barrett, D. and D. Filipov (2017) ‘RT agrees to register as an agent of the Russian government,’ *washingtonpost.com*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/rt-agrees-to-register-as-an-agent-of-the-russian-government/2017/11/09/bd62f9a2-c558-11e7-aae0-cb18a8c29c65_story.html (Accessed 21st September 2018)

Over the past five years, therefore, the Russian government has developed and enhanced its capacity to use multi-language news content as a tool of ‘information-psychological warfare,’ conducted permanently against target populations.¹¹ It also has a motive to do so: to skew or disrupt information on selected issues, events or stories to serve Russian interests.

The process by which churnalism works is a useful conceptual template for studying how motivated and well-resourced actors can use news content to try to reach and influence audiences and media outlets in target countries, and the ways in which ‘information-psychological warfare’ can be conducted by states in conjunction with controlled news outlets:

- It is based on intelligence and the exploitation of vulnerabilities. Churnalism works best when its practitioners know how and when to package information that will be picked up by time- and resource-poor journalists.
- It is strategic, relying on predictability and a knowledge of the type, style and format of information that will attract journalists looking to publish attention-grabbing content.
- It relies on leveraging audience trust in news outlets to deliver (dis)information to a target. Just as audiences are less likely to believe PR material straight from the source, so they are less likely to trust (for example) statements about Russian military prowess from Russian media. Channelling information through news outlets in target countries takes advantage of signals of authority and audience trust.

RT and Sputnik act as both source and source material. As digital journalists cast around for content to support an existing story or to create a new story from, they are both compelled to ‘pull’ content and receptive to ‘pushed’ content that satisfies the news values of the outlet for which they work. As the investigations by DFRLab and the New York Times show, eye-catching stories, published in English, can be irresistible to Western news outlets, even when they make unverifiable or false claims that serve Russian interests. Well-resourced state-linked news outlets like RT and Sputnik therefore have the opportunity and motive to produce news agendas and package content in a way that is both eye-catching and which builds a reputation as go-to sources for specific types of content (such as military information or quotes from Russian sources, official or otherwise).

This mechanism is especially effective when relating to areas of news, such as national security, where journalism plays a vital public function in keeping citizens informed.

Assessing Russian news agendas and detecting Russian content in UK media

This project was designed to assess the content that Russian state-linked news media produced for English-language audiences, and to explore the extent to which Russian information put out via these channels is replicated in UK media. Using software-enabled content analysis techniques, including an adaptation of the original text-matching code behind Churnalism.com, the project consists of a series of analyses of over 11,000 articles published on the websites of RT and Sputnik and over 150,000 online articles by UK national news outlets in two sample periods in 2017 and 2018.

The project uses the Steno content analysis tool to collect, tag and analyse all articles published on RT.com and Sputniknews.com, and on 17 UK national news sites over two four-week periods in May-June 2017 and March 2018. As part of the project a new series of functions was incorporated into Steno to allow researchers to match content from datasets of RT and Sputnik articles against datasets of UK media articles to detect where content has been replicated. The Steno tool used for this analysis has also been made available for researchers to use on a non-profit basis for future research.

The analysis addresses two broad themes:

1. What can we learn from what Russian state-linked news media publish, in English, about key issues central to Russian interests, and about the rest of the world?
2. Is there evidence of churnalism? ie to what extent is Russian English-language content replicated – that is, reproduced word-for-word or with cosmetic alterations – in the media of other countries (in this case the UK), and to what extent do Russian media cherry-pick content from external media outlets to build their own agendas?

11 Giles, K. (2016a) Handbook of Russian Information Warfare, NATO Defence College, 23rd November 2016, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=995> (Accessed 10th May 2018)

The original format of the project was disrupted following the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia on 4th March 2018. Given the nature of the incident and the diplomatic repercussions that followed, it was decided to reschedule the 2018 sample period in order to collect all RT and Sputnik coverage for a four-week period beginning on the day of the poisoning. This became a fascinating case study in its own right, and the accommodation of this analysis shifted the focus of this report more towards investigating how RT and Sputnik operate as English-language news outlets during a developing international crisis between Russia and the West.

Following this restructure, the analysis in this report has been grouped into three sections:

- An analysis of RT and Sputnik coverage during the Skripal crisis. This section explores how RT and Sputnik deployed a wide range of often contradictory narratives – including full-blown conspiracy theories – to explain and interpret the events before, during and after the poisoning. It identifies how a range of senior Russian officials and obscure Russian and Western sources supplied narratives that were gathered or amplified by both outlets, and how editorial statements in RT and Sputnik articles also pushed pro-Russian narratives. Finally, it identifies which of these quotes were featured in UK media coverage of the report and discusses the role of senior Russian government and diplomatic sources in shaping narratives about a major international event.
- An assessment of how RT and Sputnik project Russian strength to English-speaking audiences, and how content showcasing the potency of Russian weaponry and military technology makes its way into Western media coverage. This section analyses coverage of NATO on RT and Sputnik to determine how Russian media are used to articulate and justify Russian military and strategic policies. It then records how Russian media present government information about specific weapons technology and explores how this information is covered in UK media, including identifying examples of Russian military churnalism, whereby RT and Sputnik content about Russian weaponry is replicated in UK news articles.

- An analysis of how the West is portrayed in English-language news content on RT and Sputnik, and the pervasive use of the narrative of ‘political dysfunction’ in Russian coverage of European and North American countries. This focuses on the prevalence of ‘conflict’ and ‘failure’ frames when reporting on public life, as well as instances of crime, corruption and anti-democratic practices. The section explores how RT and Sputnik build their news agendas for coverage of immigration in Europe, using wire services and European news sources. Finally, the extent to which UK news sources take content directly from RT and Sputnik is assessed, as well as instances of the reversed process, whereby Russian news sources appropriate UK news content to create articles.

Following the empirical analysis of Russian and UK news sources, and in recognition of a parallel function of this project – the creation of a series of tools to allow other researchers to conduct similar analyses of cross-border flows of information and the construction of news agendas across multiple news outlets – a smaller-scale case study is included, measuring whether similar processes can be detected between Russian-language news sources based in Russia and Ukraine. A collaboration with the Ukrainian data journalism organisation Texty.org.ua tested and adapted the Steno software tools in order to conduct a pilot study in Russian language news. The results indicate that researchers across Europe will be able to conduct similar studies to this one, with local language support.

Finally, after the concluding remarks of the report a section outlining the background and context to the report is included. This section contains a review of literature and information on developments in Russian media and the growth of RT and Sputnik, as well as a summary of existing research and analyses of those channels. It also outlines the Russian state’s approach to media management and information warfare, and a note on how Russia uses media disinformation as a tool of warfare in Ukraine and beyond.

This report is, by necessity, only limited in scope given the amount of source material that it deals with. Focusing on Russian English-language news output in certain circumstances, and testing tools that allow for comparison between how information passes between different news environments, it marks a significant step in understanding how propaganda can be spread by politically motivated or directed news outlets: the porous nature of national news environments in an age of borderless access to information; the growth of well-resourced and politically-motivated actors (a state in this case, but private entities can also perform the same activities) as creators of journalism (or material that adheres to the aesthetic forms of journalism but not its truth-seeking function); the susceptibility of trusted newsbrands to disinformation in the attention economy. Understanding and addressing these issues will be some of the most important tasks facing policy-makers and researchers in coming years; this project is intended to aid that understanding and to supply the tools that will make those tasks easier. The Steno tools and underlying code will be made available to researchers at stenoproject.org.

3.

Project sampling and methods

Key points:

In total, 151,809 online articles published by UK national news outlets and 11,819 articles on the English-language sites of RT and Sputnik were analysed across two four-week samples from May-June 2017 and March 2018.

The search and tagging functions of the digital content analysis tool Steno were used to conduct large-scale content analyses of Russian English-language news output, and to determine key themes and frames deployed by RT and Sputnik in their coverage of the Skripal poisoning, Russian military capacity and Western democratic politics.

The 'Steno-Similar' tool, created for this project, allowed researchers to compare databases of Russian and UK news content to determine the extent to which content produced by news outlets based in one country was replicated in the other.

This study consists of several analyses of news content published by the English-language versions of the Russian news outlets RT and Sputnik, and direct comparison of content from RT/Sputnik article databases against UK national media output to determine where content replication occurs. It is built around the bulk collection of content from multiple news sites, and – given the volume of articles collected – partially-automated content analysis and text comparison.

The collection, analysis and comparison of news content is conducted using the analytical tool ‘Steno’, developed since 2015 by the Media Standards Trust and by researchers at King’s College London. Steno has been adapted and used across multiple projects, including analyses of online news coverage of the 2015 UK General Election and the 2016 EU Referendum campaign, as well as studies of the coverage of election campaigns on alternative digital media in the UK and the gender balance of expert sources in UK media coverage.

For this project, Steno was used to collect, store and analyse news content from UK and Russian (English-language) news sources, and – in a separate case study – Russian-language news content in Russia and Ukraine. The overall project of which this report forms part also involved the incorporation of additional functions into Steno to enable researchers to compare news content across large datasets to detect content replication, and the release of the Steno tool on an open source licence for researchers.

Using Steno for content analysis¹²

Steno consists of three related components:

1. An article collection function that uses specially configured scrapers to extract news content from selected news sites and store them in a structured way, removing extraneous information and text and recording certain metadata (such as date/time, byline, headline, article URL).
2. A customisable Graphical User Interface (GUI) that allows researchers to extract articles from the server by date range and index them as local database files. This interface then allows users to search the database by article content and metadata and apply tags manually or automatically to articles by running pre-written scripts.
3. A separate text-matching interface that allows researchers to compare datasets to detect whether content from articles in one database has been replicated in another. It also includes a function to upload blocks of text from any source to test whether it has been replicated, in whole or in part, in any article in a given database.

Article collection

Articles were collected from two groups of online news outlets: UK national newspapers, broadcasters and selected digital news sites; and the Russian English-language news outlets RT and Sputnik. Articles that consisted of audio or video content were not included in the analysis; articles with embedded videos but more than 100 words of text were included. Table 3.1 shows the list of sites that were selected for analysis.

Group 1 – UK Legacy and Digital News Media		
Website	Category	Associated National Newsbrands
bbc.co.uk/news	Broadcast	BBC News
channel4.com	Broadcast	Channel 4 News
itv.com/news	Broadcast	ITV News
news.sky.com	Broadcast	Sky News
dailymail.co.uk	Print	Daily Mail; MailOnline
dailystar.co.uk	Print	Daily Star; Daily Star Sunday
express.co.uk	Print	Daily Express; Sunday Express
ft.com	Print	Financial Times
theguardian.com	Print	Guardian; Observer
independent.co.uk	Print (Legacy; now digital)	Independent
inews.co.uk	Print	i
mirror.co.uk	Print	Daily Mirror; Sunday Mirror; Sunday People
telegraph.co.uk	Print	Daily Telegraph; Sunday Telegraph
thesun.co.uk	Print	Sun; Sun on Sunday
thetimes.co.uk	Print	The Times; Sunday Times
buzzfeed.com	Digital First	Buzzfeed; Buzzfeed UK
Huffingtonpost.co.uk	Digital First	Huffington Post UK
Group 2 – Russian English-Language News		
Website	Category	Associated Newsbrands
rt.com	Russian (ENG)	RT; RT UK
sputniknews.com	Russian (ENG)	Sputnik International

Table 3.1: Sites selected for analysis

¹² Further details on the operation of Steno is included in Appendix 1

Two separate four-week samples were collected, one in 2017 and one in 2018. The first covered 11th May to 7th June 2017, covering the last stages of the UK's General Election campaign of that year. The second covered the four weeks from the discovery of the poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal in March 2018. This second sample ran from 4th to 31st March, inclusive.

During these sample periods, all articles published on each of the sites were collected and stored on a central server. This is done via Steno by configuring scrapers to scan all URLs on preselected sites every few hours and adding all newly detected URLs to the existing database. Once activated, the scrapers continue to collect and store all new URLs (and associated metadata) until deactivated.

Once collected, researchers used the main Steno GUI to pull the articles into two separate groups of UK and Russian database files, these were divided for ease of use into eight week-long files covering both sample periods – 16 files overall. Prior to analysis, autodeletion scripts were written to automatically remove all articles not relevant to the analysis.¹³

Table 3.2 shows the breakdown of articles included in the final analysis. In total, 151,809 relevant articles were included in the UK media datasets, and 11,819 articles were collected from RT and Sputnik. The number of articles collected from RT and Sputnik declined from over 1,600 on average per week in 2017 to around 1,300 in 2018. This discrepancy is explored below.

Sample	Week	UK Media	RT/Sputnik
2017	Week 1	19,750	1,624
	Week 2	19,547	1,719
	Week 3	18,215	1,540
	Week 4	19,349	1,698
	Subtotal 2017	76,861	6,581
2018	Week 1	19,687	1,140
	Week 2	19,016	1,363
	Week 3	18,378	1,331
	Week 4	17,867	1,404
	Subtotal 2018	74,948	5,238
Total		151,809	11,819

Table 3.2: Articles collected for analysis, UK and Russian sources

The number of articles collected from different news outlets varied considerably. The *Daily Mail*, for example, publishes between 6,000 and 7,000 articles each week on average, including a large proportion of articles pulled from wire services which make up around two-thirds of all the *Mail's* output on an average week.¹⁴ The website for *Channel 4 News*, in contrast, publishes around 60 articles per week (excluding video articles with little or no accompanying text, which form a significant part of that outlet's coverage, but is not included in this analysis).

Table 3.3 shows the breakdown of RT and Sputnik articles in the Russian datasets and provides more details of the decline in Sputnik coverage between 2017 and 2018. Significant discrepancies in article collection counts are often the result of problems with scrapers being rendered out of date by the reconfiguration of news sites. However, multiple tests of the Sputniknews.com scraper and manual checking of archived pages on selected dates led to the conclusion that the decline in collected articles simply reflected fewer published URLs on the English-language Sputnik site on those dates.

In total, 3,815 RT articles and 8,004 Sputnik articles were collected. Sputnik publishes significantly more content than RT, even accounting for the drop in articles in the 2018 sample. This may in part be because some articles from Sputnik's non-English sites are translated for publication in English (for instance, Sputnik articles in English that show signs of translation, such as awkward phrasing in quotes and missing articles in sentences).

Sample	Week	RT	Sputnik
2017	Week 1	465	1,159
	Week 2	460	1,259
	Week 3	448	1,092
	Week 4	454	1,244
	Subtotal 2017	1,827	4,754
2018	Week 1	453	687
	Week 2	510	853
	Week 3	527	804
	Week 4	498	906
	Subtotal 2018	1,988	3,250
Total		3,815	8,004

Table 3.3: RT and Sputnik articles collected for analysis

¹³ For news analysis this normally includes: Sports, Lifestyle, Gardening, Reviews, Consumer information, Puzzles and other non-reportage content depending on the focus of the analysis. In this analysis, audio and video-only articles were not analysed; the analysis is based on article texts as published online.

¹⁴ The Daily Mail denotes wire articles in URLs with '/wires/', which makes detection easier. Most other publications do not, though RT does occasionally package wire content in articles with '/newline/' in the URL.

Content Analysis – Search and Tagging¹⁵

Once collected, and after autodelete scripts had been used to remove all irrelevant articles, researchers then used a combination of automatic and manual methods to conduct content analysis on the collected datasets.

The Steno GUI includes a search function to return all articles fulfilling search criteria defined by Boolean commands, for example: ‘content: (putin AND nato)’ will return all articles in which the article text includes the words ‘putin’ and ‘NATO’. Other search fields include publication date, headline, publication, byline and URL. Searches within these fields can be combined; for example:

*Pub: dailymail published: [2017-05-05 TO 2017-05-06]
headline: nato -content: (“vladimir putin” OR medvedev)*

The above command would return all articles in the database that fulfil the following criteria:

- Published by the *Daily Mail*
- Published on 5th or 6th May 2017
- Headline contains the word ‘nato’ (not case sensitive)
- Content does not include the text strings ‘vladimir putin’ or ‘medvedev’

This method can then be used to select lists of articles on the basis of content which can then be tagged for easy retrieval later. Multiple tags can be added to each article. This can be done manually, or automatically via pre-loaded scripts which can be used to ‘tag’, ‘untag’ or ‘delete’ articles. An example of a tagging script is included in Appendix 1.

In practice, projects using Steno have been designed so as not to over-rely on the automated functions, but to use them to augment and facilitate content analysis methods that rely on researcher expertise and familiarity with source material. The inherent danger of registering false positive results when implementing scripts designed to collect content across sources as varied and creative as news sites, including nuances in language (eg ‘migration’ relating to both human and animal movement; the multiple meanings of the word ‘labour,’ etc), means that manual checking is essential to ensure that articles have not been tagged incorrectly. This can be time-consuming when working with large datasets but is necessary to return reliable results. For similar reasons, automated scripts that are designed to delete articles are designed to ensure that relevant articles are not erroneously removed from datasets.

The various content analyses conducted in this study used Steno to locate articles of interest, but in almost all cases results were analysed manually by researchers.

Text Comparison

A central component of this project was the adaptation of Steno to include additional functions to provide researchers with the means to compare sources of news content to determine whether information from one dataset has been replicated in another. This allows researchers to locate likely instances where news articles have been replicated, in whole or in part, by other news outlets – used in this context deployed to measure whether targeted disinformation can be seeded in the news media of another country.

Code from the project ‘Churnalism.com,’ created by the Media Standards Trust in 2011 to detect where news articles had been constructed from PR press releases, was incorporated into Steno and a new user interface, ‘Steno-Similar’ was created. This tool includes two main functions:

1. **Whole-Database Comparison:** This involves comparing all content in Dataset A (eg Russian articles in Week 1 of the 2017 sample) with all content in Dataset B (eg UK media in the same week). The text-matching tool then generates a report listing all articles in Dataset B that contain content from articles in Dataset A (details on how this is achieved and how users can customise the parameters of text-matching are included in Appendix 1).
2. **Targeted Text Comparison:** This involved uploading a text fragment from any source and running it against a dataset to test whether it is replicated in whole or in part in any articles. The primary use of this function is to select specific articles or quotes to see whether or not they have been replicated by other news outlets.

¹⁵ See Appendix 1 for more detail on the content analysis and text comparison functions in Steno

In both cases, establishing causation requires manual checks of which news outlet was first to publish the news articles. Care must also be taken to ensure that any matching text has not been independently replicated from a third party (for example, wire services). In the context of this project, there is a danger that content from one source is replicated by another, but since the samples were broken into weekly datasets the replication from content in (eg) Week 1 is included in an article in Week 2. Care was taken to find where this may have occurred, and in future larger datasets covering longer time periods would minimise this issue.

Overall, the Steno-Similar tool provides a useful mechanism to locate instances where replication may have taken place – in most cases further analysis by researchers is necessary to detect the direction of transfer of the content, whether it has been created by third parties or whether partial replication is coincidental.

Future research

As part of this project the code for the Steno build used for this analysis (comprising both the collection, search and analysis component and the text-matching interface) have been made available to researchers on an open source licence. This is intended to spur cross-national research of online news content – in particular, ways of measuring cross-border flows of news content. As the case study of Russian-language news content included in this report shows, it is possible to incorporate local language support in order to conduct research across different countries. The scale and complexity of modern digital media is such that collaborative research will be the most effective method of analysing patterns of information exchange across national boundaries and detecting the role of motivated actors in trying to influence audiences in other countries. It is therefore hoped that making Steno available to researchers will facilitate comparative analyses either using replicable methods to compare single countries, or multi-country analyses monitoring the spread of news content.

4.

Flooding the zone: RT, Sputnik and Russian framing of the Skripal incident

Key points:

Coverage of the Skripal incident on RT and Sputnik was abundant, with 735 articles on the story published across both sites over the four weeks following the discovery of the poisoning.

In total, 138 separate – and often contradictory – narratives explaining the incident and its aftermath were published by RT and Sputnik during this period, ranging from interpretations of Western motives, to explanations of the origins of the nerve agent used in the poisoning, to full-blown conspiracy theories.

Narratives often appeared following public interventions by Western governments. Following Theresa May's speech to the UK Parliament on 12th March in which Russia was accused and the nerve agent 'Novichok' identified, a flurry of narratives contesting the origins and existence of Novichok appeared on RT and Sputnik, and narratives framing the incident as defined by geopolitics and Western domestic political problems began to emerge.

The most frequently repeated narratives supporting the Russian position asserted that Russia's willingness to cooperate was being rejected by the West, that there was no evidence to prove Russian guilt, and that the Western response was driven by 'Russophobia' and hysteria. Theresa May's accusation of Russian guilt was frequently cited, but often immediately rebutted by editorial statements by RT or Sputnik.

215 separate sources were quoted as providing one or more narratives on the Skripal incident and its aftermath. Many of these were non-governmental Russian and 'expert' non-Russian sources, columnists and fringe or right-wing politicians who formed a 'parallel commentariat' supplying pro-Russian or anti-West interpretations of events.

Elite Russian government sources – individual and institutional – were prominent in coverage on RT and Sputnik and supplied a range of narratives ranging from the conciliatory to the conspiratorial. Their elite status and use of combative and confrontational language towards Western counterparts resulted in substantial coverage by mainstream UK media. This was the most successful means by which pro-Russian narratives were inserted into Western news content.

The Skripal incident

On Sunday 4th March 2018, former Russian spy Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia were discovered incapacitated on a bench in Salisbury, Wiltshire, near the home of Mr. Skripal. Over the following weeks and months, Western governments established with sufficient certainty to proclaim that the Skripals had been poisoned by a nerve agent and that the attack was almost certainly the responsibility of individuals acting on behalf of the Russian state. Nine days after the attack, Prime Minister Theresa May announced to the House of Commons that the nerve agent had been identified as belonging to the 'Novichok' family of agents, developed by the Soviet Union between the 1970s and 1990s. By September 2018 British police were able to identify two men suspected of carrying out the attack and who had entered the UK on Russian passports, and two weeks later investigative journalists at Bellingcat identified the suspects as agents for Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU.¹⁶

The diplomatic fallout from the incident continued in the months after the Skripals were discovered. Within weeks, and following consensus agreement regarding Russia's ultimate responsibility for the poisoning, the UK and more than 20 allies expelled Russian diplomats, with Russia responding in kind. In August 2018 the United States imposed further economic sanctions on Russia as a direct result of the Skripal poisoning.¹⁷

Coverage of the Skripal story by the English-language channels of RT and Sputnik in the weeks following the incident provides unique insights into the communication strategies of state-linked news outlets aimed at external audiences during a developing international incident. As this section demonstrates, both outlets provided blanket coverage of the story, publishing around 26 articles per day on average between them over the four-week period beginning on 4th March (the initial discovery of the poisoning). More significantly, RT and Sputnik aired an array of competing and often contradictory narratives – over 130 separate narratives in total – about the event and its aftermath, from explanatory accounts of events on 4th March to speculation on the motivations governing the responses of Western governments.

In many cases these narratives were advanced not by identifiable external sources, but in the editorial text of RT and Sputnik articles. However, a long list of sources were also deployed providing narrative explanations of events relating to the Skripal story, though a small number of prominent Kremlin sources – Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Peskov and Maria Zakharova foremost among them – dominated coverage. Perhaps due to their elite status, claims made by these sources were also often covered extensively in UK media coverage of the incident. The list of non-elite sources, including RT/Sputnik commentators were rarely, if ever, featured in UK mainstream media, suggesting a 'parallel commentariat' in English-language Russian news.

Interestingly, RT and Sputnik's coverage contains both reactive and proactive communication strategies, with elements of public relations-style crisis management combined with "flooding the zone" with vast amounts of confusing and contradictory information, frequently attacking the integrity of those making counter-claims, and occasionally injecting conspiracy theories into their news content. The coverage doesn't appear to constitute a concerted effort to influence media in the UK, and – elite sources aside – instances of content being replicated in British news outlets were very rare. Indeed, RT and Sputnik occasionally lifted and recycled narratives first published in the British press, suggesting that a primary aim was the injection of as many narratives into circulation as possible.

This section outlines the results of a four-week analysis of all RT and Sputnik content beginning on 4th March 2018. The analysis covers: the volume and spread of coverage of the Skripal story on those channels; the list of narratives on the story put forward within RT and Sputnik articles, whether by sources or by the outlets themselves, including how often narratives were repeated; the list of sources who put forward or repeated these narratives; and which sources were subsequently picked up by UK mainstream media.

16 Bellingcat (2018) 'Skripal Suspects Confirmed as GRU Operatives: Prior European Operations Disclosed,' [bellingcat.com](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/09/20/skripal-suspects-confirmed-gru-operatives-prior-european-operations-disclosed/), 20th September 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/09/20/skripal-suspects-confirmed-gru-operatives-prior-european-operations-disclosed/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

17 BBC News (2018) 'Skripal case: US sanctions over Novichok hit Russian rouble,' [bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45126207), 9th August 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45126207> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

Methods – identifying narratives and sources in Skripal coverage

Article Collection

For this analysis, Steno was used to collect all content published by RT and Sputnik for a four-week period beginning Sunday 4th March 2018 and ending on Saturday 31st March. The data was collected in four week-long datasets, and a script was used to automatically tag all articles about the Skripal story (all articles containing the words ‘skripal’ (including plurals); ‘novichok’; ‘salisbury’; ‘nerve agent’; variations of the word stem ‘poison’). Each tagged article was then manually checked to ensure that the reference to the story was valid. A number of articles referring to poison gas or nerve agent usage in the Syrian conflict were untagged, as were a small number of articles using the word “skripal” in text linking to other articles (though this text should be removed during article scraping, in practice it can remain in a small number of cases). Following this process of filtering, a total of 735 articles mentioning the Skripal story remained.

Defining narratives¹⁸

Narratives for the purpose of this study were identified as ‘*Any statement within an article that offers a coherent explanation of the circumstances leading to the poisoning, or the motives of actors involved in the event or its aftermath.*’¹⁹ Articles were analysed chronologically, and a list of mutually exclusive narratives was generated as and when new narratives were identified: each narrative was assigned a code (eg A01: ‘UK rushed to blame Russia without establishing facts’) and when a narrative was discovered in an article it was checked against the existing list; new narratives were added to the list only if they were not already covered by an existing narrative. In total, 138 separate narratives were recorded, of which 11 ‘alternative’ narratives were made by sources belonging to or allied to Western governments or otherwise antagonistic towards Russia.

Each time a narrative was detected within an article a case was created. Table 4.1 below shows the information recorded for one instance of a narrative being detected. For any article containing more than one narrative a separate case was generated for each narrative detected (the article in Table 4.1 contains two separate narratives, both ascribed to Sergey Lavrov). Articles containing no narratives were recorded as a single case marked ‘none’. In a very small number of articles the same narrative was made more than once by multiple sources. In these cases only the first instance of the narrative was recorded.

Information	Example
Publication	Sputnik
Date	15/03/2018
Timestamp	10:58
Headline	‘Lavrov on Skripal Case: Russia to Expel UK Diplomats in Response’
Source Type	Russian Government
Source Name	Sergey Lavrov
Narrative Code	G03
Narrative Description	UK exploiting events to deflect from Brexit failures
Narrative Group	Domestic Western Politics
Source Description	Russian Foreign Minister
URL	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803151062552056-russia-uk-skripal-response/

Table 4.1: Information Collected Each Time a Narrative is Recorded

Sources were recorded only where they provided a narrative in a quote, or where a narrative was directly ascribed to them in the text of the article. RT and Sputnik were recorded as sources themselves where narratives appeared in text without being ascribed to sources.

Finally, the RT and Sputnik articles were used to determine the dates on which selected Russian government sources made direct interventions regarding the Skripal story via public statements, interviews or social media posts. Steno’s text-matching tool was then used to identify where these quotes were replicated in UK media, and Steno’s search function was used to determine other instances where these sources were covered by UK media.

¹⁸ A spreadsheet containing all recorded instances of these narratives in RT and Sputnik articles between 4th and 31st March 2018 (including Skripal articles where no narratives were recorded) is available here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1RW2Y7zN3nVOymtEeqFJgo6aCs90kO_qirNVd_vihW1w/edit#gid=0. See Appendix 3 for further details on defining narratives

¹⁹ See Appendix 3 for further details on defining narratives

RT and Sputnik coverage of the Skripal incident

From Sunday 4th March to Saturday 31st March there were 735 articles published on RT and Sputnik that mentioned the Skripal poisoning either as the central focus of the story or as a side issue. This averages out at over 26 articles each day on both channels and represents a significant proportion of their output – around 14% of the 5,238 articles making up the full four-week March 2018 sample. Sputnik accounts for 62% of these (461 articles); the remaining 274 articles were published by RT.

Pickup was generally slow – there were no articles on the day that the Skripals were discovered and only one RT article on the following day. From the 6th of March onwards, however, there was a modest increase in coverage, although in the whole of the first week just 40 articles in total appeared on both outlets. As Figure 4.1 shows, coverage increased significantly in the second week, from Monday 12th March, after Theresa May's statement to Parliament accusing Russia of responsibility for the poisoning and naming the nerve agent involved as 'Novichok'.

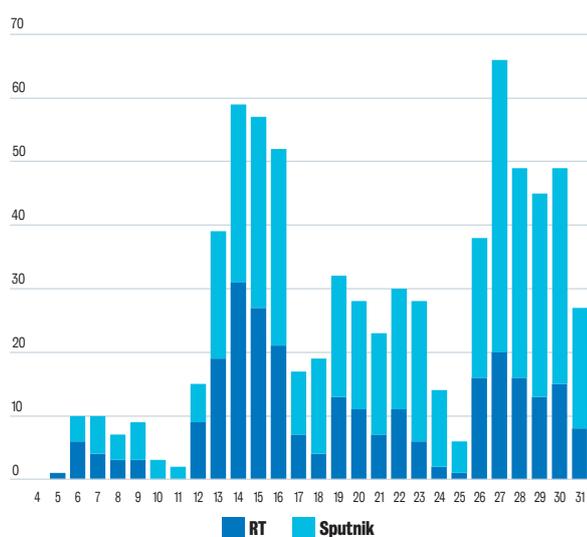


Figure 4.1: Total Number of Skripal Articles, 4 – 31 March, RT and Sputnik

A total of 241 articles were published in the second week and 174 in the third. Week four (25th – 31st March) saw the two outlets publish 280 articles – an average of 40 per day. The noticeable dips in Figure 4.1 signify weekends, where there was a general reduction in output on both sites.

The spikes in coverage denote significant interventions by Western governments. Theresa May's attribution of responsibility to Russia on 12th March saw a burst of extra coverage, and the announcement by the US and other countries of the expulsion of Russian diplomats on 26th March saw a very large increase in coverage across the final week of the sample, particularly on Sputnik.

Narratives in RT and Sputnik coverage

In total, 138 distinct narratives were recorded across the four-week sample of RT and Sputnik coverage of the Skripal poisoning story and its aftermath. In other words, 138 distinct explanations were put forward by one or more sources (or by RT and Sputnik themselves) during that period. Some of these narratives were repeated frequently, while some were mentioned only a handful of times. Some narratives were more elaborate or intricate accounts of events, while some were more general (and as a result more likely to be mentioned by different sources).²⁰ Of the 735 articles on RT and Sputnik mentioning the Skripal incident, 116 (15.8%) contained no narrative relating to the story. These articles tended to be those where the incident was not the central focus of the article, or descriptive stories relating the details of the diplomatic expulsions.

The recorded narratives fell into eight groups. Seven of these groups consisted of narratives put forward by sources asserting Russian innocence or Western guilt, or speculated on the motives of Western governments. The eighth group consisted of narratives that assumed Russian guilt, and were almost exclusively put forward by representatives of Western governments or by critics of the Russian government. The groups are set out in Table 4.2:²¹

²⁰ See Appendix 3 for a full list of all narratives by groups

²¹ Longer explanations of group criteria are included in Appendix 3

Group	Description	Narratives in Group	No. of Instances
UK/West Response	Motivations and behaviour of the UK and allies in response to the poisoning	32	618
Geopolitics/ Conflict	Interpretations of geopolitical motives of Western actors, including potential for, or likelihood of, resulting conflict	26	93
Novichok	Speculation on the origin and use of the nerve agent Novichok in the poisoning	20	128
Skripals	Explanations or speculation on what happened to the Skripals on 4th March	16	33
Western Domestic Politics	Assertions of domestic conditions in the UK and other Western allies as drivers of the response to the poisoning	15	44
Russian Response	Accounts of the nature and justification of Russia's response to the events and to accusations of guilt	11	358
Conspiracies	Conspiracy theories relating to the poisoning, including the guilt and motives of named groups or individuals	7	46
Alternative	Assertions of actual or likely Russian guilt, including calls for dialogue or a de-escalation of conflict	11	267

Table 4.2: Narratives by Group

'UK/West response' narratives

The most prominent set of narratives were those relating to the UK's or its Western allies' response to the Skripal incident. In total, 32 separate narratives explaining or speculating on the Western response were recorded. These ranged from the assertion that there was no evidence to support claims of Russian guilt, to assertions that the investigation was a predetermined 'witch hunt' against Russia, that the UK was motivated by hysteria or deeply-held 'Russophobia', or that the incident was being used as a pretext to interfere with the forthcoming Russian Presidential election on 18th March or Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. In total there were 618 instances of sources making these narratives across the 735 Skripal articles on RT and Sputnik (though this includes multiple narratives in a single article).

A list of the most frequent narratives across the analysis is included below in Table 4.3, but examples of some of the most common narratives in the 'UK/West Response' group illustrates how these were deployed by different sources:

UK rushed to blame Russia without establishing facts:

This narrative appeared in 67 articles over the four-week period and was one of the most frequent throughout the sample. An early intervention by Dmitry Peskov (press secretary for President Putin) alleged that Russia 'didn't need to wait long' for accusations from the UK. This quote was repeatedly used in RT and Sputnik articles in the following days, but some assertions of the narrative were more explicit: A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry was contextualised in an RT article as follows: 'However, the ministry was adamant that such conclusions had been made in haste, saying: "The investigation into [the poisoning of Skripal], which is not only still not complete, but virtually hasn't even started"'.²² Some days later another RT article contextualised a quote by Russian Ambassador to the UK Alexander Yakovenko as follows: 'Yakovenko said he was surprised by how quickly British PM Theresa May blamed Russia for Skripal's poisoning, despite the absence of any evidence. "We want to clarify all the questions behind this provocation – this is exactly how we see [this incident]," he added.'²³ This fragment of the article also contains an instance of another frequently-attributed narrative: that of an absence of evidence behind the UK's response.

No evidence that Russia is responsible: A relatively general claim, this narrative appeared in 182 articles – a quarter of all Skripal articles on both sites. The function of the narrative is relatively self-explanatory, though it does not include outright denials that Russia was responsible (as this on its own did not constitute a narrative of events), only claims that there was no evidence behind accusations of responsibility or that the UK was unable to back up its claims. This narrative was frequently found in editorial text on RT and Sputnik (eg 'Britain has alleged that Russia masterminded the attack but has given no tangible evidence'.²⁴) but was also made by external sources and in comment pieces on the sites. An op-ed by Robert Bridge on RT claimed: 'Any guesses as to who the British authorities have ruled – without a trial, evidence or motivating factor – is the main culprit? Yes, Russia'.²⁵

22 "Unable to forgive us for winning right to host World Cup': Russia responds to UK boycott threats,' RT.com, 13th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/sport/421144-russia2018-boycott-foreign-ministry/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

23 UK using Skripal case to divert attention from Brexit setback – Russian ambassador,' RT.com, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421473-uk-skripal-brex-it-yakovenko-rt/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

24 'Yulia Skripal's Memory Will Fully Recover Over Time, Doctor Predicts,' sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063069210-yulia-skripal-memory-poisoning/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

25 Bridge, R. (2018) 'The West's 'guilty until proven innocent' mantra is wrecking lives & international relations,' RT.com, 24th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/422206-russia-skripal-courts-metoo/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

‘Russophobia’ driving response: Another common narrative, appearing in 62 articles, is the accusation that an inherent hatred towards Russia was motivating Western actors. Often this was expressed using the phrases ‘Russophobia’ or ‘Russophobic,’ but it was also recorded where UK actors were accused of ‘demonising’ Russia or acting on the basis of anti-Russian sentiment. Following the US expulsion of Russian diplomats (including foreign intelligence officers) announced on March 26th Sputnik ran a quote from Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Sergey Naryshkin stating: “‘This is a dirty, cynical provocation from a well-known group of countries that form an atmosphere of Russophobia,” Naryshkin said’.²⁶

Biased UK/Western media inflaming tensions:

Though RT and Sputnik occasionally took narratives from UK media reports, more frequently sources and editorial statements alleged ‘bias’ in UK and Western media as either inflaming public opinion against Russia or producing government propaganda. For example, Sputnik cited the Russian Embassy in the UK Twitter feed @RussianEmbassy making this accusation: “‘Twisting the narrative: by calling a [sic] MI6 agent “Russian” media sets an agenda for public opinion and investigation — despite lack of information and logic. Sells better this way,” the Russian Embassy in the United Kingdom said on Twitter’.²⁷ Overall, this narrative featured in 38 articles.

‘Witch hunt’ / no intention of proper investigation before blaming Russia:

A different assertion to that of there being no evidence with which to accuse Russia, this denotes claims that the investigation was rigged to ensure accusations of Russian guilt. A frequent narrative – appearing in 51 articles – it is exemplified by statements such as that of Russia’s envoy to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, as interpreted by RT: ‘Establishing truth in the case of the poisoning of former double agent Sergey Skripal is actually “the last thing” that the British Government is interested in, Nebenzya said during a UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting called on the initiative of the UK’.²⁸

The full list of narratives in this group can be found in Appendix 3, with the range of 32 narratives demonstrating the extent to which multiple accusations and interpretations of Western motivations and behaviour were aired on RT and Sputnik in the immediate aftermath of the incident. Most notable among the rest given the array of narratives put out on these sites and the range of sources who made them, is the accusation by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov that British politicians and media outlets are cherry-picking narratives from unreliable sources:

I would like to call on our colleagues in London who always boast that they are very accurate in their own wording and express themselves accordingly, stop ceaselessly surfing the Internet, reading newspapers, watching TV and reading any statement by any person with a Russian passport to represent it as Moscow’s official theory.²⁹

Geopolitics/conflict narratives

26 separate narratives were discovered providing explanations or interpretations of the geopolitical motives of Western actors in their response to the poisoning. These narratives also included several alleging that Western governments were pursuing strategies that would – deliberately or inadvertently – lead to conflict with Russia. These included accusations of a plan to expel Russia from the UN Security Council (put forward by Russian Senator Sergey Kalashnikov),³⁰ that the decision to accuse Russia was driven by the fact that the West is losing the conflict in Syria (by Basam Raja, a “political scientist” interviewed by Sputnik),³¹ and a statement made by a Sputnik interviewer that European countries were joining together to punish Russia because of ‘their own individual interests in stirring up the scandal’.³² Narratives in this group often pointed to division and deception between Western allies, or the manipulation of Western countries by the UK and US.

26 ‘Russian Foreign Intel Service Officers Among Expelled Diplomatic Staff – Chief,’ sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803281062978058-russia-expelled-diplomatic-staff/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

27 ‘UK Media Manipulates Facts Calling Skripal ‘Russian Agent’ - Russian Embassy,’ sputniknews.com, 9th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803091062375153-uk-russian-embassy-skripal-case-media-manipulates-facts/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

28 ‘Cui bono? Russian envoy to UN asks about Salisbury case, says Moscow ready for open probe,’ RT.com

29 ‘Moscow Lambasts ‘Lying US Accusations’ Over Skripal Case,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803271062934144-russi-skripal-us-accusations/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

30 ‘West launches massive campaign to kick ‘inconvenient’ Russia out of UN Security Council – Senator,’ RT.com, 14th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421316-russia-uk-may-uns-c/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

31 ‘I Think Skripal Attempted Murder Staged by US, UK Intel’ – Political Scientist,’ sputniknews.com, 17th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803171062630272-skripal-poisoning-staged-uk-us/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

32 ‘Poisonous Political Harmony’ – German Expert Weighs in on Diplomats’ Expulsion, sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803271062928912-poisonous-harmony-opinion/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

More common narratives in this group included the following:

UK manipulating allies into Anti-Russian actions against their interests: This narrative contended that the decision by European countries to expel Russian diplomats had been taken under pressure, or through misdirection, by the UK. For example, RT quoted a Russian Foreign Ministry statement as follows:

The countries which expelled Russian diplomats have only played into the hands of London, which “de-facto took a prejudiced, biased and hypocritical stance, producing indiscriminate accusations against the Russian Federation in the absence of explanations of what happened and refusing to engage in substantive cooperation,” the statement reads.³³

Many countries didn’t join diplomatic expulsions as they don’t believe UK: Again alleging lack of trust and division between Western countries, this narrative featured prominently in the days after Western allies elected to expel Russian diplomats. Several sources pointed to the lack of action by some countries as an indication that the UK had insufficient evidence to persuade allies to act, or that even those countries who had followed the UK’s example were not convinced due to the UK’s lack of evidence. For example, Dmitry Peskov was quoted in a Sputnik article on 28th March that:

“First of all, 20 or 30 countries constitute only a part of the international community. The international community is much more diverse and includes a greater number of countries ... Even among the countries which expressed solidarity with the United Kingdom, there are some countries which still believe that reasoning provided by London is weak and insufficient for such serious accusations,” Peskov told reporters.³⁴

Novichok narratives

Following UK Prime Minister Theresa May’s announcement on Monday 12th March that the nerve agent used in the poisoning was from the ‘Novichok’ family developed in the Soviet Union, a flurry of narratives emerged on RT and Sputnik about the origins of the particular Novichok used in the poisoning, about the likelihood of where it may have been produced, and about whether the UK was lying about detecting Novichok at all. In total, 20 different narratives relating to Novichok were recorded, made by a variety of sources including former Soviet scientists, current Russian government spokespeople, Russian intelligence agents, academics, and commentators based in the UK and elsewhere. The list of Novichok narratives is worth reproducing in full due to the subtle differences between them and in the range of actors other than the Russian state that are accused of developing the poison:

1. The Novichok used is or could be from Porton Down [UK military chemical weapons facility]
2. The Novichok used was not made in Russia
3. The Novichok used may be Russian, but was not made by the state
4. All Russian Novichok stockpiles had been destroyed prior to the attack
5. The Novichok could be from another post-Soviet state
6. No proof that the nerve agent used was actually Novichok
7. The Novichok could have been stolen
8. The Novichok could be from a Western country
9. The nerve agent used was definitely not Novichok
10. The Novichok may have belonged to Sergey Skripal
11. The Novichok programme never existed
12. Any laboratory could be used to produce Novichok
13. Porton Down can’t identify the nerve agent as Novichok or Russian
14. Novichok specifically created by the UK and US, not Russia
15. The UK does not have any Novichok to identify
16. Porton Down has confirmed to the UK government that there’s no evidence the Novichok was made in Russia
17. The Novichok could be from Iran
18. The UK is deliberately withholding samples of Novichok
19. Porton Down is trying to destroy its own stocks of Novichok
20. The Novichok was definitely developed in the US

33 “Against common sense and intl law’: Russia to retaliate over diplomats’ expulsion by UK allies,’ RT.com, 26th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422347-russia-expels-american-diplomats-skripal/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

34 ‘Some States Siding With London on Skripal Case Question UK’s Reasoning – Kremlin,’ sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803281062982603-russia-skripal-uk/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

Skripal narratives

Throughout the four-week sample, there were numerous attempts to explain what had happened to the Skripals before, during and after the attack. In several cases RT and Sputnik bolstered the list of narratives put forward on this topic by repeating those contained in UK and US media news reports (signifying that speculative use of narratives following an international incident is not exclusively the preserve of Russian media). Initial speculation indicated that the poisoning could in fact have been drug use (initially reported by local UK media and repeated in three RT/Sputnik articles),³⁵ or that the attack could have been by organised criminals as a result of Sergey Skripal having many enemies.³⁶

A notable narrative in this group included the assertion that Yulia Skripal may be complicit in the poisoning or may have been used to deliver the nerve agent – a claim made in a Sputnik interview with a British counter-terrorism investigator:

Whatever the substance is and we still don't really know what it is, has somebody given that substance to the daughter in a package and she's brought it over? Is it unwittingly that she's brought it over or is she complicit in something?³⁷

RT and Sputnik columnist Finian Cunningham alleged that the UK was keeping Yulia Skripal against her will, in 'de facto detention',³⁸ whereas an unnamed Russian intelligence agent suggested that the Skripals were never actually poisoned.³⁹ The most common narrative of this type was that the Novichok may have been planted in Yulia Skripal's luggage prior to her flying from Moscow to visit her father. This narrative featured in seven articles, initially picked up from a UK media report before being repeated on Sputnik the following day.⁴⁰ It subsequently featured over the next seven days, cited by, among others, RT/Sputnik commentators⁴¹ and a former Russian Intelligence Service veteran.⁴²

Western domestic politics narratives

Fifteen narratives consisted of assertions that the response of Western governments – primarily the UK and US – in the aftermath of the Salisbury poisoning was driven by domestic political concerns, usually to distract from deteriorating domestic conditions:

'UK exploiting events to deflect from Brexit failures': Variations of this claim appeared in 15 articles, made by a combination of Russian government spokespeople and external sources. Ambassador to the UK Alexander Yakovenko, for instance, claimed "In order to divert attention from Brexit, the UK has to present something to the public to move [the focus] a little bit to the other side," as reported on RT.⁴³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was reported by Sputnik as making a similar point:

I think that this story primarily reflects the desperation of the current UK government, especially in the situation where they cannot ensure these promises they made to their population in relation to leaving the European Union.⁴⁴

The point was also made by external sources interviewed by RT and Sputnik. Rob Abdul, described by Sputnik as an "author and digital expert" made the claim in an interview that was edited and included in two separate Sputnik articles:

I think [Theresa May is] trying to pick a fight, trying to make herself look good in front of the international community, when the reality is the Brexit negotiations are really going nowhere at the moment, and it's a fantastic way to distract the British public.⁴⁵

35 For example: 'Moscow is open to working with UK over incident with Russian ex-double agent – Kremlin,' RT.com, 6th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420618-kremlin-uk-former-spy/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

36 Clark, N. (2018) 'The Skripal Mystery - Supposition Masquerading as Fact,' sputniknews.com, 9th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803091062380585-skripal-spy-russia-uk-media/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

37 'Former Counter-Terror Investigator Says Gov't Response Could Hurt Skripal Probe,' sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803141062535200-uk-skripal-poisoning-investigation/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

38 Cunningham, F. (2018) 'Why Russia's Military Edge Reassures,' sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803201062733168-russia-military-britain-ukraine-us/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

39 'Russian Intelligence Veteran Explains What's Wrong With Skripal Case in UK,' sputniknews.com, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803151062569505-skripal-uk-veteran/> (Accessed 26th September 2018).

40 'Russia Opens Criminal Cases Over Yulia Skripal's Poisoning, Glushkov's Murder,' Sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803161062604611-russia-skripal-poisoning-investigation/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

41 Clark, N. (2018) 'If Poirot went to Salisbury,' sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803201062720931-poirot-goes-salisbury/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

42 'UK using Skripal case to divert attention from Brexit setback – Russian ambassador,' RT.com, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421473-uk-skripal-brexit-yakovenko-rt/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

43 'UK using Skripal case to divert attention from Brexit setback – Russian ambassador,' RT.com, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421473-uk-skripal-brexit-yakovenko-rt/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

44 'Lavrov on Skripal Case: Russia to Expel UK Diplomats in Response,' sputniknews.com, 15th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803151062552056-russia-uk-skripal-response/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

45 'Skripal Case: 'Fantastic Way to Distract British Public From Brexit' – Author,' sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803201062722462-skripal-case-public-distraction-brexit/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

‘US using Skripal story to deflect from internal problems’: Following the decision by the US to expel Russian diplomats, much of the focus of narratives on RT and Sputnik shifted from the UK and Europe to the US government. The Russian Ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, played a similar role to that of the UK ambassador in leading criticism and putting forward narratives to interpret the intentions behind US actions. As RT reported:

Speaking of the inherent causes of the UK’s and the US’s growing alienation from Moscow, Antonov suggested that the “Russian threat” is needed to distract people from pressing issues at home. “Our opponents hate to see a strong and powerful Russia, which has recently demonstrated its capabilities,” he stressed, adding that the internal problems of countries will not slip away with more Russia-bashing.⁴⁶

External sources also made the claim. Murat Bilhan, deputy head of the Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies featured in a Sputnik article as describing ‘Washington’s actions against Russia over the [Skripal] case as “the result of an unstable interior political situation in the United States”’.⁴⁷

Many narratives alleging domestic motives behind Western governments’ responses to the incident only featured once, though some ascribed deeply cynical motives to governments without providing evidence. Maria Zakharova, Press Director for the Russian Foreign Ministry, claimed that the UK government was using ‘retaliatory moves against Russia following Skripal’s poisoning to patch the British budget holes from Brexit with “dirty Russian money”’.⁴⁸ Five days later, Sputnik published an interview by an external source, “Greek journalist and foreign affairs columnist” Dimitrios Lyacos, including the claim that the UK government was using the incident to distract from child sex abuse scandals in the UK. As Sputnik put it, “‘However, does the sexual violence issue really matter after Russia’s sudden ‘attack’ against [Britain]?’” Lyacos asked wittily.⁴⁹

Russian response narratives

A series of 11 narratives denoted justifications or explanations of the Russian government’s response. This included by far the most common narrative included in the sample: that Russia is being reasonable and offering to cooperate, while Western governments are refusing to do so. In total, this narrative featured in 248 articles, over one-third of all Skripal articles on RT and Sputnik. The very high frequency of this narrative is partly driven by the fact that it was frequently made by senior figures such as Dmitry Peskov, Sergey Lavrov and – in one rare intervention by the President – Vladimir Putin, but mostly through frequent repetitions in the editorial text of Sputnik articles. 135 articles on the Sputnik cite made the claim without attributing it to a source, most often in a stock paragraph added with minor variations at the end of many of the articles. For example:

Russia has strongly rejected the accusations. Moscow has repeatedly offered to help with the investigation, but its offers of assistance have been rejected by London.⁵⁰

The claim was also included as an unattributed assertion in the text of 18 RT articles, though not as replicated stock text:

The UK has pointed the finger at Russia, despite having no evidence, and has declined to provide Russia with samples of the substance. Moscow has denied having any role in the attack and has offered its full cooperation in the investigation.⁵¹

Other Russian narratives included that Russia had no motivation to carry out the attack, which featured in 39 articles, and that Russia could not be responsible due to the incompetent nature of the attack (25 articles).

46 ‘Scale of anti-Russia frenzy proves Skripal case was only pretext – Russia’s US embassy,’ RT.com, 27th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/422418-skripal-poisoning-pretext-coordinated/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

47 ‘US Plays Hard Ball With Russia, China to Try to Revive Its Clout – Analysts,’ sputniknews.com, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803291063020332-russian-diplomats-china-us-clamdown/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

48 ‘Novichok of Diplomacy’: Russian Foreign Min. Spokeswoman Mocks Boris Johnson,’ sputniknews.com, 21st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803211062750427-uk-russia-skripal-zakharova-johnson-diplomats-fight-facebook/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

49 ‘Skripal Poisoning: How PM May Diverts Public Attention Away From Child Sex Abuse,’ sputniknews.com, 26th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803261062913940-uk-skripal-child-abuse/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

50 ‘Atmosphere in Washington Toward Russia ‘Poisoned’ – Russian Ambassador to US,’ sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803301063071554-russia-us-poisoned-atmosphere-antonov/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

51 ‘Results of tests on substance used in Skripal attack to take at least 3 weeks – OPCW,’ RT.com, 20th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/newsline/421858-skripal-test-analysis-opcw/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

Several narratives related to Russia's concern for the wellbeing of Yulia Skripal, as a Russian citizen. These included general expressions of Russian concern for her wellbeing, which featured throughout the sample, to accusations that the poisoning was a terrorist attack in which the UK government was unable to protect its own, or Russian, citizens (a claim made by Vladimir Ermakov, head of the non-proliferation and arms control department at the Russian Defence Ministry and featured in six articles).⁵² Sergey Lavrov claimed that Yulia Skripal's status as a Russian citizen meant that Russia should receive all information from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW),⁵³ while at the end of the sample a narrative emerged claiming that Russia demanded consular access to Yulia Skripal and that the UK was obstructing this.⁵⁴

Conspiracy narratives

Though many of the recorded narratives put out via RT and Sputnik contained an element of unverifiable speculation about the trustworthiness of motives driving Western governments in the aftermath of the Skripal incident, a few could be classed as outright conspiracy theories. Though only seven were detected, some were made repeatedly, and occasionally by senior figures in the Russian government. Given that these were also put out – in English – by substantial Russian news organisations they are of extra significance.

1. **'The poisoning is a set-up by the UK authorities to harm Russia':** This allegation – that the UK government or intelligence services deliberately poisoned the Skripals featured in 24 articles. Though imprecise language occasionally suggested that the 'set up' implied that the attack was staged rather than carried out in full, figures as senior as Maria Zakharova made statements such as the following:

We haven't had any information on this subject until now. The only official input that we've received from the UK came yesterday regarding the improvement of Yulia Skripal's condition. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about the direct involvement of the UK and British officials in this story, but we have certain suspicions... concealing information and keeping quiet about the details of what happened makes one think that UK intelligence services may be involved.⁵⁵

Zakharova was speaking to Russia's Channel 5 in this instance, perhaps indicating a different form of words when addressing a domestic audience, but elsewhere she claimed 'strong, powerful forces in the United States and in the United Kingdom stand behind the provocation on the [sic] British soil.'⁵⁶ Vladimir Dzhubarov, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council's Committee on International Affairs claimed 'the provocation could have been carried out by UK security services,'⁵⁷ while Andrey Lugovoy, former FSB officer and now deputy in the State Duma and suspect in the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, was quoted by RT as saying 'I don't rule out that this is another provocation by British intelligence agencies,' in regard to the poisoning of Sergey Skripal.⁵⁸

Commentators on RT and Sputnik went further. 'If something looks like a false flag operation, walks like a false flag operation and quacks like a false flag operation, it probably is a false flag operation,' said columnist Ivan Danilov in an comment piece.⁵⁹ Finian Cunningham, regular columnist on both sites, wrote the following:

The trusted detective question of "who gains?" points far more plausibly to sinister British state involvement. The rapid concerted political and media reaction to the incident of Skripal's apparent poisoning is strongly suggestive of orchestration for propaganda value.⁶⁰

52 For example: 'Moscow: UK is Either Unable to Protect From Attack or Staged Skripal Attack,' sputniknews.com, 21st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803211062757577-russia-skripal-poisoning-meeting/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

53 'UK Court Allows Blood Samples to be Taken from Skripals for OPCW Testing,' sputniknews.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803221062803025-uk-court-skripals-blood-testing/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

54 For example: 'Yulia Skripal's cousin intends to travel to UK – embassy,' RT.com, 30th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/newsline/422808-skripal-cousin-uk-embassy/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

55 'Moscow: UK Hiding Info on Skripal Case Hints at Likely Intel Involvement,' sputniknews.com, 31st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803311063096887-moscow-uk-hiding-info/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

56 'Western Countries Expel Some 100 Russian Diplomats Over Skripal Case,' sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062926122-russia-diplomats-skripal-incident-expulsion/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

57 'UK Urges Explanations on Alleged Soviet-Developed Nerve Agent 'Newcomer',' sputniknews.com, 13th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803131062465560-uk-russia-skripal-poisoning-explanations/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

58 'UK-Russia relations at risk as MPs step up attacks over ex-double agent's poisoning,' RT.com, 8th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/420779-russia-spy-diplomacy-spy/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

59 'Skripal's Poisoning is Theresa May's Chance to Make Her Government Great Again,' sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803161062614239-skripal-poisoning-theresa-may-uk-russia-threat/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

60 Cunningham, F. (2018) 'Who Gains From Poisoning a Russian Exile in Britain?' sputniknews.com, 8th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803081062350153-who-gains-from-poisoning-russian-ex-spy-uk/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

2. **‘The attack was carried out by the intelligence agencies of a third party to harm Russia’:** This theory was featured in ten articles, usually by external sources such as a spokesperson for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD),⁶¹ a Finnish MP for the True Finns party,⁶² and an “independent political analyst” who claimed Ukraine could have been responsible.⁶³ Sputnik columnist Neil Clark speculated that:

Other state intelligence services - perhaps frustrated at how Russia has blocked regime change plans for Syria - might have wanted to stage an operation which would be blamed on the Kremlin, believing it would lead to even tougher sanctions on Russia and destroy any hopes of east-west détente.⁶⁴

3. **‘No evidence has been found of contamination in Salisbury’:** This narrative appeared twice, initially put forward without attribution in the headline and text of a Sputnik article, using social media posts to justify the claim:

While the scene of the poisoning was considered highly toxic and dangerous by law enforcement officials due to the qualities of the alleged Novichok nerve agent, Theresa May didn’t appear to fear turning up without any protective clothes, which social media users could not help but notice, calling the current circumstances surrounding the incident a “phony and hoax show.”⁶⁵

4. **‘The whole incident is a hoax; the poisoning never happened’:** This narrative was put forward first by a journalist for The Duran, a news site whose employees often appeared on RT and Sputnik during the period of analysis. The journalist, Alex Christoforov, claimed ‘I personally think there is no evidence that has been presented, so I find this to be a complete hoax,’⁶⁶ while Alexander Mikhailov, a member of Russia’s Foreign and Defence Policy Council, stated:

“[W]e are witnessing an amusing hoax and the demonization of a poisonous substance. Speaking of a chemical warfare agent, how did doctors of the ambulance find the means that allowed the substance to be classified and obtain — what’s more fantastic — the antidote? In this case, we are dealing with the outspoken, arrogant lies of people who do not even understand what they are talking about”

5. **‘Novichok was named as the nerve agent because it had been featured in a TV drama’:** One of the more convoluted theories, this claim was made by Sputnik columnist Neil Clark in an article raising various questions about the events of Sunday 4th March, who cited a tweet mentioning that Novichok had featured in a November 2017 television drama, and asked ‘Is that where the idea to use this particular nerve agent in the attack (if indeed Novichok was used), came from?’⁶⁷

6. **‘The OPCW investigation is rigged, and so the results will not be credible’:** This claim was made by the Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Department for Nonproliferation & Arms Control, Vladimir Ermakov, who was quoted in an RT article suggesting that the OPCW’s investigation would not be sufficient due to flawed conventions and processes, and that since the OPCW investigations were ‘conducted in close cooperation with the West only’ and ‘severely undermined by the international probe conducted in Syria.’⁶⁸

61 ‘Berlin’s Solidarity With UK Over Skripal Case May Harm Ties With Russia – AfD,’ sputniknews.com, 18th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803181062661338-germany-uk-skripal-case/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

62 ‘Orchestrators of Attack on Skripals Aimed to Point at Russians’ – Finnish MP,’ sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063083551-skripals-attack-russians-finnish-mp/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

63 ‘UK a Priori Blaming Russia in Skripal Case is Business as Usual – Analyst,’ sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803141062530008-skripal-uk-blames-russia-as-usual/> (Accessed 26th September 2018).

64 Clark, N. (2018) ‘The Skripal Mystery - Supposition Masquerading as Fact,’ sputniknews.com, 9th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803091062380585-skripal-spy-russia-uk-media/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

65 ‘Hoax Show’: Twitter Enraged as Theresa May Visits ‘Toxic’ Salisbury,’ sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803161062596460-theresa-may-visits-salisbury-skripal/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

66 ‘Interesting’ Timing of Skripal Scandal ‘Close to Russian Elections’ – Analyst,’ sputniknews.com, 18th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia-elections-2018/201803181062660632-skripal-elections-tensions/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

67 Clark, N. (2018) ‘If Poirot Went to Salisbury,’ sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803201062720931-poirot-goes-salisbury/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

68 ‘Accusations and threats, but where are the facts? – Russia challenges West on truth,’ RT.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421979-west-accusations-no-facts-skripal/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

7. ‘The US orchestrated the poisoning and is directing the international response’: This claim was first made by Russia’s former Consul General in San Francisco, who was covered in Sputnik as follows:

The case involving the poisoning of ex-spy Sergey Skripal in the United Kingdom was most probably orchestrated by the United States, and the recent expulsion of Russian diplomats made that clear, Russia’s former Consul General in San Francisco Viktor Lizun told Sputnik. “Now, in my opinion, it became absolutely clear that it was not London which invented it, the United States came up with this, and everything was ready to do everything that [sic].”⁶⁹

The claim was repeated by Sputnik the following day⁷⁰ and further Sputnik articles on the same day ascribed the claim to a statement the previous week by the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Department of Nonproliferation,⁷¹ though it is not clear which statement was being referred to. George Szamuely, who appears both as a commentator and as a source for Sputnik during the sample claimed ‘I think that this whole Skripal poisoning was orchestrated by Washington; I think May is really just simply a big player in all of this. I think it is in preparation for some kind of an armed conflict that is coming’.⁷² Polish politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Chair of the eurosceptic Liberty Party, was quoted as saying ‘In my opinion it was done by the CIA.’⁷³

Alternative narratives

The final group of narratives were those not made in support of Russia or against the actions of Western governments, but those that assumed Russian actual or likely responsibility for the poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal. These narratives were usually attributed to representatives of Western governments. By far the most common narrative, the assertion that Russia is responsible for the poisoning appeared in 194 articles in

total. 104 of these were attributed directly or indirectly to Theresa May, and a further 27 to the UK government. As with the narrative that Russia was offering to cooperate, mentioned above, the accusation of Russian guilt by Theresa May or the UK government was often featured in stock final paragraphs in Sputnik articles.

The list of alternative narratives is as follows:

1. Russia is responsible; Russia most likely culprit
2. Russian negligence was a factor in the poisoning
3. Dialogue with Russia needed
4. Shouldn’t rush to apportion blame; facts needed
5. UK not obliged to provide samples of nerve agent to Russia
6. The attack was a warning by Russia to potential dissidents
7. The attack was Putin’s decision
8. Russia has been stockpiling Novichok for years
9. Russia should be given Novichok samples
10. The attack was designed to shore up support for Putin in the Presidential election
11. There is evidence that Russia has been planning nerve agent deployment for some time

Three of these – that dialogue is needed, that it is too soon to blame Russia, and that Russia should be given samples of Novichok – are more sympathetic to the Russian position. The first was initially made by UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in response to Theresa May’s statement to Parliament on 12th March, though it was later made by Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz⁷⁴ and Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl,⁷⁵ as well as Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.⁷⁶ Jeremy Corbyn also made the assertion that Russia should be provided with samples of the nerve agent,⁷⁷ and, along with Karin Kneissl, that there shouldn’t be a rush to apportion blame to Russia.⁷⁸

69 ‘Former Russian Consul to US Deems Skripal Case Likely Orchestrated by Washington,’ sputniknews.com, 26th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803261062917344-us-russia-former-consul-skripal-case-made-by-washington/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

70 ‘Western Countries Expel Some 100 Russian Diplomats Over Skripal Case,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062926122-russia-diplomats-skripal-incident-expulsion/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

71 ‘“Improving Ties”: Trump Orders Largest Ever Expulsion of Russian Diplomats,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803271062929937-usa-russia-diplomats-ties-expulsion/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

72 ‘Russian Envoy: US Abuses Privileges as UN Host Nation by Expulsion of Diplomats,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803271062928495-usa-russia-un-nebenzia-diplomats/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

73 ‘Expulsion of Russian Diplomats is Part of Demonization of Russia – Scholar,’ sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803281062995859-russian-diplomats-expulsion-armed-conflict-skripal-poisoning/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

74 ‘Polish Politician: Ex-Spy Skripal Was ‘Highly Likely’ Poisoned by CIA,’ sputniknews.com, 31st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803311063106078-uk-skripal-cia-usa-poisoning/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

75 ‘Skripal response: Moscow orders UK to cut diplomats to same number as Russian mission in Britain,’ RT.com, 30th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422772-russia-uk-diplomats-numbers/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

76 ‘No fear of reprisal, but need for dialogue: Austria on not expelling Russian diplomats,’ RT.com, 29th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422674-austria-russian-diplomats-skripal/> (Accessed 28th September 2018)

77 ‘Bulgaria won’t expel Russian diplomats over spy poisoning – PM,’ RT.com, 30th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/newsline/422770-bulgaria-russian-diplomats-eu/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

78 ‘Russia must be given nerve agent sample, Corbyn maintains Kremlin stance,’ RT.com, 20th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421779-corbyn-russia-skripal-poison/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

79 ‘EU’s Juncker attacked for wanting good relations with Russia in wake of spy poisoning,’ RT.com, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421848-juncker-verhofstadt-skripal-security/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

Most common narratives

Table 4.3 shows the fifteen most common narratives to feature in RT and Sputnik coverage. The list demonstrates that three narratives were very common, while the remaining twelve narratives ranged in frequency from approximately 2.4 articles per day on average over the 28-day sample period, to just under once per day. In practice, there was a very long tail of narratives that appeared a but were rarely repeated: 82 narratives out of the total of 138 (around three-fifths) appeared in 3 articles or fewer; 57 of these appeared only once.

No. of Articles	Description	Group
248	Russia is being reasonable & offering cooperation; West not reciprocating	Russia Response
194	Russia is responsible; Russia most likely culprit	Alternative
182	No evidence that Russia is responsible	UK/West Response
67	UK rushed to blame Russia without establishing facts	UK/West Response
62	“Russophobia” driving response	UK/West Response
52	Emotional Response/Hysteria by UK	UK/West Response
51	“Witch hunt” / no intention of proper investigation before blaming Russia	UK/West Response
44	UK actions illegal / not following due process	UK/West Response
39	UK non-disclosure of information suspicious	UK/West Response
39	Russia has no motive to conduct the poisoning	Russia Response
38	Biased UK/Western media inflaming tensions	UK/West Response
32	Novichok could be from a Western country	Novichok
30	All Russian Novichok stockpiles had been destroyed prior to attack	Novichok
25	Russia wouldn't be as incompetent as the attack demonstrates	Russia Response
24	Russia concerned for the wellbeing of its attacked citizens	Russia Response

Table 4.3: 15 Most Common Narratives in RT/Sputnik Coverage

As discussed above, the two most common narratives – Russia offering to cooperate, and Russia being responsible for the poisoning – frequently appeared in boilerplate text at the bottom of articles, usually on Sputnik but occasionally on RT. It is significant that the accusation of guilt was so common, though it usually consisted of a repetition of Theresa May's remarks on 12th March to the House of Commons and was often followed immediately by a rebuttal of that claim. For example, a typical final paragraph in a Sputnik article may contain a variation of the following:

UK Prime Minister Theresa May has blamed Russia for staging the attack against Skripal. The Russian side has called the accusations baseless and requested samples of the nerve agent that was used in the poisoning.⁷⁹

Or:

Reacting to the accident, UK Prime Minister Theresa May said that it was “highly likely” that Russia was responsible for the incident and later went on to announce a package of anti-Russia measures, including the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the country, and the suspension of bilateral contacts between London and Moscow. The Russian Foreign Ministry refuted all the allegations and requested the UK Foreign Office to allow a joint investigation into the case.⁸⁰

This format – of referencing the accusation, immediately followed by rebuttal, was very common in Sputnik's coverage of the story.

It is also notable that the majority of the most common narratives related to the response to the incident by the UK or by other Western governments. A large proportion of the narratives featured on RT and Sputnik related to attempts to explain the motives of Western actors, almost always indicating malign intent – predetermined investigations, accusations made with no evidence, disregard of international legal frameworks, biased media, hasty or emotional responses, inherent hatred or fear of Russia. Many of these correspond to Russian media frames of dysfunction and hypocrisy in Western politics that emerge more clearly in the analysis of RT and Sputnik's coverage of Western democratic politics explored later in this report. In contrast, the Russian-themed narratives relate to explanations of Russia as an honest, reliable partner ready to cooperate if only the UK would let them or as ‘above’ the attack entirely – with no motive, or too competent to make the mistakes committed in Salisbury.

79 'Media Reports Second UK Policeman 'in Hospital' After Skripal Poisoning,' sputniknews.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803221062800073-police-officer-hospital-skripal-poisoning/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

80 'Poland May Join UK in Expelling Russian Diplomats Over Skripal Case – Reports,' sputniknews.com, 19th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803191062694834-poland-russian-diplomats/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

Narrative distribution

Figures 4.2 – 4.9 below show the distribution of all narratives, by group, over the 28 days of the sample. The grids show each day in which each narrative appeared in one or more articles. The graphs illustrate some features about which narratives were repeated across long periods of the sample and which were more short-lived.

- Narratives that emerged early were in many cases likely to be repeated continually over the following weeks. The six narratives concerning the UK's response to the incident that were first recorded on the third and fourth days after the poisoning (Tuesday 6th and Wednesday 7th March) continued to appear on most days over the four-week period (Figure 4.2). After first being detected on 6th March, the narrative that there was no evidence to suggest Russian responsibility appeared on 25 of the remaining 26 days of the sample. Narratives relating to Russia's response that emerged on 6th and 7th March (that Russia is ready to cooperate, and that Russia had no motive to conduct the poisoning) also continued to appear until the end of March (Figure 4.4).
- Narratives in the 'Skripals,' and 'Geopolitics/Conflict' groups tended not to be cited over significant periods of time, with many appearing only once or twice (Figures 4.3 and 4.7, respectively).
- Narratives relating to Novichok largely emerged, perhaps unsurprisingly, on Day 10 (Tuesday 13th March), the day following Theresa May's identification of the nerve agent in her statement to Parliament (Figure 4.6). Three-quarters of the 'Novichok' narratives emerged over the following four days, though only a handful – that Russia had destroyed its stockpiles of the nerve agent, that the Novichok could be from a Western country, or that the Novichok could specifically be from Porton Down – appeared with significant regularity over the remainder of the sample.
- 13th March (Day 10) was also the day that narratives relating to Geopolitics/Conflict and domestic Western politics began to emerge (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). This, combined with the introduction of Novichok narratives on the same day may indicate that Theresa May's intervention prompted a reframing of coverage on RT and Sputnik into two main threads: discrediting the source (through the portrayal of UK motives as self-interested and both defensive – to distract from domestic shortcomings – and aggressive, to pursue geopolitical ends against Russia) and to sow confusion about Novichok, then an unfamiliar concept to the majority of the public in the UK and elsewhere.

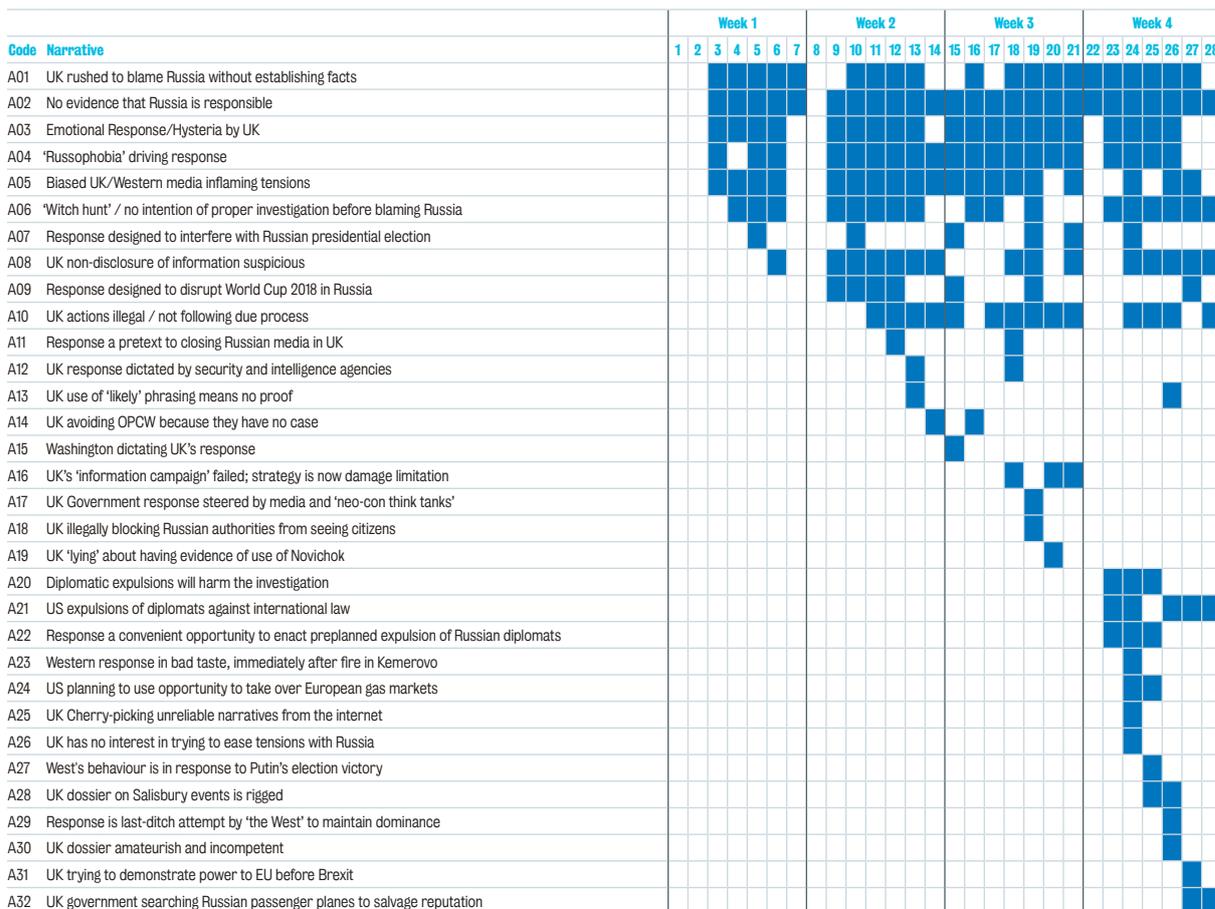


Figure 4.2: 'UK/West response' narrative distribution over time

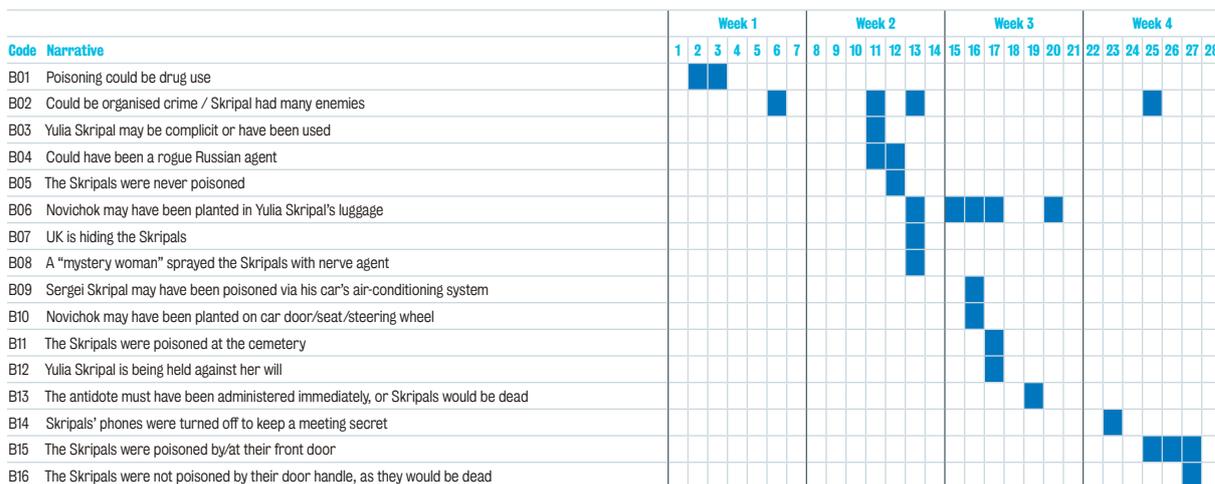


Figure 4.3: 'Skripals' narrative distribution over time



Figure 4.4: 'Russian response' narrative distribution over time

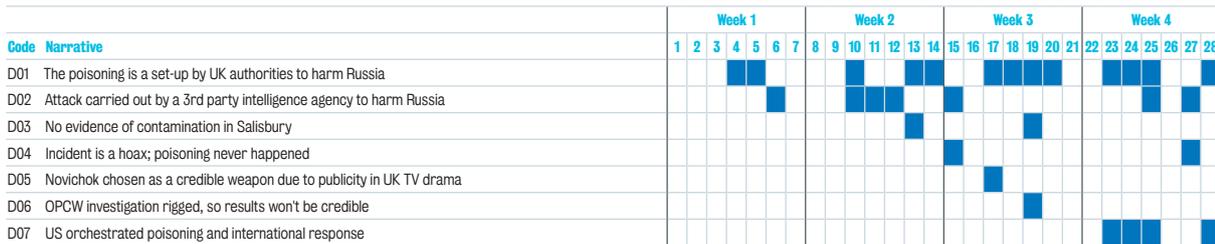


Figure 4.5: 'Conspiracy' narrative distribution over time

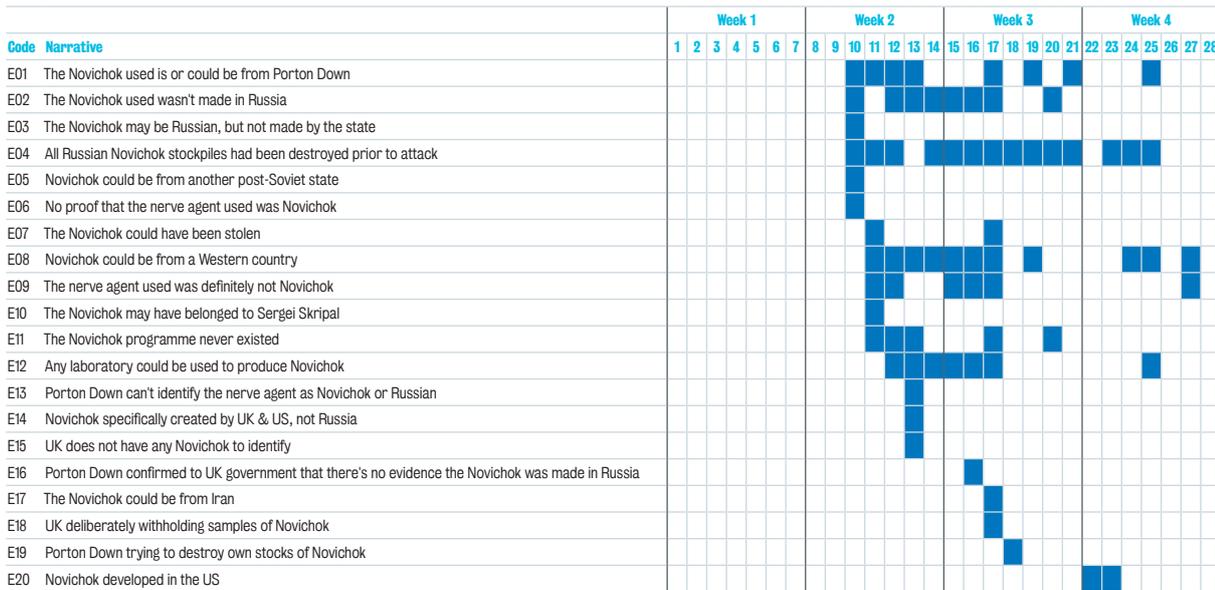


Figure 4.6: 'Novichok' narrative distribution over time

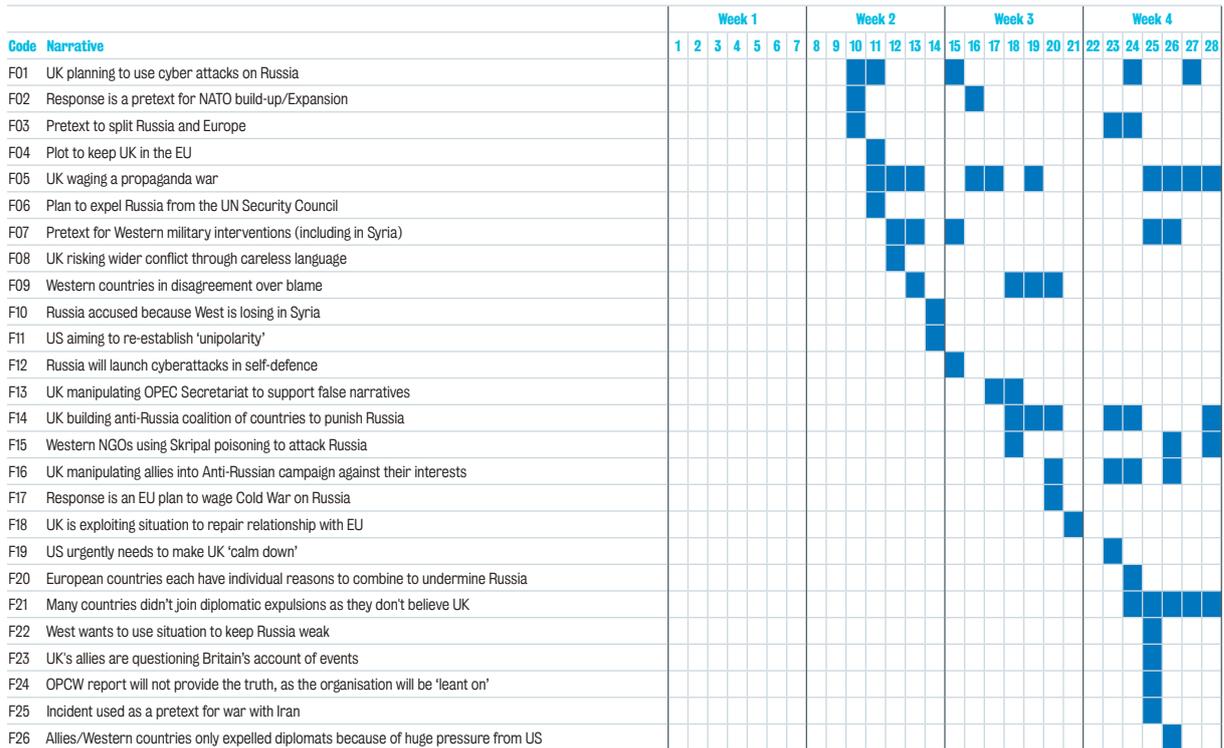


Figure 4.7: 'Geopolitics/conflict' narrative distribution over time

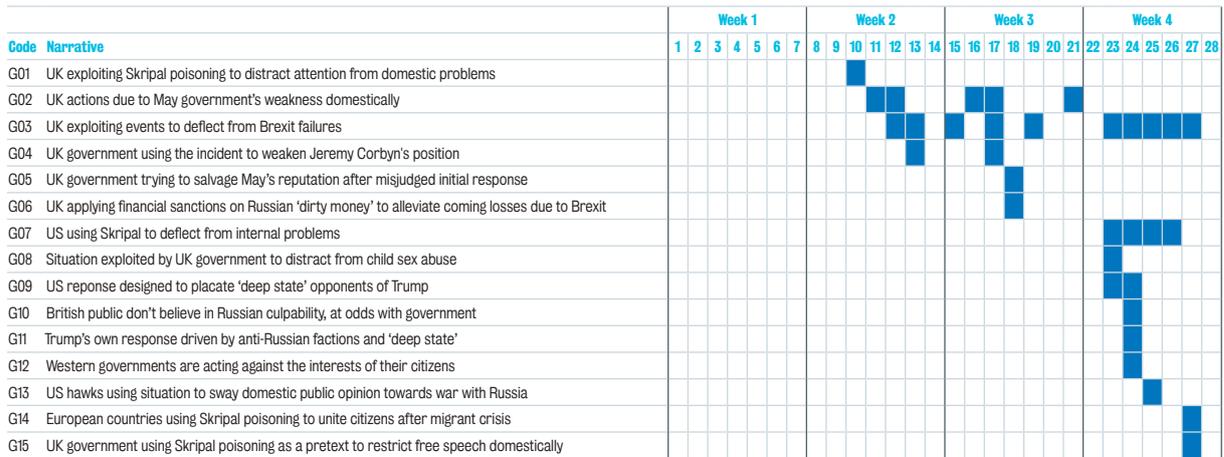


Figure 4.8: 'Domestic Western politics' narrative distribution over time

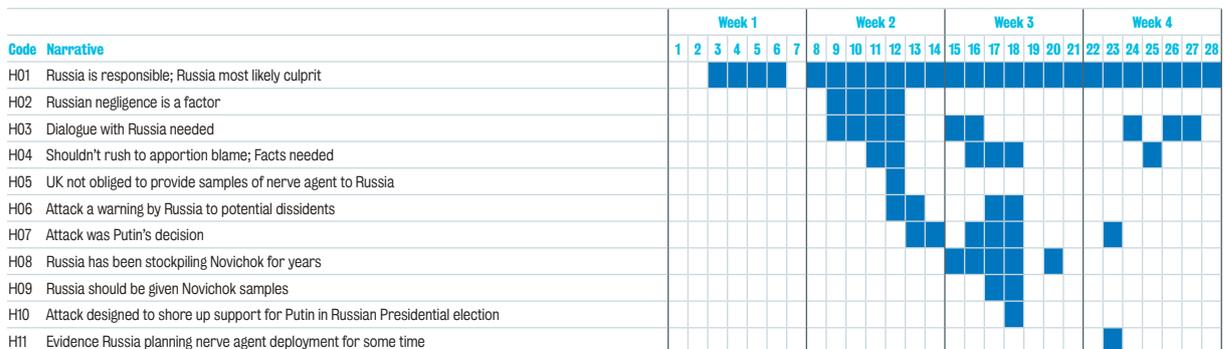


Figure 4.9: 'Alternative' narrative distribution over time

Sources and narratives in RT and Sputnik coverage of the Skripal incident

For each recorded instance of a narrative being used, the source was recorded (see Table 4.1 above). Where a narrative was included without any attribution to a named individual, an unnamed or anonymous spokesperson or source, or to an organisation (including governments), it was recorded as an editorial statement by the publisher – RT or Sputnik. Once collected, sources were sorted into groups:

- **Russian Government:** Named or anonymous sources representing part of the Russian government, including diplomatic sources. Also includes statements by branches of the Russian government, ministries and embassies.
- **Other Russian:** All other Russian sources – includes politicians not serving in government
- **External Source:** All non-Russian sources – includes representatives of foreign governments, spokespeople representing organisations and organisational statements.
- **Editorial:** RT and Sputnik editorial text, where narratives are put forward without attribution.
- **Comment:** Columnists on RT and Sputnik (NB: in two articles, RT/Sputnik columnists were cited as independent sources. They were therefore included in both lists).

Table 4.4 shows the list of source groups and the number of separate instances a source from each group was attributed a narrative. A full list of all sources, the number of articles each source appeared in and the number of times a narrative was attributed to them is featured in Appendix 3.

Source Group	No. of Sources	Narratives
Russian Government	28	506
Other Russian	35	70
External Source	135	520
Editorial	2	343
Comment	15	148

Table 4.4: Source groups in RT and Sputnik coverage

Twenty-eight different Russian government sources either supplied narratives in direct quotes or had narratives attributed to them. Narratives were attributed to sources from this list 506 times. 35 'other' Russian sources supplied narratives over the four-week period, although these were far less likely to appear in multiple articles.

External sources were by far the most likely to supply narratives, with 135 individual sources having narratives attributed to them 520 times. However, 60 of these sources were only quoted as supplying a narrative once, and one source – Theresa May – had narratives attributed to her 119 times. On 343 occasions across 265 articles RT and Sputnik included narratives unattributed to any source, and on 148 occasions a narrative was supplied in op-ed pieces by RT and Sputnik commentators.

Top 10 Russian government sources

Table 4.5 shows the Russian government sources who were most frequently attributed narratives. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister supplied a narrative on 94 occasions across 67 articles, while the Press Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, provided narratives 90 times in 64 articles. Putin's Press Secretary, Dmitry Peskov, was attributed narratives 51 times in 39 articles.

Source	Narrative Instances	Articles	Most Common Narrative
Sergey Lavrov	94	67	Russia ready to cooperate; West obstructing
Maria Zakharova	90	64	Emotional/Hysterical response by West
Dmitry Peskov	51	39	Russia ready to cooperate; West obstructing
Russian Embassy in UK	44	28	Russia ready to cooperate; West obstructing
Russian Government	42	36	No evidence that Russia is responsible
Russian Foreign Ministry	31	17	"Witch hunt" / investigation predetermined
Vasily Nebenzya	29	13	No evidence that Russia is responsible
Alexander Yakovenko	28	17	No evidence that Russia is responsible
Vladimir Ermakov	26	8	Poisoning a set-up by UK authorities
Vladimir Putin	12	6	Russia not incompetent, therefore innocent

Table 4.5: Top ten Russian sources, by narratives

Lavrov and Peskov most commonly offered the narrative that Russia was ready to cooperate (in 28 articles and 15 articles respectively). Lavrov was also associated with the narrative that the UK was acting illegally in the way it was conducting its investigation (16 times) and that there was no evidence to suggest Russian guilt (16 articles). Zakharova was quoted in 13 articles accusing the UK of acting hysterically or being driven by emotion, while in 12 articles she put forward the claim that the UK was acting suspiciously by not making its proof public.

In eight articles she claimed that the Novichok used in the poisoning could have been from a Western country. Of other named sources, Vladimir Ermakov (Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control) stands out in that he was most commonly associated with the conspiracy narrative that the UK was responsible for the poisoning of the Skripals.

'Other Russian' sources

The most common 'other' Russian sources to be associated with narratives were:

- Leonid Rink, a former Soviet scientist who claimed to have worked on the Novichok project and who was associated with narratives relating to Novichok, including that it could be from Porton Down (2 articles), that it could be made in any laboratory (2 articles) and that the UK was deliberately withholding samples of Novichok (2 articles). In one article he also suggested that the UK had poisoned the Skripals.⁸¹
- Valery Morozov, introduced in different articles as a "Guildford resident" or Russian entrepreneur, who claimed that Sergey Skripal could have been attacked by organised criminals, that Russian citizens were being threatened in the UK, and that the UK had rushed to blame Russia without waiting for evidence.
- Alexander Mikhailov, former FSB General, who appeared in two articles in which he claimed:
 - that the Skripals were not poisoned by nerve agent on their door handle, as they would be dead;
 - that the nerve agent therefore was not Novichok;
 - that Russia wouldn't be as incompetent as the failed attack suggests;
 - that the UK's non-disclosure of evidence was suspicious;
 - that the UK's 'information campaign' had failed, and the government was now trying to limit the damage; and
 - that the whole incident was a hoax and the poisoning never happened.⁸²

External sources

As mentioned above, Theresa May was the most frequent external source of narratives, cited 119 times across 106 articles (most often the claim that Russia was responsible). The next most commonly cited external sources were also senior UK political voices, with the UK government cited as an organisational source 29 times, (then) Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson having narratives attributed to him 24 times, and Jeremy Corbyn 14 times.

Of the other external sources, some groups were evident. These were: regular RT or Sputnik contributors invited to discuss the Skripal story; fringe or far-right European politicians; and selected 'experts', including alternative journalists and writers.

Regular contributors: former UK MP and RT contributor and host George Galloway was featured in five articles in which he supplied 11 different narratives (some multiple times), including: that there was no evidence Russia was responsible (3 articles); that Russia had no motive (2 articles); that the Novichok may have belonged to Sergey Skripal;⁸³ and that the US decision to expel Russian diplomats was designed to placate 'deep state' enemies of Trump.⁸⁴ Former MI5 officer Annie Machon, a regular guest on RT and Sputnik, was interviewed five times, offered the narratives that Russia had no motive (3 articles), that the Novichok used wasn't made in Russia or that it may be Russian but not made by the state,⁸⁵ and that it could be from a Western country such as Britain.⁸⁶ Other regular contributors, such as former UK Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, and Executive Vice President of the Eurasia Centre, Earl Rasmussen, also appeared in multiple articles.

81 'Nerve Gas in Skripal Case 'Could Have Easily Been Done by Brits' – Developer,' sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803201062711423-novichok-nerve-agent-skripal/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

82 'Ex-Russian FSB Agent Blasts UK PM May for 'illiterate' Skripal Case Accusations,' sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803301063060162-skripal-case-theresa-may/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

'Samovar With 'Novichok': Russian Intel Vets Mock Skripal Case,' sputniknews.com, 23rd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803231062839699-skripal-intel-vets/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

83 "One of the Great Hoaxes": Skripal Poisoning Evokes 'Deja Vu' of Iraq War Run-up,' sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803141062501430-skripal-poisoning-responsibility-mystery-investigation/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

84 'US expulsion of Russian diplomats is 'declaration of war' – George Galloway to RT,' RT.com,

85 "Just because the poison was made in Russia doesn't mean they're behind it" – ex-MI5 officer (VIDEO),' RT.com, 13th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421158-russia-spy-mi5-machon/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

86 'Alex Salmond defends RT as MPs call for channel to be banned (VIDEO),' RT.com, 15th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421392-russia-spy-alex-salmond/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

Fringe or right-wing European politicians: Aside from spokespeople for the UK and US governments and representatives of several other European governments, many of the political figures featured in RT and Sputnik's coverage of the Skripal story were fringe figures or representatives of right-wing or Eurosceptic parties and movements. Examples include:

- Waldemar Birkle (AfD member): Claimed the investigation was a witch hunt in which the West 'is not in any way interested in discovering the truth.'⁸⁷
- Roberto Jonghi Lavarini ('Brothers of Italy' Party member): Claimed that in expelling diplomats EU member states 'adhere to the Russophobia that is driven by the United States and NATO.'⁸⁸
- Marine Le Pen (Leader, Rassemblement National – formerly FN): Claimed the EU's actions in response to the poisoning showed that 'the EU is waging a Cold War against Russia.'⁸⁹
- Bela Kovacs (MEP, Hungarian 'Jobbik' party): 'We have not seen any results [of the investigation]... It is clear to see that this is a political attack against Russia.'⁹⁰
- Janusz Korwin-Mikke (Chair, Liberty Party (Poland)): As cited above, claimed the CIA was responsible for the poisoning in Salisbury.
- Helga Zepp-LaRouche (Founder, German Civil Rights Movement 'Solidarity'): Claimed intelligence services were 'fabricating another Litvinenko case as a pretext for another anti-Russia escalation.'⁹¹
- Alexander Gauland (co-leader, AfD): 'The claims made by the British government are unproven.'⁹²
- Aymeric Chauprade (Independent MEP): Claimed accusations against Russia were 'without any proof' and that 'dialogue with Russia must be renewed.'⁹³

- Anthony Webber (Independent MP, Guernsey Parliament): 'It is blatantly obvious that the Russian government would not be stupid enough to use the Novichok agent for such an operation.'⁹⁴
- Tom Packalen (Finnish MP – True Finns): 'Russia has no motives'; 'The orchestrators of the attack aimed to point at Russians.'⁹⁵
- Nigel Sussman (UKIP member): Claimed the decision to expel diplomats 'highlighted the coalition of anti-Russian hysteria,' and that 'as each day passes, more information comes to light that Russia had nothing to do with poisoning [sic] of the Skripals.'⁹⁶

Not all fringe European politicians quoted represented right-wing parties. Sputnik published Latvian MEP (Social Democratic Party 'Harmony') Andrejs Mamikins' statements that US plans to dominate the EU gas market may be one of the reasons behind the escalation, and that Theresa May was using the Skripal scandal to save face because of Brexit failures.⁹⁷

Alternative Journalists, writers and experts: a wide range of sources were presented as experts or represented niche journalistic enterprises, usually featured on Sputnik. These sources invariably offered narratives that supported the Russian position, several supplied multiple narratives, and some occasionally introduced conspiracy theories. A sample of this list includes (descriptions as presented by RT or Sputnik):

- Alexander Mercouris (Editor-in-Chief of The Duran): nine narratives across two articles.
- Alex Christoforov (Writer and Director at The Duran): 'I find this to be a complete hoax.'⁹⁸

87 'Expulsion of Russian Diplomats Shows Lack of 'Western States' Sovereignty', sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062962866-diplomats-expulsion-russia-west-sovereignty/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

88 'Expulsion of Russian Diplomats Shows Lack of 'Western States' Sovereignty', sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062962866-diplomats-expulsion-russia-west-sovereignty/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

89 'European Union Wages Cold War Against Russia - Marine Le Pen,' sputniknews.com, 23rd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803231062831241-eu-cold-war-le-pen/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

90 'Hungary's EU MP Calls Expulsion of Russian Diplomats From Many States 'Hasty' sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063080464-hungaryeu-expulsion-russian-diplomats/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

91 'Russian Ex-Spy's Poisoning Seems Like Ploy to Derail UK-Russia Ties – Analysts,' sputniknews.com, 13th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803131062492854-russia-spy-poisoning-bilateral-relations/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

92 'Germany's AfD Slams Merkel's Move to Expel Russian Diplomats over Skripal Case,' sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803281062970145-afd-merkel-russian-diplomats-slam/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

93 'Expelling Diplomats Over Skripal Case Unduly Jeopardizes Relations – EU Lawmaker,' sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803271062961295-expelling-diplomats-skripal-relations-eu/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

94 'Skripal Poisoning: 'UK Could End Up Looking Very Foolish' – Former Guernsey MP,' sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803141062534625-spy-poisoning-uk-foolish/> (Accessed 27th September 2018).

95 'Orchestrators of Attack on Skripals Aimed to Point at Russians' – Finnish MP,' sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063083551-skripals-attack-russians-finnish-mp/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

96 'Western Countries Expel Some 100 Russian Diplomats Over Skripal Case,' sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062926122-russia-diplomats-skripal-incident-expulsion/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

97 'Expulsion of Russian Diplomats Shows Lack of 'Western States' Sovereignty', sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803271062962866-diplomats-expulsion-russia-west-sovereignty/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

98 'Interesting' Timing of Skripal Scandal 'Close to Russian Elections' – Analyst,' sputniknews.com, 18th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia-elections-2018/201803181062660632-skripal-elections-tensions/> (Accessed 18th March 2018)

- Rob Abdul (“Author and digital expert”): As cited above, claims the UK’s response is an attempt to distract the British public from failures in Brexit negotiations.
- Stephen Ebert (“Independent political analyst”): ‘The list of potential suspects needs to include Ukraine, a proven supplier of such [nerve agents] since the break-up of the USSR.’⁹⁹
- Gilbert Doctorow (“Independent political analyst”): ‘diversionary activities like the Skripal nerve gas attack story.’¹⁰⁰
- Luca Susa (“Italy-based Balkans and Security analyst”): ‘Some actors, such as the UK, are more interested in escalating confrontation with Russia rather than trying to ease tensions.’¹⁰¹
- Murat Bilhan (Deputy Head of the Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies): Washington’s actions against Russia ‘the result of an unstable interior political situation in the United States.’¹⁰²
- Francesca Totolo (“Independent Italian Journalist”): ‘I do not think it is a coincidence that Avaaz’s petition to boycott the FIFA World Cup in Russia was published 4 days before the presidential elections and coinciding with the Sergey Skripal case.’¹⁰³
- Patrick Henningsen (Executive Editor of 21stCenturyWire.com): ‘We don’t know who has carried out the attack, neither does the British government. We can assume that they don’t actually know yet.’¹⁰⁴

Commentators/columnists

Alongside news reports, RT and Sputnik also host columnists, several of whom published op-ed pieces about the Skripal story. In total, 15 columnists covered the story; ten of these only once, while the remaining five published 26 articles between them. Commentators were more prolific than most sources in providing narratives to explain the poisoning and its aftermath – across 36 articles, there were 148 instances of narratives being used, an average of over four per article. Three commentators – Finian Cunningham, Neil Clark and Jon Gaunt – accounted for the majority of articles and narratives. Finian Cunningham published seven articles in which 24 different narratives were used, accounting for 41 separate usages of narratives.

Neil Clark also published seven articles, using 17 different narratives (23 total uses). Jon Gaunt published six articles (15 different narratives, 19 uses). The rate of different explanations of events surrounding the Skripal story deployed per article (almost six per article by Finian Cunningham; just over three per article by Neil Clark and Jon Gaunt) was eclipsed by other commentators. Analysis of one column by Ivan Danilov recorded eight different narratives.¹⁰⁵

Russian sources in UK media

The analysis of sources on RT and Sputnik shows that, while a large amount of external sources and minor Russian sources were interviewed and cited on English-language Russian news coverage of the Skripal story, and while some high-profile external sources such as Theresa May were frequently cited as supplying the narrative that Russia was responsible for the poisoning, many of the most prolific sources of narratives were senior figures in the Russian government or statements and sources representing the views of branches of the Russian government and diplomatic corps.

In addition, these sources often provided narratives including inflammatory or provocative statements about Western governments and politicians, or alleged illegality or dishonesty among their counterparts in the UK and elsewhere. It is outside the scope of the present analysis to determine whether it was a deliberate strategic decision to do so, but the combination of elite sources making inflammatory accusations against British and American politicians or posing conspiracy-laden explanations of events is, in the current media environment, inherently newsworthy.

99 ‘UK a Priori Blaming Russia in Skripal Case is Business as Usual – Analyst,’ sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803141062530008-skripal-uk-blames-russia-as-usual/> (Accessed 14th March 2018)

100 ‘Which Way Are US-Russian Relations Heading?’ sputniknews.com, 25th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803251062887793-us-russia-relations-prospective-doctorow/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

101 ‘NATO, EU Diplomat Expulsions Push Russia ‘Towards China and Iran’ – Expert,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803271062927739-diplomat-expulsion-/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

102 ‘US Plays Hard Ball With Russia, China to Try to Revive Its Clout – Analysts,’ sputniknews.com, 29th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803291063020332-russian-diplomats-china-us-clamdown/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

103 ‘US-Based NGO Behind Anti-FIFA 2018 Campaign ‘Supporting Arab Spring’ Since 2011,’ sputniknews.com, 21st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803211062757119-us-based-ngo-fifa-2018-campaign-arab-spring/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

104 ‘UK accusations against Russia anecdotal & speculative’, RT.com, 15th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421411-skripal-uk-russia-unsc/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

105 ‘Skripal’s Poisoning is Theresa May’s Chance to Make Her Government Great Again,’ sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803161062614239-skripal-poisoning-theresa-may-uk-russia-threat/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

To test the extent to which elite Russian actors were covered in UK media during the aftermath of the Salisbury poisoning, all interventions by senior figures in the Russian government were recorded by date. This was achieved using the search function of Steno on the 2018 Russian datasets. Once quotes from the selected sources were identified, the text-matching function of Steno was then used to test whether the quotes were picked up, in full or in part, in UK media over subsequent days.

The selected sources were: Sergey Lavrov, Maria Zakharova, Dmitry Peskov, the Russian Embassy to the UK, Alexander Yakovenko, Vasily Nebenzya, Vladimir Ermakov and Vladimir Putin. Table 4.6 shows the dates on which they made a public pronouncement in relation to the story in which one or more narratives were included, and the number of UK news articles that carried all or part of the quote.¹⁰⁶

	Lavrov	Zakharova	Peskov	Embassy	Yakovenko	Nebenzya	Ermakov	Putin
4 March								
5 March								
6 March		1	21	18				
7 March		2						
8 March				4				
9 March	1			2				
10 March								
11 March								
12 March		20	2	6				
13 March	3	2		24				
14 March			6	0	14	17		
15 March	5	8	4					
16 March			2		6			
17 March	1	0						
18 March					0			7
19 March			6					
20 March								
21 March	7	5	8				10	
22 March			12		5			
23 March	4		2					
24 March			2	3				
25 March								
26 March							0	
27 March	0				0	0		
28 March		0	0					
29 March	3	1						
30 March		1						
31 March		1	0	12				

Table 4.6: UK articles covering Russian government interventions

It should be noted that this does not cover all articles in which these sources were mentioned in UK media during the four-week period, but where quotes including one or more of the narratives identified in this study were featured. Though occasionally multiple quotes by the sources on a single day were picked up by RT or Sputnik, not every quote was covered by UK media.

Though there are some instances when quotes were not picked up – notably between 26th and 28th March in the aftermath of the expulsion of Russian diplomats – the majority of interventions were covered. Certain interventions received high volumes of coverage. Dmitry Peskov’s response on 6th March that accusations against Russia ‘were not long in coming’ was featured in 21 online articles published by UK media. The Russian Embassy in the UK’s statements on the same day – that Russia was being blamed before the investigation had been completed, that the UK law enforcement bodies had drawn conclusions but had no proof, and of anti-Russian sentiment in the UK media, were covered across 18 articles.

Insulting or derogatory language was a feature of some quotes that received prominent coverage. Maria Zakharova’s response to Theresa May’s statement to the House of Commons – that the Prime Minister’s statements were a ‘provocation’ and the Parliamentary debate ‘a circus show’ was picked up in 20 UK articles. The following day the Russian Embassy in the UK delivered quotes that were covered in 24 UK articles. The first, a claim that the UK was planning to ‘strike Russia with cyber weapons,’ appeared in eight articles. The second, a Tweet attacking British ‘propaganda,’ ‘slogans for their unenlightened domestic audience’ and ‘hysteria’ was covered in 16 articles.

Confrontational statements aimed at British politicians were successful in gaining coverage. Peskov’s claim on 22nd March, that Boris Johnson’s statement regarding Russia’s use of the World Cup for propaganda purposes was ‘totally disgusting’ and ‘not appropriate for any foreign minister’ featured in 12 articles, while Vladimir Ermakov’s statement that ‘either the British authorities are unable to protect from [sic] a terrorist attack or staged the attack themselves’ was picked up in 10 articles.

¹⁰⁶ The full list of quotes on these dates and the UK articles in which they appear is available here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/16BseLs8opJRUz3IRGR7ydgSuLbUTPge_iDqXl8n2k/edit?usp=sharing

The prominence of quotes by high-profile Russian governmental sources was not matched by coverage of the rest of Sputnik's and RT's sources. Though some other Russian governmental figures who provided narratives on RT and Sputnik did receive some coverage – Russian Envoy to the EU Vladimir Chizhov was mentioned in 28 articles in total, and Russian Envoy to the OPCW Alexander Shulgin was covered in 15 articles, almost none of the external sources that appeared on RT and Sputnik appeared in UK media, with George Galloway (six articles), Craig Murray (two) and Annie Machon (three) the exceptions. Of RT and Sputnik columnists, there was only one instance of any of the 15 appearing in UK news coverage – an *Express* article quoting Phil Butler.¹⁰⁷

The lack of overlap of RT's and Sputnik's choices of expert sources and columnists with UK media is significant, and represents something of a 'parallel commentariat' that Russian English-language news sources draw on, either to validate existing editorial positions or in expectation of certain viewpoints being aired. Certainly these sources were not sought out or validated by UK newspapers or broadcasters.

Conclusions

Coverage of the Skripal incident on RT and Sputnik in the four-week period after Sergey and Yulia Skripal were discovered on a bench in Salisbury is distinctive by the sheer volume of content: by number of articles, by range of narratives, by the number of sources solicited, and in the tone of the coverage. The focus on the incident and its aftermath – 735 articles in 28 days – in the English-language output of both sites suggests an editorial decision to concentrate resources on the story. The sheer number of 138 separate narratives provided by sources – and often presented as fact in the editorial text of RT and Sputnik articles – also suggests a willingness, if not intent, to represent as many competing or contradictory explanations of events as possible.

This interpretation is also borne out by the intense bursts of activity that followed significant Western public interventions over the course of the period. Theresa May's statement to Parliament on 12th March accusing Russia as being responsible for the attack and naming the nerve agent 'Novichok' as the mechanism with which it was committed and the 26th March expulsion of Russian diplomats by the US and other countries both saw significant changes in the frequency with which RT and Sputnik covered the story, the number and range of sources solicited for comments and the emergence of new narratives by which events were explained.

The list of Novichok-related narratives is instructive; in the two days following May's statement, 11 new narratives emerged, relating to where it came from, where it was made, or whether it existed. Largely contradictory, every one of these narratives was based on the assumption that the Russian state did not supply the Novichok. Though it is outside the scope of the analysis here, it is perhaps worth exploring further the fact that, as a 'new' term – a unique name, unknown to all but a handful of experts in the English-speaking world – a conscious attempt was made to try to define the concept as quickly as possible, or to supply as many competing and conflicting narratives and counter-narratives to confuse potential audiences in the crucial period before definitions are fixed.

On the same day that Novichok-based narratives began to emerge, so too did narratives relating to geopolitics and conflict, and to deteriorating Western domestic political conditions as drivers of the response to the Skripal incident. Though the data is insufficient to assert a connection, it is clear that from the day after May's intervention, RT and Sputnik coverage began increasingly to contain narratives that defined the issue in terms of geopolitical aggression and as a symptom of degraded democratic conditions in the West (two themes that are visible strongly in the rest of RT and Sputnik's coverage as analysed in this study). In particular, the consistent portrayal of Western governments as untrustworthy partners (in contrast with 'honest, reasonable' Russia – as the most frequently recorded narrative in this study attests), driven by dishonest or hypocritical goals and both dangerously aggressive and simultaneously weak and unstable, suggests that the emergence of these groups of narratives may have been a conscious editorial strategy.

107 Carey, J. (2018) 'World War 3 is now 'CLOSER than ANY TIME' since the Cuban Missile Crisis, claims expert,' *Express.co.uk*, 28th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/938022/World-War-3-closer-than-any-time-since-Cuban-Missile-Crisis-Russia-USA-Britain-Putin> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

This is also supported by the prevalence of ‘non-elite’ sources that featured in RT and Sputnik coverage (though Sputnik was considerably more likely to rely on these sources). Voices from obscure news sites such as The Duran and 21st Century Wire that focus heavily on Russia-friendly talking points, politicians from fringe or far-right European parties, and “independent” journalists, writers, authors, historians and experts form the backbone of non-Russian sources on both channels. Perhaps a measure of the lack of access that these outlets have – though elite Western politicians were frequently quoted in coverage, direct interviews were invariably conducted with sources from the list outlined above, or with Russian politicians, journalists and intelligence agents. The list of columnists on the English-language RT and Sputnik channels who wrote about Skripal during the period of analysis also sits largely separate from mainstream news coverage. The term ‘parallel commentariat’ has been used here to describe this phenomenon – the evidence suggests RT and Sputnik cultivate a network of sources that rarely overlaps with those featured on ‘mainstream’ national media.

Elite Russian sources, on the other hand, though not directly affiliated with the sites, did cross the media divide. Heavily covered by RT and Sputnik, the tendency of very senior news sources to use confrontational, accusatory language and to deploy a range of narratives, ranging from the conciliatory to the conspiratorial, also led to significant coverage in the UK’s national media outlets. Again, it is outside the scope of this study to investigate whether this was a conscious strategy, or whether combative language by ministers, officials and by institutions was intended to influence international or domestic audiences (or both), it is clear that the primary means by which UK national media audiences were exposed to some of the narratives recorded in RT and Sputnik coverage of the Skripal incident was through elite Russian sources. The problem of elite source trustworthiness may not be a new one facing journalists, particularly in the international arena, though the role of senior government sources and government institutions in a coordinated, multi-pronged disinformation campaign is one that bears close study in the future.

5.

**Heads we win,
tails you lose:
projecting Russian
strength**

Key points:

Coverage of NATO by RT and Sputnik was both prominent and overwhelmingly negative. 617 articles mentioning NATO were published over the eight weeks sampled in 2017 and 2018, approximately 5% of total output by the Russian sites; of these, 80% contained criticism of the alliance.

NATO was characterised both as aggressive and threatening, and simultaneously weak and incapable: 280 articles criticised NATO as expansionist and aggressive, as illegal or illegitimate, as being untrustworthy or duplicitous to its own members and to opponents, or outlined instances of failures, mistakes or incompetence by NATO personnel. 181 articles focused on disharmony and conflict within NATO, and international friction between member states. 80 articles contained the assertion or implication that NATO membership had a detrimental effect on (particularly new or smaller) members, and 168 articles justified Russian military build-up or offensive policies as a valid and necessary response to NATO.

RT and Sputnik cover Russian military issues extensively, with many articles acting effectively as 'fact files' on Russian weapon specifications and capabilities, with embedded videos and quotes from Russian government and military officials, and military analysts.

Certain parts of the UK media draw heavily from content of this type when publishing articles about Russian weaponry. 83 articles were identified containing 120 different mentions of Russian prototype or cutting-edge weapons. Almost nine-tenths of these mentions were found in four publications: *The Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Star*.

These four UK publications frequently used Russian-sourced information on weapon specifications and capabilities and emphasised the destructive capacity and effectiveness of many Russian weapons. Many of these claims relied on Russian quotes, and contained Russian government-supplied embedded video, sometimes taken from RT and Sputnik.

Text-matching analysis found a small number of examples of 'churnalism' in articles about Russian weaponry in UK media. Ten articles were found that contained significant passages of text taken from RT and Sputnik coverage. In six of these articles the Russian news source was credited. In the remaining four no information was supplied to indicate to audiences the provenance of the content. One *Express* article was found to be almost entirely replicated from an RT article published the previous day, with certain identifying phrases removed.

Conflict forms a large part of the news agendas of RT and Sputnik. As the previous section showed, geopolitics is a common frame through which Russian news outlets portray relations between Russia, its neighbours and opponents. As relations between the international community and Russia deteriorated following the annexation of Crimea in February 2014, so Russia expanded its foreign news output, launching RT UK, RT Deutsch and the Sputnik network over the following year. In recent years, several studies have identified how Russian media outlets push consistent narratives about Russia's actions and justifications in the international arena.¹⁰⁸

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2016) identified information warfare strategies in how Russia projected narratives at European media regarding the Crimean conflict,¹⁰⁹ while Kragh and Asberg (2017) detected narratives of Western unreliability, Western policy failures and NATO aggressiveness in Swedish-language Sputnik news content.¹¹⁰ Other studies by Yablokov (2015) and Watanabe (2018) found extensive coverage of conspiracy theories in English-language output by RT and Sputnik.¹¹¹ Overall, studies have documented how Russian state-linked media project pro-Russian or anti-Western narratives to international audiences.

One common target of such narratives is NATO, the defensive alliance of European and North American states viewed by Russia as a proxy for American interests and a threat to Russia's security and strategic interests. Fear of NATO enlargement is a key driver of Russia's international policy, as is distrust of the motivations of members of the alliance following its expansion into what Russia perceives as its own sphere of influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹¹² The ongoing civil war in Syria is an additional complicating factor, with Russia and a US-led coalition supporting different factions in the conflict. RT and Sputnik publish extensively on the conflict in Syria.

Another distinctive aspect of the output of RT and Sputnik is their focus on military matters. While news of international tensions and conflict is a common part of journalism everywhere, the volume and depth of detail in Russia's English-language output is unusual. In most cases, coverage focuses on Russian military hardware, sometimes to a level of detail normally seen in special-interest publications or military think tank reports. In many cases coverage is not tied to any news event, but simply details the specifications and capabilities of Russian weapons or vehicles,¹¹³ though coverage of arms deals between other countries and details of Chinese, American and European military hardware are also common.

RT and Sputnik provide a mechanism through which the Russian state can portray its military strength as it would like the world to see it, and a platform to portray Russia's enemies in as negative a light as possible. In a zero-sum approach to international relations, there is a clear motivation to do so at every possible opportunity, and publishing news content in the language of targeted international audiences is a cheap and simple method of undermining or displacing alternative narratives.

This section analyses how RT and Sputnik portray Russia's international opponents to English-speaking audiences, how they project Russian military strength, and the extent to which media in the UK pick up and replicate Russian propaganda on its military technology and capability. A content analysis of RT and Sputnik coverage of NATO shows the key frames in how Russian media present the alliance on issues of legitimacy, aggression, trustworthiness, and the legitimacy of Russian actions in relation to NATO. This is followed by an analysis of coverage of advanced Russian weapons and military equipment in RT and Sputnik, compared with UK media content to determine where Russian statements and demonstrations of military prowess are included in foreign media. Finally, an analysis using Steno's text-matching function is conducted to detect where UK news media directly replicate RT and Sputnik content when reporting on Russian military capability.

108 A review of research on Russian media, including RT and Sputnik, is included in the 'Background and Context' section at the end of this report

109 Pynnoniemi, K. and A. Racz (2016) 'Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine', Finnish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/fog-of-falsehood> (Accessed 8th March 2018)

110 Kragh, M. and S. Asberg (2017) 'Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40:6

111 Yablokov, I. (2015) 'Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)', *Politics*, 35:3

Watanabe, K. (2018) 'Conspiracist propaganda: How Russia promotes anti-establishment sentiment online,' Paper presented at ECPR General Conference 2018, Hamburg, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/56301432-fdec-4081-a777-90ac49609aa5.pdf> (accessed 10th September 2018)

112 Rühle, M. (2015) 'NATO enlargement and Russia: myths and realities', *NATO Review*, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/russia-ukraine-nato-crisis/nato-enlargement-russia/en/index.htm> (Accessed 10th September 2018)

113 For example: 'Modernized Tu-160M2 Bomber, 'Stepping Stone' to PAK DA 5th Gen Stealth Bomber,' *sputniknews.com*, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201705181053744039-russia-bombers-development/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

Representing the enemy: RT and Sputnik coverage of NATO

This analysis is based on eight weeks of RT and Sputnik coverage, spread over two four-week samples: 11th May – 7th June 2017 and 4th – 31st March 2018. Each sample immediately followed or spanned events that pushed the Russian military and NATO to the top of the agenda on RT and Sputnik.¹¹⁴ On 9th May 2017, Russia held its Victory Day celebrations, culminating in the annual Red Square military parade. On 17th May, President Putin announced the drafting of a new framework document for defence budgeting, procurement and development,¹¹⁵ while on 24th May Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu outlined plans for the acquisition of aircraft, air defence systems and submarines.¹¹⁶ The NATO Brussels summit took place on 27th May, during the third week of the 2017 sample.

In 2018, the sample began three days after Vladimir Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly on 1st March, where the Russian President cited NATO's eastward expansion and missile defence systems as the motivation for his presentation of a range of new Russian weapons.¹¹⁷ March 2018 also saw NATO training exercises in Estonia and the signing of an agreement by Poland to purchase the Patriot missile defence system from the US.¹¹⁸

The analysis of NATO coverage on RT and Sputnik focused on the subset of articles in which NATO was mentioned in any capacity. A tagging script was applied to each week-long dataset to identify all articles containing "nato" within the article text or headline. Researchers then checked the resulting articles manually to remove any ineligible articles. These generally took two forms: those listing NATO naming configurations when mentioning weaponry (and containing no other references to NATO as a body), and those using NATO as a comparator when mentioning alternative international bodies (such as referring to a potential Middle Eastern military alliance as "the Arab NATO").

Table 5.1 shows how many articles on RT and Sputnik mentioned NATO. In total, 617 articles over eight weeks were detected. There was a substantial difference between the 2017 and 2018 samples, with Sputnik publishing almost three times as many NATO articles in 2017 than in 2018. A spike in coverage in the third week of the 2017 sample suggests that the 27th May Brussels summit drew a substantial amount of attention from Russian sources.

Sample	Week	RT	Sputnik	Combined
2017	Week 1	7	62	69
	Week 2	14	72	86
	Week 3	35	127	162
	Week 4	28	71	99
	Total	84	332	416
2018	Week 1	12	18	30
	Week 2	21	27	48
	Week 3	19	24	43
	Week 4	33	47	80
	Total	85	116	201
Overall total		169	448	617

Table 5.1: RT and Sputnik articles mentioning NATO

Both outlets devoted a significant amount of their total output to NATO. 4.4% of all RT coverage and 5.6% of Sputnik output mentioned the alliance. This rose to over a tenth of Sputnik coverage in the week of the 2017 Brussels summit.

114 Further details on the NATO analysis methodology are included in Appendix 2

115 President of Russia (2017) 'Meeting on drafting of the State Armament Programme for 2018–2025', en.kremlin.ru, 17th May 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54513> (Accessed 27th July 2018)

116 'Russian Defence Minister gave a speech at the session of the Federation Council within the government hour', en.mil.ru, 24th May 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12125102@egNews (Accessed 4th June 2018)

117 'President's Message to the Federal Assembly,' kremlin.ru, 1st March 2018, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957> (Accessed 15th May 2018)

118 'Poland signs \$4.75bn deal to buy US Patriot missiles,' bbc.co.uk/news, 28th March 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43574308> (Accessed 15th May 2018)

Framing NATO

Once the NATO article datasets had been completed, a subset of articles was analysed and four recurring themes identified: criticism of NATO; conflict between NATO members; negative effects of NATO membership; and justifications for Russian responses to NATO. A coding frame was then constructed to allow researchers to identify whether each article contained any of these themes. To account for articles containing none of these themes, Researchers were given an option to record where an article contained no negative frames. Table 5.2 outlines the characteristics of the different frames.

Frame	Description
Criticism of NATO	Descriptions of NATO as aggressive, expansionist, provocative or otherwise threatening to Russia. Also includes references to NATO's illegitimacy, accusations of illegality or ingrained 'Russophobia', and references to NATO mistakes or incompetence.
Conflict within NATO	Descriptions of actual or speculative disputes between member states of NATO, or between member states and other allies.
Negative Effects of Membership	Assertions that membership of NATO is bad for member states and their populations, in relation to: security; cost; loss of sovereignty; democratic deficits.
Russian Justifications for Response	Descriptions of Russia's justifications for responding to NATO behaviour, particularly the threat NATO poses to Russian interests. Also includes: positive references to Russian strength in relation to NATO; assertions of Russian military and technological edge over NATO.
No Negative Frame	Any article mentioning NATO that doesn't include any of the other four frames.

Table 5.2: Coding Frame for NATO coverage analysis

Table 5.3 shows the prevalence of these frames in RT and Sputnik coverage. 121 articles in which NATO was mentioned contained none of the selected frames; the remaining 80% contained one or more frames. Critical framing of NATO as aggressive, illegitimate or incompetent appeared in 280 articles (45% of the total), while representations of conflict between NATO members and of the negative effects that membership of NATO supposedly confers on its members appeared in 181 articles and 80 articles respectively. The framing of Russia's justifications for responding to NATO behaviour, including assertions of Russian military and technological supremacy over NATO was featured in 168 articles. Articles often contained a combination of frames: 49 RT articles (29% of all NATO articles) and 142 Sputnik articles (32%) contained a combination of two or more critical or pro-Russian frames.

Frame	2017		2018		TOTAL
	RT	Sputnik	RT	Sputnik	
Criticism of NATO	51	122	47	60	280
Conflict within NATO	29	113	13	26	181
Negative Effects of Membership	15	53	3	9	80
Russian Justifications for Response	20	84	21	43	168
No Negative Frame	7	78	19	17	121

Table 5.3: Frames in RT and Sputnik NATO coverage

The most common combination of frames involved the pairing of critical statements about NATO aggression alongside justifications for Russian political or military responses. 24 RT articles and 59 Sputnik articles contained both frames.

Criticism of NATO

Examples of this frame tended to fall into four main categories: NATO aggression, expansion and threats to Russian interests; the illegality or illegitimacy of NATO's actions; the duplicity or untrustworthiness of NATO; and incompetence or failures by NATO. Often statements asserting more than one of these criticisms was present in an article.

NATO aggression: Articles often contained the common Russian criticism of NATO – that the alliance has aggressively encroached upon Russia's sphere of influence and unnecessarily threatens its security. This was regularly portrayed in terms of NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. A Sputnik article following the 2017 NATO Brussels summit entitled 'Russia Has Little Reason to Trust NATO After It Absorbed Whole of Eastern Europe,' contained this point, citing "international politics expert" Viktor Nadein-Rajewski as saying:

Of course NATO would like, without any conciliatory gestures apart from verbal ones, to get Russia's consent to what is, let's be blunt, the occupation of the remaining territories of the former Soviet Union. [...] NATO must abandon [policies] which pose a direct threat to Russia, threats to its territory. But for now this threat continues to exist.¹¹⁹

119 'Russia Has Little Reason to Trust NATO After It Absorbed Whole of Eastern Europe,' sputniknews.com, 29th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705291054103355-nato-russia-relations-commentary/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

An RT article published the day after the Brussels summit about the deterioration of relations between Russia and NATO cited statements from the Russian Foreign Ministry blaming aggressive behaviour by the alliance as being responsible for the crisis:

The ministry stressed that “the growing negative tendencies are not Russia’s choice,” but are rather the direct result of a longstanding and destructive NATO policy, aimed at the bloc’s “political and military domination in European and international issues.”¹²⁰

Later, in early June 2017, Sputnik published an article built around an appeal by a Russian Security Council official for a switch from confrontation to cooperation between NATO and Russia, with a final paragraph outlining a series of complaints against NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe:

Moscow has repeatedly denied allegations of involvement in Ukraine, as they are not supported by factual evidence. Russia has also warned that amassing troops and military equipment on its borders is a provocation, violates past NATO pledges, and can lead to regional and global destabilization.¹²¹

Statements by Russian officials were often inserted into coverage of NATO activities, with an RT article on NATO exercises in the Baltic ending with the following passage:

Russia has repeatedly criticized NATO’s military buildup along its borders as a threat to national security. In February, Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed NATO for provoking a conflict with Moscow and using its “newly-declared official mission to deter Russia” as a pretext.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that “NATO’s expansion has led to an unprecedented level of tension over the last 30 years in Europe.”¹²²

Similar sentiments were made in March 2018, amid accusations of NATO aggression manifested in the West’s response to the Skripal incident (see Section 4 above). An RT article on the aspiration of Ukraine to join NATO again ended with an official statement denouncing the expansion of the alliance as a threat to stability in Europe:

In the meantime, senior Russian senator Vladimir Dzhubarov expressed doubts over the prospects of Ukraine’s bid, calling it Poroshenko’s “pipe dream.” Moscow, however, has repeatedly voiced concerns over NATO’s steady expansion to the East, saying it does not help strengthen stability and security in Europe, and that is [sic] reserves the right to protect Russia’s national security.¹²³

NATO illegality or illegitimacy: Direct accusations of NATO activity as illegal were less common, but still present in RT and Sputnik coverage of international politics. An RT article marking seven years since the beginning of NATO bombing operations in Syria in 2011 declared the operation as illegal.¹²⁴ An op-ed piece by Sputnik columnist Finian Cunningham in the midst of the fallout from the Skripal poisoning claimed that NATO powers were involved in a ‘criminal covert war in Syria.’¹²⁵ Other articles contained claims about the legitimacy of NATO’s activities. A French then-MP was cited as questioning the ‘objectives of the alliance since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the perceived Communist threat,’¹²⁶ a common Russian narrative reflecting a deeply-held perception that NATO has reneged on promises not to expand into Eastern Europe following Russian acceptance of a reunified Germany in 1990.¹²⁷

120 ‘Russia-NATO relations at worst point since Cold War – Moscow,’ RT.com, 26th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/389851-russia-nato-relations-crisis/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

121 ‘NATO Should Switch From Confrontation to Cooperation With Moscow – Official,’ sputniknews.com, 6th June 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201706061054350542-nato-russia-relations/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

122 ‘NATO kicks off new round of Baltic drills on Russia’s doorstep (PHOTOS, VIDEOS),’ RT.com, 28th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/389962-nato-baltic-drills-russia/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

123 ‘Kiev hails NATO recognition of Ukraine’s ‘aspiration’ to join the bloc,’ RT.com, 10th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420951-ukraine-nato-aspirant-country/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

124 ‘Libya: The true face of ‘humanitarian intervention’’, RT.com, 19th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/421711-libya-war-gaddafi-intervention/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

125 Cunningham, F. (2018) ‘Britain, Syria... Synchronizing Provocations to Beat Russia,’ sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803161062617044-britain-syria-russia-chemocal-provocations/> (Accessed 21st March 2018)

126 ‘French MP Says NATO Needs Russian Help to Fight Daesh,’ sputniknews.com, 30th March 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201705301054115295-nato-anti-daesh-coalition/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

127 Rühle, M. (2015) Op cit.

Duplicity by NATO: Articles occasionally included accusations of NATO as an untrustworthy or hypocritical partner. An RT article from 1st June 2017 contains the claim, ascribed to the Russian government, that NATO unduly inflates the threat of Russia to justify increased defence spending by member nations.¹²⁸ Some days later, the same outlet claimed that Montenegro's accession to NATO was carried out against the will of the Montenegrin public, citing an opponent claiming:

Today, I have to underline this, Montenegro isn't entering and joining NATO, but it's NATO that's entering Montenegro and that's a huge difference. This is the finalizing of one big, undemocratic process which included the bombing of our country in 1999.¹²⁹

NATO mistakes and incompetence: Articles published during NATO training exercises often focused on accidents, mistakes and misbehaviour by NATO troops. Drills in Estonia in May 2017 were covered as a series of mishaps, with articles focusing on injuries and vehicle crashes,¹³⁰ and incidents between NATO troops and shotgun-wielding locals.¹³¹ Coverage was often mocking, such as that of a drunken incident involving NATO soldiers in Lithuania, published by Sputnik.¹³²

Elsewhere, the operational effectiveness of NATO was questioned, with coverage focusing on the inability of NATO to mobilise at speed,¹³³ while past NATO actions were often characterised as strategic failures.¹³⁴

Conflict within NATO

Indirect coverage of NATO often took the form of conflicts and disagreements between NATO member states, indicating divisions within the Alliance, or implying that NATO suffers from structural imbalances of power between members. This often focused on American dominance of NATO and willingness to overrule or compel other members against their wishes. Disagreements between Germany and Turkey over access to Incirlik airbase¹³⁵ and between France and Turkey over the French President meeting representatives of Syrian Kurds,¹³⁶ exemplified the tendency to focus on conflict on RT and Sputnik.

The 2017 NATO Brussels summit was also covered extensively in terms of division and disagreement among members, with particular focus on US President Donald Trump's critical remarks on NATO funding.¹³⁷ RT suggested that Trump manhandled the leader of Montenegro,¹³⁸ and the US President's demand that members meet the alliance's funding goals was frequently referenced in later RT and Sputnik coverage of disagreements in the alliance.¹³⁹

128 'NATO moves 1,000s of troops in one of year's largest Europe drills,' RT.com, 1st June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/390445-nato-massive-drill-romania/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

129 'Montenegro officially joins NATO despite internal opposition,' RT.com, 5th June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/391001-montenegro-nato-member-washington/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

130 'Bump in the road: NATO drills in Estonia plagued by 3rd incident in just a week,' RT.com, 20th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/389060-nato-drills-estonia-incidents/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

131 'Estonian Man With Shotgun Chases Away Trespassing NATO Troops,' sputniknews.com, 25th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705251053983605-estonian-man-chases-away-nato-troops/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

132 'Four NATO Soldiers Get Into 'Drunken Kung Fu' Brawl in Lithuania, Catch Flack,' sputniknews.com, 4th June 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706041054297403-nato-soldiers-fight-drunken-lithuania-germany/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

133 'Few NATO States Ready to Rapidly Deploy in Possible Conflict w/ Russia – Report,' sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201803291063031757-russia-nato-military/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

134 'NATO Record in Fighting Terror in Afghanistan Study in Failure - Ex-USAF Colonel,' sputniknews.com, 30th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705301054139661-nato-afghanistan-terror-failure/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

135 'German Foreign Minister Asks US for Help in Airbase Row With Turkey,' sputniknews.com, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705181053718944-germany-ask-usa-help-turkey/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

136 'Open support for terrorism': Turkish deputy PM slams Macron's pro-Kurdish statement,' RT.com, 30th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422777-france-turkey-support-kurds/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

137 'It's Payback Time: How Trump Chided NATO 'Freeloaders',' sputniknews.com, 25th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705251053990670-trump-nato-members/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

138 'Montenegro manhandled? Video shows Trump shoving PM aside at NATO summit,' RT.com, 25th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/389735-trump-shoves-montenegro-nato/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

139 'Not Fair': Trump Says Germany Should Spend More on Defense,' sputniknews.com, 9th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803091062362124-trump-germany-defense-spending/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

Negative effects of NATO membership

A less common frame, but still featured in 80 articles in total, was the idea that NATO's members suffered as a result of membership. This was usually directed at smaller members and those seeking or having recently achieved membership. Montenegro's accession to NATO in May 2017 received significant coverage, with one Sputnik article on 30th May containing the claims that the move was against the interests of citizens, would harm the country economically through the loss of tourist income, and would strain relationships with Russia and other Balkan states.¹⁴⁰ Macedonia's potential accession to NATO was also framed in terms of threats to regional security and to bilateral relations between Macedonia and its neighbours.¹⁴¹

Negative economic and political effects for larger members of NATO were also accentuated, including the effects of defence spending commitments. However, articles also suggested that NATO limited the capacity of member states to purchase armaments, and that the alliance was used by the United States as a vehicle to compel fellow members to purchase American weapons. One example is found in a Sputnik article from 18th May 2017 with the headline 'Washington to "Force" Germany to Purchase Scandal-Ridden F-35,' including a quote from a Russian source claiming:

It is common knowledge that Washington likes to force other NATO member states to purchase US-built armaments to provide contracts to its defense industry. This is what is likely to happen in this case.¹⁴²

Russian justification in responding to NATO

Articles frequently contained Russian sources citing NATO aggression as a justification for Russian defensive responses, including military spending, weapons development and threats of pre-emptive action. As noted above, this sentiment was often made alongside accusations of threatening or illegitimate activity by NATO. In total, variations of this claim – including justifications for the development of high-tech military technology and the supremacy of Russian military capability over NATO – were found in 168 articles.

Some articles went into significant depth in explaining the need for an aggressive stance by Russia in response to NATO. A Sputnik article titled 'Baltic Fleet Buildup: Russia's "Natural Response" to NATO's Sabre-Rattling,' contained lengthy quotes from a Russian "defence analyst" pulled from an op-ed article published on RIA Novosti (another newsbrand under parent company Rossiya Segodnya):

The swift military buildup of the Baltic Fleet is a natural response on Russia's part to NATO's aggressive ambitions in the region, increased war-gaming, Baltic air policing, anti-Russian sentiments and spy fever [...] And still NATO can only dream about dominating the Baltic Sea," the analyst noted. "The Baltic Fleet has in its arsenal three cutting-edge diesel submarines, one destroyer, six patrol ships, six fast attack guided missile craft, six anti-submarine warfare corvettes, 12 missile boats, four large amphibious assault ships, two small amphibious assault ships, six coastal minesweepers and nine inshore minesweepers. This operational-strategic Navy division is one of the most advanced in terms of its composition in Russia.¹⁴³

The article contained highly detailed descriptions of Russian military hardware (a common theme in Sputnik and RT news coverage, as shown below). Likewise, an RT article in March 2018 contained text and video explaining the justification for Russia's development of hypersonic missiles in competition with NATO expansion, driven by the United States:

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has dotted Europe with missile shields – while rapidly expanding NATO eastward. Washington is planning to install new missile defense systems in South Korea and Japan – which it claims are necessary to deter Iran and North Korea.

Moscow has repeatedly protested against years of US military expansion towards its borders. Now, as Putin said during his March address, Moscow hopes that the United States will finally listen.¹⁴⁴

140 'Montenegro Pays the Price for NATO Entry by Spoiling Ties With Russia, Serbia,' sputniknews.com, 30th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201705301054112922-russia-montenegro-relations-nato/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

141 'Macedonia's accession to NATO could have negative effects for regional security – Moscow,' RT.com, 20th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/newsline/421833-macedonia-accession-nato-russia/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

142 'Washington to "Force" Germany to Purchase Scandal-Ridden F-35,' sputniknews.com, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705181053745835-us-germany-f35/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

143 'Baltic Fleet Buildup: Russia's "Natural Response" to NATO's Sabre-Rattling,' sputniknews.com, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705181053722853-baltic-fleet-response-nato/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

144 'Restoring strategic balance: The history of why Russia needs those scary missiles (VIDEO),' RT.com, 27th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422419-hypersonic-weapons-nuclear-parity-russia-us/> (Accessed 21st September 2018)

Summary: NATO – aggressive but weak; dangerous yet incompetent

It is unsurprising that coverage of NATO in Russian state-linked news outlets was overwhelmingly critical. It is, however, significant that both RT and Sputnik devote a significant amount of coverage to NATO, and that only one-fifth of articles in which the alliance is mentioned do not contain either critical frames or justification of an aggressive Russian stance in response.

There is a fundamental paradox in how RT and Sputnik portray NATO and its relationship with Russia. NATO is an existential threat, but it is also no match for Russia's superior military might; it is a multinational menace encircling Russia's Western flank, but it can't mobilise its forces and its soldiers lose fistfights while drunk or are chased off by shotgun-wielding farmers. Russia is forced to adopt an aggressive stance or be overwhelmed; yet it claims an insurmountable edge in military hardware. In every permutation of the relationship between NATO and Russia, Russia has the upper hand.

Beyond its military competence, NATO is variously portrayed as acting illegally, being deceitful in the gap between its words and actions, forcing members to act against their wills and against the wishes of the people, and riven by competition and conflict between distrustful members. The uniting theme is one of hypocrisy: it claims to be a defensive alliance, but is (in its portrayal in Russian media) consistently aggressive; it is supposedly an alliance of democratic states, but its actions are consistently presented as illegal or anti-democratic. As shown in Section 6 below, these are central themes in how the West is portrayed in RT and Sputnik coverage more widely, but with NATO the framing is particularly consistent.

Two simple conclusions can be drawn from this: RT and Sputnik devote a lot of coverage to NATO; and that coverage is overwhelmingly and consistently negative about all aspects of the alliance – its objectives, its behaviour, its effectiveness and its cohesiveness. If the undermining of Russia's main perceived military opponent is a key strategy of the Russian government, then RT and Sputnik certainly play a part in portraying the organisation in as poorly a light as possible.

Representing Russian military capability

RT and Sputnik coverage of Russian weapon technology

Just as RT and Sputnik devote an unusual amount of coverage on NATO and international conflict, they also have an unusual focus on weapons technology and military capability. As noted in the introduction to this section, Sputnik in particular publishes a large number of articles given over to detailed specifications of military hardware. Though the outlets cover the capabilities (and shortcomings) of other countries' weaponry – particularly those of the US and China – the majority of coverage is on Russian military capability, and on the development of cutting-edge and futuristic weapons. In contrast to the incentive to cover NATO in as negative a light as possible, so Russian media best serve the state's interests by portraying its military technology and capability as superior to its opponents. Crucially, they also provide a channel through which Russian government and military officials can make pronouncements about the readiness or developmental status of weaponry that are exaggerated or otherwise unverifiable.¹⁴⁵

Though coverage of Russian military hardware is generally common on Sputnik, the two sampled periods in this study take place during periods of particularly high focus on Russian military technologies on both outlets. The May-June 2017 sample period began two days after the Russian Victory Day celebrations commemorating the Soviet victory in the Second World War. The military parade, held in Red Square, is traditionally a celebration of Russia's military power and showcases new weapons systems. The 2017 parade did not include aircraft due to adverse weather conditions, but weapons previously displayed in 2015 (including the T-14 'Armata'-tracked heavy battle tank) featured, in addition to the Iskander and Yars missiles and air defence systems such as the Triumf/S-400, the Tor-M2U SAM, Pantsir-S1 and Buk-M2.

Three days before the March 2018 sample began, President Putin made his annual 'State of the Nation' speech to the Federal Assembly, in which he listed examples of Russian military development and weapons. These included: Sarmat (an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile); Avangard (hypersonic glide vehicle) and Kinzhal (hypersonic missile). He also announced a public competition run by the Ministry of Defence to name some of the new systems, including an underwater drone (Poseidon), a nuclear-powered cruise missile (Burevestnik) and a combat laser system (Peresvet).

¹⁴⁵ See Appendix 2 for further notes on Russian weaponry covered by RT and Sputnik, and technical omissions in Russian government announcements about new weapon capability

In addition to Putin's speech, the sample period saw tests of new systems and existing technologies (such as the Iskander missile system).

This study set out to determine, first, how RT and Sputnik covered new and emerging weapon technologies announced by the Russian military, and second (discussed below) how UK media reported on Russia's pronouncements on weapons technologies.

A preliminary analysis of RT and Sputnik content over the 2017 and 2018 samples generated a list of weapons that had been prominently featured in the 2017 Victory Day parade or were announced by President Putin in his 2018 'State of the Nation' speech. The list (outlined in Table 5.4 below) is not an exhaustive record of all military hardware mentioned by RT and Sputnik; it is limited to those weapons that were prominently showcased by Russian military or government figures during the sample period.

Name/Keyword	Description ¹⁴⁶
Sarmat/Voevoda	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM)
Underwater Drone <i>Poseidon</i>	Underwater drone named in 2018 MoD public poll
Kinzhal	Air-launched, hypersonic missile
Iskander	Missile system
Kalibr	Anti-ship missile
Avangard	Hypersonic glide vehicle
Zircon	Hypersonic missile
Armata/T-14	Unified combat platform; T-14 tank variant
Soratnik	Tracked, autonomous, armoured vehicle
T-50/Su-57/PAK-FA	5th-generation stealth fighter aircraft programme
Topol	ICBM
Triumf/S-400	Air defence system
Yars	Thermonuclear ICBM
Borei	Submarine
Bulava	Submarine-launched nuclear missiles
S-500	Air defence system; upgrade to S-400
Granit	Anti-ship missile
Tu-160	Supersonic bomber
Kornet	Anti-tank missile
Tor-M2DT	Short-range surface-to-air missile system
Tornado-S	Mobile rocket launcher system

Table 5.4: List of prominent Russian weapons in RT and Sputnik coverage

Keyword searches in Steno were used to identify all RT and Sputnik articles in the samples in which these weapons were mentioned. Where translations varied (ie 'Voevoda'/'Voyvoda' when searching for articles mentioning the Sarmat ICBM), all variants of the weapon names were included in the search. Manual checks of articles were used to remove false positive results (especially in results for 'poseidon', 'underwater drone' and 'zircon').

Table 5.5 shows the frequency with which new and selected weapons systems were covered by RT and Sputnik in the different samples. As noted above, Sputnik is considerably more prolific than RT in its reporting on military technology. It is also more likely to outline weapon specifications in detail and to build articles around the quotes of Russian military officials. For example, a March 2018 article about the T-14 Armata tank consists almost entirely of repackaged praise for the vehicle and its capabilities taken from an interview with a Ground Forces Commander in the *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper.¹⁴⁷ Another Sputnik article, on the Soratnik unmanned vehicle, contains an embedded video from the YouTube channel of the weapon's manufacturer, alongside a list of the weapon's specifications:

The Soratnik is the first robotic fighting vehicle developed and built by the Kalashnikov Concern manufacturer. Tracked and armored, it is designed to conduct reconnaissance and transmit data, patrol and protect territories and important facilities, carry out mine clearance and clear obstacles. The 7-ton Soratnik is armed with 7.62 mm and 12.7 mm machine guns, as well as an AG-17A 30 mm grenade launcher. It can operate remotely within a six-to-seven mile radius of the controller. One design option under consideration is to mount eight Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missiles onto the vehicle.¹⁴⁸

The Soratnik article is based on defence industry promotional material; more commonly, coverage of weapons is based on information released by the Russian Defence Ministry. An RT article on the 'Sarmat' ICBM was built around test launch footage published on the Ministry's YouTube channel, again outlining the specifications and capabilities of the weapon.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Longer descriptions of each weapon

¹⁴⁷ 'Indestructible Armata: the Russian Tank That Can Survive Any Hit,' sputniknews.com, 7th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803071062318919-armata-tank-features/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

¹⁴⁸ 'Locked and Loaded: WATCH Russian Combat Robots in Action,' sputniknews.com, 9th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803091062366168-russia-combat-robots-test/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

¹⁴⁹ 'Russia's new heavy ICBM undergoes 2nd launch test (VIDEO),' RT.com, 30th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422745-sarmat-icbm-launch-test/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018).

Weapon/Keyword(s)	2017			2018			Total
	RT	Sputnik	Total	RT	Sputnik	Total	
Sarmat	0	2	2	7	13	20	22
Underwater Drone <i>Poseidon</i>	0	0	0	5	8	13	13
Kinzhal	0	0	0	4	6	10	10
Iskander	0	7	7	1	4	5	12
Kalibr	4	12	16	1	2	3	19
Avangard	0	0	0	2	8	10	10
Zircon	0	4	4	0	0	0	4
Armata/T-14	0	6	6	0	4	4	10
Soratnik	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
T-50/Su-57/PAK-FA	0	8	8	0	5	5	13
Topol	0	2	2	2	1	3	5
Triumf/S-400	2	17	19	4	26	30	49
Yars	0	4	4	2	1	3	7
Borei	1	2	3	1	2	3	6
Bulava	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
S-500	0	5	5	0	1	1	6
Tu-160	1	5	6	1	1	2	8
Granit	0	1	1	1	0	1	2
Kornet	0	1	1	0	2	2	3
Tor-M2DT	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Tornado-S	0	2	2	0	0	0	2

Table 5.5: Selected weapon coverage in RT and Sputnik, 2017 and 2018

Though only a handful of these weapons were extensively covered – the S-400 ‘Triumf’ air defence system featured frequently as part of a proposed arms deal between Russia and Turkey – in total there were 204 instances of weapons from this list being mentioned on RT and Sputnik. The weapons prominently showcased in Putin’s 1st March 2018 ‘State of the Nation’ speech – Sarmat, Avangard, Kinzhal and ‘Poseidon’ among them – received a large amount of coverage, largely based on information and video footage supplied by military or government sources (eg Sarmat¹⁵⁰, Kinzhal¹⁵¹, Avangard¹⁵²).

RT and Sputnik, therefore, act as prominent mainstream English-language sources of information about Russian military capability. Both sites frequently publish articles that consist of little more than praise for emerging weapon technologies based on quotes and video footage provided by the Russian government and military. Articles frequently accentuate the destructive power of weapons and their superiority over Western equivalents or capacity to bypass defences:

The ‘Kinzhal’ missile has an effective range of 2,000km and can travel 10 times faster than the speed of sound. The munition is highly manoeuvrable and can reliably penetrate all the existing and even prospected air-defense systems...¹⁵³

The Sarmat missile, known under the macabre NATO classification of Satan-2, has a starting weight of 200 tons, a length of about 35 meters and carries more than 10 nuclear warheads of up to one megaton each. It also sports missile defense penetration countermeasures.¹⁵⁴

The Iskander-M is one of Russia’s newest high-precision weapons, which entered service at the country’s armed forces in 2006. Its supersonic, guided nuclear-capable missiles, ranged at 415-500km, can be independently targeted in seconds, and are fully controlled at every stage of their flight path.¹⁵⁵

In many cases these articles represent ‘fact files’ about weapons, providing packaged information carefully explaining their specifications and capabilities, and helpfully providing linked video content showing the weapons in action, with increased coverage of weapons that feature in speeches by senior government figures. The material is therefore designed to be eye-catching, to relate to international political news events, or to supply easy-to-access information on the potency or technological advancement of the Russian military.

150 ‘Goodbye ‘Satan’: Russia to get rid of iconic ICBM & get top replacement,’ RT.com, 12th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421027-russia-scraps-satan-missiles/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

151 ‘Russia’s new hypersonic missile put through military tests (VIDEO),’ RT.com, 10th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420947-russian-hypersonic-missile-tests/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

152 ‘Russia’s Avangard Hypersonic Glider Warhead Enters Production – Source,’ sputniknews.com, 4th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803041062210266-avangard-hypersonic-glider-enters-production/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

153 ‘Russia’s new hypersonic missile put through military tests (VIDEO),’ RT.com, 10th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420947-russian-hypersonic-missile-tests/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

154 ‘WATCH: Newest Sarmat ICBM Test Preparations Caught on Video,’ sputniknews.com, 14th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201803141062504839-sarmat-preparation-video/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

155 ‘Bull’s Eye: WATCH Russia’s Iskander Missile Launch,’ sputniknews.com, 5th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803051062231022-russia-iskander-missile-launch/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

UK media coverage of Russian weapon technology

To compare how UK national media covered these same issues, Steno was used to conduct the same keyword search on the datasets containing all UK news articles collected over the same sampling period. Table 5.6 shows how many articles mentioning those Russian weapons systems were published in online articles during the 2017 and 2018 samples. Though there is a substantial difference in the number of outlets in the UK sample (17 publications) versus RT and Sputnik in the Russian sample, there were a comparative number of articles published about the Sarmat ICBM, the Kinzhal hypersonic missile, the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle and the underwater drone 'Poseidon', all of which featured in Putin's 1st March 2018 speech to the Federal Assembly. The Iskander missile system, tested by the Russian Navy during the March 2018 sample, also featured in eleven articles, while the Zircon hypersonic missile and the Soratnik autonomous armoured vehicle were covered more often in UK media.

Weapon/Keyword(s)	UK Media Articles	RT and Sputnik Articles
Sarmat	20	22
Underwater Drone <i>Poseidon</i>	14	13
Kinzhal	13	10
Iskander	11	12
Kalibr	9	19
Avangard	8	10
Zircon	7	4
Armata/T-14	5	10
Soratnik	5	1
T-50/Su-57/PAK-FA	6	13
Topol	4	5
Triumf/S-400	3	49
Yars	3	7
Borei	2	6
Bulava	2	1
S-500	2	6
Granit	2	8
Tu-160	1	2
Kornet	1	3
Tor-M2DT	1	1
Tornado-S	1	2

Table 5.6: Selected weapon coverage on UK and Russian media, 2017 and 2018

However, coverage of Russian weapons was not evenly spread across UK media. Table 5.6 shows that there were 120 instances of the selected weapons systems across the seventeen UK outlets. These were spread across 83 articles, of which 70 were published by four titles: the *Express*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Star* and the *Sun*. In total, these titles accounted for 105 (87.5%) of the 120 mentions of the selected Russian weapons.

Publication	2017	2018	Total
Express	9	24	33
Daily Mail	10	17	27
The Sun	9	18	27
Daily Star	5	13	18
Mirror	2	2	4
BBC	3	0	3
Independent	1	2	3
Telegraph	0	2	2
Guardian	0	1	1
Huffington Post UK	1	0	1
i	0	1	1
Total	40	80	120

Table 5.7: Mentions of selected Russian weapons, all UK publications, 2017 and 2018¹⁵⁶

Table 5.7 shows the difference across all publications in which the Russian weapons were mentioned, demonstrating the significant difference between the four most prolific outlets and the rest, and also the significant difference in coverage among these four titles between the 2017 and 2018 samples. Figure 5.1 shows the extent to which these four outlets dominated coverage of Russian weapons in UK media.

¹⁵⁶ This analysis does not include one BBC video-only article

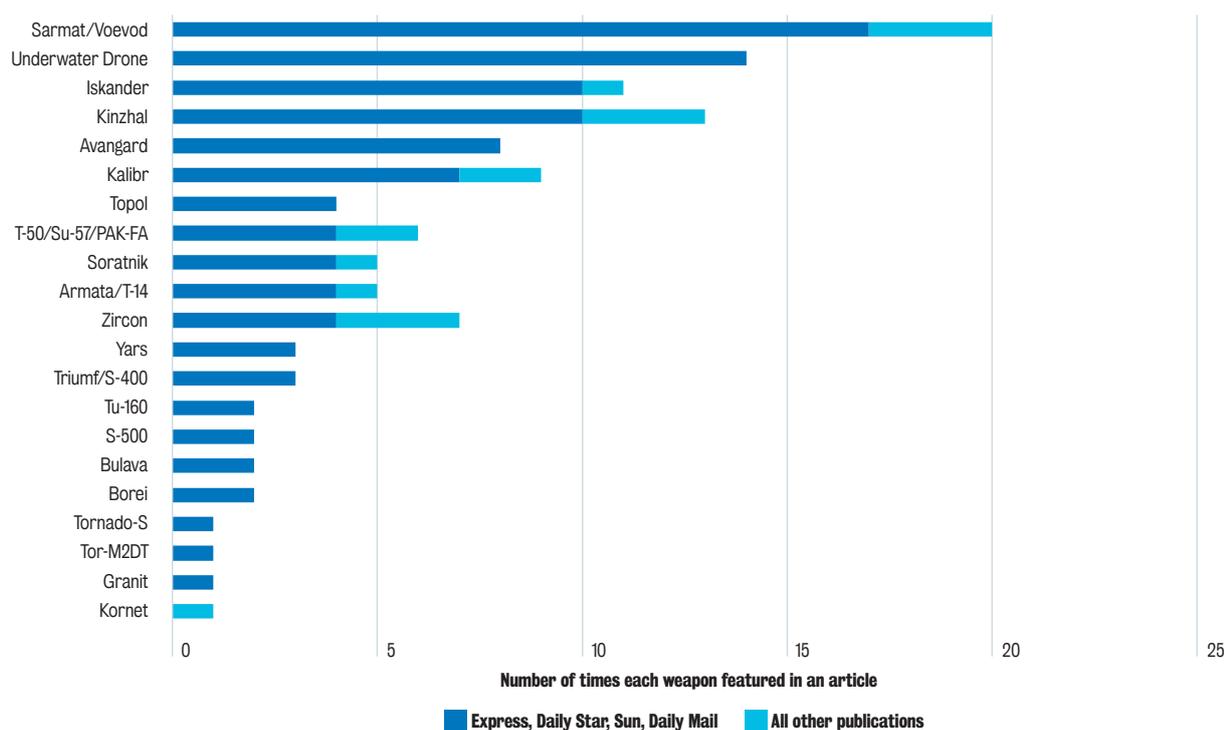


Figure 5.1: Mentions of Russian weapons in UK media, split by outlet, 2017 and 2018

To further explore the ways in which UK news outlets reported on these weapons, each separate mention of a weapon was then analysed for the following information:

- **Weapon specification:** Any mention of technical details and quantitative information on the weapon's specification, including speed, capacity, equipment, armaments (where applicable).
- **Weapon capability:** Any assessment of the effectiveness or destructive capacity of the weapon (includes capacity to evade or bypass existing defences, and descriptions of the damage that the weapon could inflict on military or civilian targets).
- **Russian quote:** Any quote within the article from a Russian military, government or expert source describing the weapon's properties and capabilities.
- **Footage:** Embedded footage within the article, supplied by Russian news, military or government sources.
- **Comparison:** Favourable comparisons of the weapon relative to Western equivalents, or the inability of existing Western defensive systems to counter the Russian weapon.

The results are shown in Table 5.8. Those publications that covered Russian weapons most often frequently illustrated their coverage with detailed weapons specifications and information about the destructive capabilities or effectiveness of the weapon. The *Express*, which mentioned 33 weapons in 24 articles, also included weapons specifications 18 times, and information on weapon capability 21 times. Weapon descriptions were accompanied by quotes from Russian sources 13 times, and by video footage nine times.

Publication	Mentions	Specs	Capability	Russian Quote	Russian Footage	Comparison	None	Wire Copy
Express	33	18	21	13	9	4	4	0
Daily Mail	27	7	11	16	5	3	9	11
The Sun	27	12	15	16	12	5	4	0
Daily Star	18	5	10	10	7	4	3	0
Mirror	4	3	3	1	3	2	0	0
BBC	3	1	1	0	0	0	2	0
Independent	3	3	3	3	2	3	0	0
Telegraph	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	0
Guardian	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
Huffington Post UK	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
i	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	120	51	68	60	39	23	23	12

Table 5.8: Coverage of Russian weapon characteristics, UK media, 2017 and 2018

The *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* both mentioned weapons on 27 occasions, and on over half these occasions the mention was accompanied by a quote from a Russian source. The *Sun*, out of all sampled publications, most commonly used Russian-supplied footage of the weapons in action or being tested. It should be noted that the *Daily Mail*, which indicates when it has repackaged wire service copy into a story on its own site, did so on 11 different occasions. Though it is not clear the extent to which coverage by other outlets relied on wire copy, this does not significantly alter the analysis of how they presented information about Russian military capability.

Weapon specifications: The *Express* most often included detailed weapon specifications in its reporting of Russian military hardware. These sometimes took the form of short statements explaining the significance of the weapon, for example, when describing the Sarmat ICBM: ‘Dubbed Satan 2 by Nato, it can travel at 20 times the speed of sound and carry 12 nuclear warheads up to 6,000 miles.’¹⁵⁷ However, some descriptions were longer and more detailed, occasionally citing Russian sources for the information:

The Avangard is an intercontinental ballistic missile system, with the glide vehicle capable of flying at hypersonic speed. The warhead travels some of its path at an altitude of several dozen kilometres in the dense layers of the atmosphere, manoeuvring by its flight path and altitude, making it capable of bypassing the area of the missile defence’s detection and destruction capabilities. Although the warhead’s performance characteristics have not been officially revealed, [Russian government-owned news agency] TASS has speculated that the glider vehicle is around 5.4m long and can travel at a speed exceeding Mach 20, with the warhead either nuclear (from 150 kilotons or 1 megaton) or conventional.¹⁵⁸

Similar coverage was found in other outlets:

Earlier this month, Russia successfully tested another hypersonic missile known as the Kinzhal, or Dagger. Described by the Russian strongman “an ideal weapon”, it can fly at almost 7,700mph across 1,250 miles and hit precise targets. It was launched from a MiG-31 supersonic interceptor jet that took off from an airfield in the South military District of Russia’s southwest.¹⁵⁹

Weapon capability: Descriptions of weapon specifications were usually accompanied with explanations of the effectiveness, power or capability of the weapon itself, often in emotive language. For example, an *Express* article about the T-14 Armata tank published on 30th May 2017 contained the following passage:

The new T-14 Armata machines can completely annihilate targets more than five miles away. And the tanks also use a special stealth coating which can block, absorb or bend waves - making the tanks essentially invisible. The innovation - a masking agent called Mantiya - poses a huge problem for a generation of anti-armour weapons, particularly the US-supplied Javelin guided missile which is now futile against the Russian fighters.¹⁶⁰

Other systems, particularly Russia’s ICBMs and Hypersonic weapons, were frequently described in terms of their destructive capacity, including the damage that would be inflicted on the UK in the event of their use. A *Daily Star* article headlined ‘Russia nuclear strike on Britain would kill 8 MILLION and cripple UK’ contained the passage:

Nuke strikes were simulated using one of Russia’s most common nuclear ICBMs the Topol SS-26 - known to NATO as the Sickle - of which Putin is believed to have around 160 in service. And these weapons carry nuclear warheads with the explosive power of up to 800,000 tons of TNT. That is more than 46 times more powerful than the bombs the US dropped on Hiroshima.¹⁶¹

157 ‘Putin hits back at Britain in SHOCK move: Russia orders 50 MORE UK diplomats to ‘GO HOME’,’ *Express.co.uk*, 31st March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/939609/Russia-vs-UK-news-Putin-50-diplomats-out-Russia-West-tensions-latest> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

158 ‘Russia builds Putin’s KILLER Avangard hypersonic missile system as tensions with UK soar,’ *Express.co.uk*, 15th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/932474/russia-avangard-hypersonic-missile-putin-uk> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

159 ‘Vladimir Putin shows off his fearsome new Sarmat hypersonic missile days after Donald Trump ‘told him America will WIN arms race’,’ *thesun.co.uk*, 30th March 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5936608/putin-shows-off-his-fearsome-new-sarmat-hypersonic-missile-after-trump-told-him-america-will-win-arms-race/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

160 ‘Warning to Nato: Russia futuristic INVISIBLE tanks represents new threat,’ *express.co.uk*, 30th May 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/810895/Russia-futuristic-invisible-Armata-T14-tanks-threat-NATO-Norway-Vladimir-Putin> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

161 ‘Russia nuclear strike on Britain would kill 8 MILLION and cripple UK,’ *dailystar.co.uk*, 24th March 2018, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/691211/Russia-War-Britain-Nuclear-Attack-UK-Targets-Map-Death-Toll-Sergei-Skripal-Cold-War> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

Though this article was based on Russian military technology already in service, reports on Russia's weapons currently in development also followed this theme. An *Express* article published in the midst of the Skripal crisis was headlined 'Russia UK war: Putin's 50 Megaton Satan-2 nuke will kill 17M Brits- are you in kill zone?' It includes the passage:

JUST one of Vladimir Putin's terrifying 50 MEGATON [sic] Satan-2 nuclear missiles dropped on Birmingham would level buildings from London to Liverpool and effectively end life in Britain. The blast – 4000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima – would create a fireball 40 miles across reaching from the ground to the edge of the [sic] space. It would be visible 500 miles away. The Satan-2 is the most powerful nuclear weapon it is possible to make.¹⁶²

The *Sun* also included similar claims about Russia's ICBMs:

The country successfully launched its massive Satan Two nuclear missile, a 100-tonne rocket capable of wiping out the UK, in October. The colossal weapon which can carry 12 warheads at once travelled 3,600 miles towards a ballistic missile test landing site in far-east Russia. The missile, also known as RS-28 Sarmat, has a range of 6,000 miles and was fired on Thursday night from Plestek Cosmodrome in Oblast [sic], 880km north of Moscow.¹⁶³

Russian quotes: Mentions of Russian weapons were accompanied by quotes from Russian military or government figures, or Russian analysts, on 60 occasions. These statements were often from the Russian Ministry of Defence describing successful tests of weapons¹⁶⁴ or praising the capabilities of weapons.¹⁶⁵ Several articles cited quotes from Russian sources Sputnik¹⁶⁶ and other Russian news outlets.¹⁶⁷ A *Daily Star* article about the Tor-M2DT arctic-capable surface-to-air missile system included a quote from "military expert Alexey Leonkov", a frequent source on Sputnik:

The chassis for the Arctic Tor were selected based on results of complex comparative tests conducted by the Defence Ministry several years ago when a sort of a rally across the tundra was organised. Kupol company from Izhevsk - that produces the Tors - developed its module and improved heating of systems. As a result, few have a frost-resistant edition of a fearsome anti-missile system that has been recognised not only by Russian but also by foreign military (experts).¹⁶⁸

Russian footage: Just as articles about Russian weapons on RT and Sputnik were often accompanied by video footage obtained from the Russian government or Russian arms manufacturers, so too were articles published by UK media. In 39 cases, a description of one of the weapons included in this analysis included embedded video footage, with the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* most commonly making use of this resource. The footage of the Soratnik unmanned tank hosted on the YouTube site of the vehicle's manufacturer was included in five UK news articles on the *Mirror*, *Sun*, *Express* and *Daily Star*, credited to the Central European News (CEN) agency.¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, footage is taken directly from RT,¹⁷⁰ but more often the footage was displayed without accreditation on the site's own video platform.¹⁷¹

162 'Russia UK war: Putin's 50 Megaton Satan-2 nuke will kill 17M Brits- are you in kill zone?,' *express.co.uk*, 16th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/932292/Russia-UK-war-world-war-three-Putin-Satan-2-nukes-kill-17-MILLION> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

163 'Vladimir Putin reveals exactly when he'll unleash Russia's nuclear weapons on the West... and says it'll spark a 'global catastrophe',' *thesun.co.uk*, 7th March 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5750924/vladimir-putin-reveals-exactly-when-hell-unleash-russias-nuclear-weapons-on-the-west-and-says-itll-spark-a-global-catastrophe/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

164 'Russia FIRES 7,673MPH hypersonic 'DAGGER' missile in shock footage,' *dailystar.co.uk*, 11th March 2018, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/687997/russia-news-hypersonic-missile-test-vladimir-putin-dagger> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

165 'Russia's Satan missiles to be SUPERIALIZED with even more powerful nuclear war weapon,' *express.co.uk*, 16th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/931967/russia-latest-vladimir-putin-satan-voevod-ballistic-missiles> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

166 'Russia successfully tests 'unstoppable' 4,600mph hypersonic weapon that is faster than ANY global anti-missile system,' *dailymail.co.uk*, 31st May 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4557934/Russia-successfully-launches-unstoppable-cruise-missile.html> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

167 'Russia V UK: Putin will make FINAL DECISION on 'revenge' against Britain as tensions mount,' *express.co.uk*, 15th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/932519/russia-uk-latest-putin-decision-revenge-salisbury-nerve-agent-spy-poison-attack> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

168 'Russia deploys 'WHITE BEAR' missiles amid brewing new Cold War,' *dailystar.co.uk*, 28th March 2018, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/692213/russia-war-nato-cold-missiles-arctic-pictures-video-vladimir-putin-tor-white-bear> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

169 'Killer Russian robot tank made by Kalashnikov unveiled as part of Vladimir Putin's terrifying arsenal,' *mirror.co.uk*, 7th March 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/killer-russian-robot-tank-made-12143144> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

170 'ISIS crushed as Russian warships launch CRUISE MISSILE onslaught on jihadi camps,' *dailystar.co.uk*, 31st May 2017, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/618655/Russia-ISIS-Vladimir-Putin-Syria-Cruise-Missiles-Warship-Submarine-Palmyra-Assad-Raqq> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

171 'Russia's Satan missiles to be SUPERIALIZED with even more powerful nuclear war weapon,' *express.co.uk*, 16th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/931967/russia-latest-vladimir-putin-satan-voevod-ballistic-missiles> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

Comparison: In a smaller number of cases, the capabilities of Russian weapons were favourably compared with their counterparts in Western militaries or against Western defensive capabilities. A *Daily Mail* article about testing of the Zircon hypersonic missile contained a side-by-side graphic demonstrating the superiority of the Russian offensive weapon against the Royal Navy's defensive countermeasures.¹⁷² A *Sun* article on the T-14 Armata tank contains an unattributed statement outlining the superiority of the tank against Western equivalents: 'Comparing the T-14 with its Western counterparts, designers speak of a 25-30 percent advantage over the American Abrams tank, France's Leclerc tank and Germany's Leopard 2.'¹⁷³

Summary

In summary, four titles dominated UK coverage of this selected list of Russian high-tech weaponry, with almost nine-tenths of all mentions of these weapons being detected in articles published by the *Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Star*. The focus tended to be on highly destructive weapons, with the frame of nuclear conflict and 'World War 3' common, particularly in articles by the *Express* and *Daily Star*, though articles about less destructive but more futuristic weapons were also common.

Articles by these outlets often included quotes from Russian official sources such as government and military figures, or Russian analysts, occasionally accrediting RT, Sputnik or other Russian news outlets for the content. Footage taken from Russian sources and news sites was also frequently added to stories to provide further proof of the weapons' operation.

The tendency to focus on highly destructive weapons and their potential effects on the UK, and to use footage and elite source quotes to underpin articles suggests the operation of news values favouring dramatic, sensational themes of looming danger and threat, as well as the impressive nature of military technology.

It is significant that all four of the news sources most likely to cover Russian military capability in this way are tabloids (though the remaining tabloid, the *Mirror*, is conspicuous in how much less often it reported on these issues), and while Vladimir Putin's announcement of a suite of new weapons in his 1st of March 'State of the Nation' address in 2018 is a clear news peg for stories about Russian military capability and intentions, other news outlets chose not to focus on the weapons themselves, or details of their specifications and capabilities. It suggests that there is an alignment between the news values of certain UK news outlets and RT's and Sputnik's output of fact-filled, video-driven and elite-sourced coverage of cutting-edge Russian military technology, as presented by the Russian government or by Russian arms manufacturers.

Russian military churnalism?

In the analysis of Russian weapons coverage described above, some articles showed indications of being heavily constructed from Russian direct quotes in English and content from other Russian sources.

For example, an *Express* article published on 30th May 2017 headlined 'Preparing for WAR? Russia to upgrade rocket artillery by 2020 as tensions with NATO rise' contained the following:

- Weapons specifications and capabilities for three of the weapons in the above list – the Tornado-S rocket artillery system, the T-14 Armata tank and the T-50 fighter jet.
- Quotes from two Russian sources (one quoted directly, the other cited indirectly) talking specifically about the rocket artillery mentioned in the title.
- Embedded video of a Russian military rocket launch (although curiously this video is credited to a Spanish-language conspiracy theory site that normally covers extraterrestrial conspiracies – the video has been truncated and relabelled by the *Express* as 'Russia launch ballistic missile-tracking Soyuz military rocket').¹⁷⁴
- A slideshow of Russian hardware from the 2017 Victory Day military parade.¹⁷⁵

172 'Russia successfully tests 'unstoppable' 4,600mph hypersonic weapon that is faster than ANY global anti-missile system,' [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4557934/Russia-successfully-launches-unstoppable-cruise-missile.html), 31st May 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4557934/Russia-successfully-launches-unstoppable-cruise-missile.html> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

173 'Vladimir Putin unveils futuristic new Russian tanks with built-in masking cloaks making them INVISIBLE to US missiles,' [thesun.co.uk](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3587703/vladimir-putin-new-russian-tanks-masking-cloaks-invisible/), 17th May 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3587703/vladimir-putin-new-russian-tanks-masking-cloaks-invisible/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

174 The original video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crhempsoWug>

175 'Preparing for WAR? Russia to upgrade rocket artillery by 2020 as tensions with NATO rise,' [express.co.uk](https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/811131/Russia-NATO-rocket-artillery-upgradeTornado-S), 30th May 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/811131/Russia-NATO-rocket-artillery-upgradeTornado-S> (Accessed 25th September 2017)

In the analysis of text-matching between Russian and UK articles containing references to Russian military equipment (described in full below), this article was identified as sharing portions of text with a Sputnik article published the previous day, titled 'Fist of Steel: Russian Rocket Artillery to be Rearmed to Tornado-S by 2020.'¹⁷⁶

The Sputnik and *Express* articles contained the same quote from Missile and Artillery commander Lieutenant-General Mikhail Matveyevsky and the opening two paragraphs contained similar introductory text for Matveyevsky and for the Tornado-S system. However, the following paragraph appeared in the Sputnik article:

Matveyevsky added that serial deliveries of Koalitsiya-SV self-propelled guns (SPG) to the Russian army would also begin by 2020. The long-range 300-mm Tornado-S MLRS, manufactured by the Splav Research and Manufacturing Company, can fire at a range of 120 kilometers (75 miles) and strike an area of over 60 hectares (150 acres).

Reordered, but almost word-for-word with a removal of metric distance, this section was reproduced in the *Express* article:

The long-range 300-mm Tornado-S MLRS, manufactured by the Splav Research and Manufacturing Company, can fire at a range of 75 miles and strike an area of over 60 hectares (150 acres). He added that serial deliveries of Koalitsiya-SV self-propelled guns (SPG) to the Russian army would also begin by 2020.

The articles are not identical, and the *Express* article contains extra information about the artillery system from another Russian source, as well as adding additional information about other Russian weapons platforms. It is also possible that the information was published elsewhere by a third source and replicated by both Sputnik and the *Express* (although if it was from an international wire service no other UK outlet contained a significant portion of the text). However, it is an indication that content published first on Russian sites, about the capability of the Russian military, can find their way into UK news sources.

In order to assess whether UK news articles were replicating content from RT and Sputnik on Russian military capability, the Steno-Similar text-matching tool was used to compare specific news articles from RT and Sputnik with full week-long datasets of UK media content. Those articles collected from RT and Sputnik that mentioned any of the Russian weapons featured in this analysis were compared, one-by-one, with all UK datasets from the corresponding yearly sample (for example, a 2017 Sputnik article mentioning the T-14 Armata tank was compared with all four weekly UK media datasets from the 2017 sample). The text-matching threshold was set fairly low, at 10%, to ensure that differences in article lengths didn't interfere with results where significant amounts of content replication had taken place, and to identify where significant blocks of text, rather than full articles, had been replicated.¹⁷⁷

Causality was determined by checking the publication date and timestamp of each article, either as displayed on the article page, or – in the case of the *Daily Star*, which does not include time of publication in its online articles – by metadata recorded during the collection of the article by scrapers. Article matches were not counted if the replicated content consisted entirely of quotes from senior political figures (such as Vladimir Putin) that were otherwise in the public domain.

In total, the analysis found ten UK media articles that were largely or partially composed of passages of text from RT or Sputnik. These articles were all from the four publications identified in the previous section as most likely to cover Russian military stories: Three articles each from the *Express* and *Daily Mail*, and two from each of the *Sun* and *Daily Star*.

176 'Fist of Steel: Russian Rocket Artillery to Be Rearmed to Tornado-S by 2020,' sputniknews.com, 29th May 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705291054088774-russia-rocket-artillery-mlrs-tornado-s/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

177 See Appendix 1 for more details on how Steno-Similar's text-matching threshold function works

Uncredited RT and Sputnik content

The text-matching analysis located four articles that were detected as having replicated significant passages of text from RT or Sputnik articles that had been published previously. The most significant of these was an article published by the *Express* on 10th March 2018, headlined ‘World War 3: US senators call for URGENT talks with Russia due to TERRIFYING new weapons.’¹⁷⁸ This article had been identified as containing a significant amount of text overlap with an RT article published the day before, titled ‘“Urgently engage with Russia”: US senators call for dialogue after new nuclear arsenal unveiled.’¹⁷⁹ Table 5.9 contains the text of each article, with text replicated in the *Express* article highlighted:

178 ‘World War 3: US senators call for URGENT talks with Russia due to TERRIFYING new weapons,’ *express.co.uk*, 10th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/929761/world-war-3-usa-senators-talks-russia-weapons-nuclear-putin-Washington-news-latest> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

179 ‘“Urgently engage with Russia”: US senators call for dialogue after new nuclear arsenal unveiled,’ *RT.com*, 9th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420839-us-russia-dialogue-nuclear-arsenal/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

RT.com – 9th March 2018

'Urgently engage with Russia': US senators call for dialogue after new nuclear arsenal unveiled

Published time: 9 Mar, 2018 06:16

Edited time: 9 Mar, 2018 14:23

A group of US lawmakers have called for strategic dialogue with Moscow. They feel that the matter is "more urgent" following Russian President Vladimir Putin's unveiling of a number of cutting-edge weapons systems.

"A US-Russia Strategic Dialogue is more urgent following President Putin's public address on March 1st when he referred to several new nuclear weapons Russia is reportedly developing, including a cruise missile and a nuclear underwater drone," a letter signed by US Senators Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) reads.

The letter, addressed to US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, was published on Thursday. The senators stressed that while the countries have many "significant" disagreements, including alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections and the "annexation" of Crimea, Moscow and Washington need to come to the negotiation table.

"Due to these policy rifts, not in spite of them... the United States should urgently engage with Russia to avoid miscalculation and reduce the likelihood of conflict."

The lawmakers are concerned that some of the brand-new Russian nuclear weapons are not covered by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, commonly known as the New START, and thus call for the agreement to be extended. The weapons in question include a cruise missile with virtually no range limit and a nuclear-powered underwater drone.

However, the letter did not miss a chance to accuse Russia of non-compliance with the 1982 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and called on the State Department to address the alleged violation. Moscow and Washington have traded accusations of INF-Treaty violations for several years. The US constantly accuses Russia of developing missile systems with ranges prohibited by the agreement, without providing any specific information to support such allegations.

Moscow has its own list of complaints regarding US shortcomings in relation to the INF Treaty. These include the US drone program, and the ground placement of a naval vertical-launch system in Europe as part of the Aegis Ashore program. Russia contends that these constitute violations of the treaty. In December 2017, Putin said that Washington was apparently creating conditions to leave the accord, and said that the process of its withdrawal has actually already begun.

There had been rumors that the Russian and American top diplomats, Sergey Lavrov and Rex Tillerson respectively, may meet while they are both in Africa. However, the US State Department denied that there had been any discussion of possible bilateral talks. When asked about it, the Russian Foreign Minister said the claims that such discussions never happened are "untrue."

On March 1, the Russian leader presented a set of advanced Russian nuclear weapons, some of which are not yet named. During his state of the nation address, Putin stressed that Russia would not need all these new weapons had its legitimate concerns been heeded by the US and its allies. "Nobody wanted to talk to us about the root of the problem. Nobody listened to us; so listen to us now!" he said.

The speech drew a hysterical reaction from the Western media and accusations of saber-rattling and starting "a new arms race," Putin told NBC Washington was in fact to blame for it. The Russian president referred to the US decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) back in 2002.

Express.co.uk – 10th March 2018

World War 3: US senators call for URGENT talks with Russia due to TERRIFYING new weapons

Published: 04:19, Sat, Mar 10, 2018

Updated: 13:11, Sat, Mar 10, 2018

A GROUP of US lawmakers have called for "urgent" strategic dialogue with Moscow after Vladimir Putin unveils a number of terrifying, cutting-edge weapons systems, it has been reported.

In a letter addressed to US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson published on Thursday, the senators stressed that while the countries have many significant disagreements, including alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections and the "annexation" of Crimea, Moscow and Washington need to come to the negotiation table.

It said: "A US-Russia Strategic Dialogue is more urgent following President Putin's public address on March 1st when he referred to several new nuclear weapons Russia is reportedly developing, including a cruise missile and a nuclear underwater drone."

The lawmakers are concerned that some of the brand-new Russian nuclear weapons are not covered by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and called for the agreement to be extended.

The letter accused Russia of non-compliance with the 1982 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF).

It also called on the State Department to address the alleged violation.

Moscow and Washington have accused each other of violating the INF-Treaty violations for several years.

The US accuses Russia of developing missile systems with ranges prohibited by the agreement without any specific information to support the allegations.

The Kremlin has its own list of complaints about US shortcomings in relation to the treaty.

These include the US drone programme and the ground placement of a naval vertical launch system in Europe.

In December 2017, Putin said Washington had been creating conditions to leave the accord and said the process of its withdrawal has already begun.

Earlier this month, Putin presented a set of advanced Russian nuclear weapons, some of which have not yet been named.

Putin also stressed Russia would need all these weapons because of legitimate concerns.

He said: "Nobody wanted to talk to us about the root of the problem. Nobody listened to us; so listen to us now!"

The speech led to criticisms from the West of saber-rattling and starting a new arms race.

The letter was signed by US Senators Edward J. Markey, Jeff Merkley, Dianne Feinstein and Bernie Sanders.

Table 5.9: Text comparison of 10th March Express article with 9th March RT article

Almost all of the *Express* article is composed from blocks of text from the RT article, largely in the same order. The *Express* text also seems to have been edited in such a way as to tone down parts of the RT article that contained partial language, so '[T]he letter did not miss a chance to accuse Russia...' became 'The letter accused Russia...', and 'The US constantly accuses Russia of developing...' became 'The US accuses Russia of developing...'

The *Express* article appears to be a direct lift of an RT article with minimal rewriting to remove evidence of a pro-Russian slant. While it can be difficult to ascertain exactly where content has been replicated and not derived from a common source such as wire service copy, it is hard to see how this *Express* article can have derived from anything other than the previous day's RT content.

The *Express* article is an extreme example of text replication, though some other articles mentioning Russian weaponry and containing uncredited passages of text from RT and Sputnik were detected. Another *Express* article mentioned above, about the upgrading of Russian rocket artillery, also fell into this category, as did a *Daily Mail* article¹⁸⁰ about a Russian fighter jet warning off a US surveillance plane over the Black Sea which contained some passages of text identical to those found in an RT article and includes the same external links as the original.¹⁸¹ A *Daily Star* article reporting on the same incident on the same day and including similar portions of text credited RT as supplying the information.¹⁸²

Finally, an article about hypersonic weapons but focusing more on Chinese than on Russian weaponry, published by Sputnik,¹⁸³ was partially replicated by an *Express* article the following day.¹⁸⁴ The *Express* article, 'China test hypersonic space vehicle as Xi Jinping continues PUSH to rival Trump military,' takes content from the Sputnik article (which had accredited the *South China Morning Post* for the original content) and republishes it without crediting either. The second paragraph of the Sputnik article contains the text:

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the Chinese space vehicle took off from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Inner Mongolia before reaching speeds greater than five times the speed of sound, about 1,715 meters per second, and landed safely.

The article then goes on to cite the *Times* as mentioning previous incidents where 'booster rockets used to launch satellites and global positioning devices were falling into people's backyards.'

In the *Express* article the opening lines read:

The space vehicle was launched from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Inner Mongolia. It reached speeds of roughly 1,715 meters per second. The vehicle is also understood to have landed safely despite previous reports of booster rockets used to launch satellites and global positioning devices falling into people's backyards.

Partially rewritten, the *Express* passage fails to credit any of the three sources that had been used to compile the original content. Later the *Express* quotes two US military sources, Admiral Harry Harris and General Paul Selva, using the exact quotes used in the Sputnik article, where they were linked to an earlier Sputnik piece from the previous month.¹⁸⁵

Credited RT and Sputnik content

Six articles about Russian weapons were identified that included passages of text from RT or Sputnik articles, but which credited the Russian news outlets as the original source of that content. One of these, mentioned above, is the *Daily Star* article on the Black Sea incident between a Russian fighter and US surveillance plane, which credited RT for the story.

180 'Russian fighter jet passed within 20 FEET of US surveillance plane over the Black Sea, Navy reveals,' [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4498792/Russian-fighter-jet-passed-20-FEET-plane.html), 12th May 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4498792/Russian-fighter-jet-passed-20-FEET-plane.html> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

181 'Su-30 fighter jet intercepted US spy plane over Black Sea on V-Day – Moscow,' RT.com, <https://www.rt.com/news/388061-su30-poseidon-black-sea/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

182 'Russia fighter jet flies within 20 feet of US plane as Trump spies on Putin,' [dailystar.co.uk](https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/613580/us-plane-intercepted-russia-jets-black-sea), 12th May 2018, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/613580/us-plane-intercepted-russia-jets-black-sea> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

183 'China Tests Reusable Hypersonic Spacecraft With Military, Civilian Applications,' [sputniknews.com](https://sputniknews.com/science/201803061062291275-china-tests-hypersonic-spacecraft-reusable/), 6th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/science/201803061062291275-china-tests-hypersonic-spacecraft-reusable/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

184 'China test hypersonic space vehicle as Xi Jinping continues PUSH to rival Trump military,' [express.co.uk](https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/928188/china-xi-jinping-donald-trump-us-hypersonic-spacecraft-military), 7th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/928188/china-xi-jinping-donald-trump-us-hypersonic-spacecraft-military> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

185 'US Seeks Hypersonic Weapons as China Zooms Ahead,' [sputniknews.com](https://sputniknews.com/military/201802161061743069-us-hypersonic-weapon-china-zoom/), 16th February 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201802161061743069-us-hypersonic-weapon-china-zoom/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

Three articles, in the *Sun*,¹⁸⁶ *Daily Star*¹⁸⁷ and *Daily Mail*¹⁸⁸ credited Sputnik for several quotes taken from an article on Russia's Baltic fleet buildup,¹⁸⁹ while a *Daily Mail* article¹⁹⁰ on the Zircon hypersonic missile, and a *Sun* article¹⁹¹ on a Russian submarine encroachment into US coastal waters each credited the Sputnik and RT articles they had taken content from.¹⁹²

Conclusions

The coverage of NATO observed on RT and Sputnik is not surprising – it is hardly groundbreaking that Russia does not like NATO and its government-owned news outlets do not present it in a positive light. It does, however, invite more analysis of what English-language output on RT and Sputnik is for – a disinformation campaign to harm the public image of NATO in the West, or a news aggregator for domestic Russian audiences about the aggression and incompetence of a key enemy? It is certainly possible to have it both ways, and the coverage does follow closely traditional Russian state narratives about the aggression, expansion and illegitimacy of NATO and the justification for Russian military spending and offensive foreign policy in Europe.

This is exemplified in the consistent paradox that NATO is dangerous enough to warrant Russian military posturing and spending, and that it is simultaneously weak and incompetent and therefore no match for Russia's supremacy in military hardware. Another key theme – that NATO is riven by internal disagreements and that smaller members are bullied by larger ones, particularly the United States – indicates that Russian media consistently portray disfunction, distrust and malaise within the alliance. This prefigures the analysis in the following section, which shows that systemic dysfunction is the main lens through which most, if not all, coverage of the West by RT and Sputnik is portrayed.

RT and Sputnik's coverage of Russian weaponry is more intriguing. The volume of coverage and the level of detail is unusual for traditional news outlets, suggesting that the content is – in part – for specialised audiences internationally, or for domestic consumption as the digital equivalent of the Victory Day military parade: a procession of impressive video content, with statistical evidence portraying how fast, powerful and advanced Russian military technology and weapons systems are. As with the coverage of NATO, it is difficult to determine the extent to which RT and Sputnik coverage of the Russian military is intended to shore up domestic support for government policies and military spending, or whether it is designed to influence audiences and media coverage internationally. In the context of this analysis, however, it is significant to note that RT and Sputnik coverage of Russian military capabilities more or less take the form of 'fact files,' replete with weapon specifications, quantitative measurements of effectiveness and capability, accompanied by eye-catching footage and quotes from elite sources, and lacking any sense that the Russian state and military may have a vested interest in over-inflating claims about the effectiveness of technologies, many of which remain at the testing and development stage.

It is therefore surprising that such a large amount of UK media coverage of Russian prototype and cutting-edge weapons shows such credulity. The tendency by the (legacy) tabloid press, excepting the *Mirror*, to cover Russian claims about military capability in such volume, and to rely so often on quotes and footage from Russian sources, is troubling. It suggests, if absolute proof is difficult to establish here, that news values trump healthy scepticism in this area. Elite source quotes, dramatic footage of weapons testing and futuristic military hardware, empirical evidence (often supplied by arms manufacturers by the Russian government) about how advanced and destructive the weapons are – all seem to be effective factors in seeding otherwise-unverifiable information about the power and potency of the Russian military into popular media in the West.

186 'Russia plans to boost Baltic fleet with new fearsome missile ships and fighter jets to face Nato,' *thesun.co.uk*, 18th May 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3592859/russia-plans-to-boost-baltic-fleet-with-new-fearsome-missile-ships-and-fighter-jets-to-face-nato/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

187 'Russian mass troop mobilisation sparks fears of imminent INVASION of Europe,' *dailystar.co.uk*, 19th May 2017, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/615620/Russia-WW3-Putin-World-war-three-troops-deployed-EU-border-invasion> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

188 'Russia strengthens its Baltic forces with additional warships and fighter jets in bid to out-gun NATO,' *dailymail.co.uk*, 18th May 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4519118/Russia-strengthens-Baltic-forces-bid-gun-NATO.html> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

189 'Baltic Fleet Buildup: Russia's 'Natural Response' to NATO's Sabre-Rattling,' *sputniknews.com*, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705181053722853-baltic-fleet-response-nato/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

190 'Russia successfully tests 'unstoppable' 4,600mph hypersonic weapon that is faster than ANY global anti-missile system,' *dailymail.co.uk*, 31st May 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4557934/Russia-successfully-launches-unstoppable-cruise-missile.html> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

191 'Russia boasts its nuclear subs crept up to the US coast completely undetected to test American defences,' *thesun.co.uk*, 16th March 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4557934/Russia-successfully-launches-unstoppable-cruise-missile.html> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

192 'Race for Hypersonic Superiority: Russia Over Half-a-Decade Ahead of the US,' *sputniknews.com*, 29th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705291054102534-russia-us-china-hypersonic-race/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

'Russian nuclear subs quietly reached US coast & left undetected – Navy officer,' *RT.com*, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421471-russian-nuclear-subs-us-drills/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

The UK's national news media are, in general, strongly and enthusiastically supportive of the country's military and cheerleaders for British interests in the international arena. They have no interest in supporting or boosting Russia's military prestige and power. Foreign and defence correspondents in UK media have, however, been subject to the same cuts and staff reductions as in most other sectors of journalism.¹⁹³ International news is and always will be a central component of journalism and technological developments have made it easier than ever to access information about events across the world. Yet where narrow expertise in specific journalistic beats is increasingly phased out in favour of general reporting roles, and where the luxury of devoting significant time and resources to stories is replaced with the need to meet story quotas and to compete for audiences with the range of other information sources available today, it is more difficult for journalists to spend time assessing the accuracy and provenance of information.

Though there was only limited evidence of direct 'churnalism' in UK coverage of the Russian military – in the sense of wholly-lifted content from RT and Sputnik – that which was found is worrying. The *Express* article that consists of a near-total rewrite of an RT article is particularly problematic, and while it is difficult in the current age of information abundance to state with absolute certainty that the *Express* copied RT, the probability that the content was taken from elsewhere seems to be vanishingly small. How this practice – even where limited – has continued since the collapse in relations between the UK and Russia following the Skripal incident is outside the scope of this analysis, but content replication of that type, given the subject matter, seems to be an entirely avoidable problem if news organisations better insulate themselves from state-sponsored content published with a clear vested interest.

193 Taylor, P. M. (2005) 'The Media, Conflict and Peacekeeping,' in R. E. Utley (ed.) *Major Powers and Peacekeeping: Perspectives, priorities and the challenges of military intervention*, London: Routledge

6.

Division and dysfunction: How RT and Sputnik portray the West and construct news agendas

Key points:

Political dysfunction is a key overarching narrative in RT and Sputnik coverage of politics and society in Western countries. Of 2,641 articles about domestic issues in the UK, US, France, Germany, Sweden, Italy and – from Eastern Europe – Ukraine, 2,157 (81.7%) contained one or more frames relating to political dysfunction.

In coverage of UK domestic issues by RT and Sputnik, 90% of 956 articles contained one or more political dysfunction frames. The most common frames associated with the UK (excluding those related to the terror attacks that occurred during the 2017 sample) were: ‘government failures’ (166 articles); ‘political party failures’ (157 articles) and ‘social conflict’ (including immigration and religious tension), which featured in 141 articles.

Coverage of the US on RT and Sputnik focused most heavily on ‘violence/crime’ (243 articles), ‘institutional conflict’ (224 articles) and ‘government failures’ (195 articles)

Outside anglophone countries, RT and Sputnik published English-language content that accentuated social conflict, particularly immigration and crime in the case of Germany, immigration and cultural tensions in Sweden, Political failures by governments, institutions and parties in Italy and France, and undemocratic practices and government failure in Ukraine.

The news agendas of RT and Sputnik were more likely to focus on immigration and Islam than UK news outlets, and considerably more likely to cover terrorism (13.8% of combined total coverage, compared with 7.1% of UK news articles published in the same period). Approximately 13% of articles on immigration published by RT and Sputnik were identifiably from major wire agencies, while the reliance of both news outlets on local German and Swedish news sources for articles on immigration in those countries indicates that RT and Sputnik use content harvested from other news outlets to build their own narratives about aspects of political dysfunction in Western democracies.

Using text-matching software to compare datasets of Russian and UK articles, 21 articles in UK national media outlets were found in which a large portion of content from RT (16 articles) or Sputnik (5 articles) was detected. All 21 articles were published on the sites of UK tabloid newspapers. While some of the replicated articles were of strange or sensational stories such as UFO sightings and apocalyptic prophecies, more than half were about political or military issues, including Russian-friendly narratives on the Russian military and the European Union.

The text-matching analysis also found 32 instances of articles first published in UK media being replicated by RT and Sputnik. 22 of these articles were about political issues in the UK and EU, many of which contained subject matter that sustain the RT and Sputnik narratives of political dysfunction in the West, including articles about immigration, child sex abuse and terrorism. The *Guardian* (10 articles) was the most commonly replicated source by the Russian outlets.

This section addresses the two central themes of the project. First, it contains a comprehensive analysis of how Russian international news media portray Western democracies, in particular their political, institutional and social cohesion. It explores how themes of dysfunction, conflict and institutional failure pervade the news agendas of RT and Sputnik in their coverage of domestic politics in the United States and Europe. A supplementary analysis explores how Russian state-linked news outlets construct their news agendas when reporting on divisive issues in Western countries.

Second, it investigates whether Russian news content published in English on RT and Sputnik is subsequently replicated in UK news media, testing whether processes of ‘churnalism’ can be detected between Russian news outlets and their UK counterparts. This analysis uses text-matching software to identify instances where large proportions of articles in Russian outlets are subsequently reproduced within article texts of UK news outlets. It also detects and maps instances of the process in reverse – where RT and Sputnik appropriate content from UK media to build their own news agendas.

Political dysfunction as a metanarrative: how RT and Sputnik portray western politics

Identifying political dysfunction

Previous studies have identified consistent negativity in Russian domestic media when reporting on Western countries. A 2018 study of Russian television by researchers at the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre identified a series of recurring narratives in how European countries were portrayed. They categorised these as “‘Horrors of life’ in Europe’, ‘Decaying Europe’, ‘Protests in Europe’, ‘Terrorism’, ‘Refugee Crisis’, and ‘Sanctions.’¹⁹⁴ The narratives are united by notions of decline, collapse, chaos, violence and loss of control. The researchers also found an abnormally large amount of international news in television bulletins. A 2016 study by Olga Smirnova included RT in an analysis of how Russian television channels framed the issue of immigration in Europe, finding three prevalent frames: ‘Threat’, ‘Crisis’, and ‘Weakness’.¹⁹⁵

This study set out to understand whether a similar consistency of narratives could be detected in the online content that Russian state-linked news outlets published, in English, about politics in Western democracies. Having collected over 11,000 articles on RT and Sputnik, those that mentioned domestic events in selected European countries and the United States were tagged, checked and copied into separate datasets for analysis. Given increased tensions between Russia and the West since 2014, and with substantial evidence gathered across the world about malign communications practices and the use of sophisticated information warfare and psychological operations techniques by the Russian government, military and intelligence services,¹⁹⁶ researchers conducted a preliminary investigation of collected RT and Sputnik content to determine whether consistent negative framing of Russia’s opponents was present.

The initial analysis found that the overwhelming majority of coverage about Western countries was to some degree negative, which is also in line with the other analyses included in this report. As the analysis of coverage of the Skripal poisoning showed, RT and Sputnik reporting on the UK and its allies in the aftermath incident was extremely negative, focusing, among other things, on interpretations of malign intent, dishonesty and hypocritical motives by Western actors. The previous section shows how RT and Sputnik coverage of NATO portrayed the alliance as weak, incapable, aggressive and – again – hypocritical, also focusing on division and discord between members.

These caricatures of Western states’ behaviour and their relations with each other are not subtle, and the consistency with which they are portrayed provides further evidence of both clear editorial lines in Russia’s main international news outlets, and of their use as a means of spreading information about the Western world that is extremely negative in tone.

The preliminary investigation of RT and Sputnik coverage of domestic events and politics in Western democracies indicated a similar approach. Using scripts to isolate articles about immigration and Islam in European countries, researchers found that many articles focused on social division, crime, poor integration and threats to local cultures. Anti-immigration politicians were frequently featured.

194 Popovych, N., O. Makukhin, L. Tsybulska and R. Kavatsiuk (2018) ‘Image of Europe on Russian TV’, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 2018, <http://ucmc.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Europe-image-in-Russian-TV-1.pdf> (Accessed 10th May 2018)

195 Smirnova, O. (2016) ‘Russian TV: Contesting European Values’, Reuters Institute Fellow’s Paper 2016, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/russian-tv-contesting-european-values> (Accessed 11th May 2018)

196 See the ‘Background and Context’ section at the end of this report

Public life was often presented as conflict-riven (not uncommon in media coverage), but also marked by failure – of policies, of institutions (public and private) – and of basic systemic malaise (corruption, violent crime, and the erosion of the principles of democratic politics).

In order to measure the extent to which this portrayal pervaded Russian coverage of Western societies, researchers derived a series of frames from themes observed in RT and Sputnik articles, which were then grouped into three categories: Conflict, Failure, and Alienation. A content analysis was then conducted to record how prevalent these frames are in Russian English-language news coverage, and how the overarching narrative of political dysfunction underpins how RT and Sputnik present the West.

Methodology

The list of countries selected for the analysis were: from the English-speaking world, the UK and US; from Western Europe, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden; and from Eastern Europe, Ukraine. This group contained anglophone countries, a range of Western European countries, and Ukraine, chosen because of its unique position as a target (and subject) of Russian propaganda, as well as political and military pressure.¹⁹⁷

Scripts were created to tag articles on the basis of keywords (eg ‘Sweden’, ‘Swedish’). Researchers then manually checked and fixed any inaccurate tagging and removed articles that were not about domestic politics or events in one of the selected countries. Therefore, all articles about international relations, including articles about supranational bodies such as the EU, were not included in the analysis.¹⁹⁸ Table 1 shows how many articles about the selected countries were identified.

Country	2017	2018	Total
UK	518	434	952
USA	571	461	1,032
France	107	103	210
Germany	114	88	202
Sweden	36	40	76
Italy	18	50	68
Ukraine	70	31	101
Total	1,434	1,207	2,641

Table 6.1: RT and Sputnik Articles on Domestic Politics of Selected Countries

Once all eligible articles had been identified, a coding frame was created (see Appendix 2). This frame was refined over the course of three pilot analyses, which were used to reduce the number of frames and ensure consistency in coding. A codebook was also created for coders to use while analysing articles. The final list of frames and their descriptions is included in Table 6.2:

Conflict frames	Description
Conflict, Partisan ¹⁹⁹	Conflict or disagreement between rival political parties or groups within the context of policy-making in formal political institutions (Only includes formal political parties or blocs)
Conflict, Institutional	Conflict or disagreement between formal political institutions, eg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between branches of government (executive, legislative, judiciary) • Between unions/NGOs and government • Between competing NGOs / Representative groups • Between national and sub-national government
Conflict, Social	Conflict or disagreement between social groups – religious, ethnic, racial, or economic (includes mention of insurgent anti-system groups)
Failure frames	Description
Failure, Government	Descriptions of government failure (eg failure to deliver policies, incompetence, intra-governmental divisions). Includes political corruption or scandals.
Failure, Other Parties	Descriptions of failure, incompetence, corruption or scandals involving other political parties or entities
Failure, Institutions	Descriptions of administrative failure by public bodies or significant private entities, eg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police • Security services • Health services • Education services • Banks
Failure, Military	Descriptions of failure within the armed services of an eligible country. Includes failure abroad, or administrative failure at home (including legal cases brought against armed services)
Alienation frames	Description
Corruption	Any explicit mention of economic or political corruption in an eligible country (may be double-counted with political corruption in ‘Failure’ frames)
Inequality	Any mention of economic inequality in an eligible country
Undemocratic	Any mention of undemocratic or unfair practices; hypocrisy by democratic states (includes freedom of speech)
Crime/Violence	Any mention of political violence (including terrorism) or instances of violent or sexual crime

Table 6.2: ‘Political Dysfunction’ frames

¹⁹⁷ See, for example: Sazonov, V. et al. (2016) Russian Information Campaign Against The Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: Combined Analysis (eds.), https://www.ksk.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Report_infoops_08.02.2017.pdf. (Accessed 14th July 2018)

¹⁹⁸ A separate study on RT and Sputnik coverage of how Western democracies interact would be extremely valuable but was unfortunately beyond the scope of this report. Some indication of the nature of this coverage is uncovered in the analysis of NATO in the previous section, however.

¹⁹⁹ Partisan conflict is a common theme in political journalism across the world; here it is included alongside other areas of political, public and social conflict to measure the extent to which conflict in public life is an inherent narrative in Russian media coverage of Europe and the US.

Inter-coder reliability testing was conducted on a subset of articles (see Appendix 2) to confirm that the presence of frames was recorded with acceptable reliability.

Coders then analysed all articles in the dataset (2,641 in total), and for each one recorded whether the frames were present in the text.

Country	2017	2018	Total
UK	466	390	856
USA	420	388	808
France	72	87	159
Germany	77	67	144
Sweden	30	37	67
Italy	12	40	52
Ukraine	45	26	71
Total	1,122	1,035	2,157

Table 6.4: RT and Sputnik articles about selected countries containing one or more frames

Table 6.4 demonstrates the regularity in which frames were present in RT and Sputnik coverage of the selected countries. Overall, 2,157 out of 2,641 articles (81.7%) contained one or more of these frames. Coverage of Sweden (88.2% of articles) and the UK (90.0%) was most likely to include one or more of the frames that denote some degree of political dysfunction.

Political dysfunction frames in coverage of the UK and US

United Kingdom

Table 6.5 shows the prevalence of political dysfunction in RT and Sputnik coverage of the UK.²⁰⁰ Across 952 articles about UK domestic issues across the eight sampled weeks, 1,361 instances of frames were found. Most common were issues of ‘social conflict’ (conflict or disagreement between ethnic, religious, racial or social groups, including tensions related to immigration), which appeared in 140 articles, descriptions of government failure (such as policy failure, incompetence, intra-governmental divisions, scandals, etc), which were detected in 166 articles, failure by and within political parties and entities outside government (157 articles) and assertions of ‘undemocratic’ practices (restriction of rights, including freedom of speech, and other assertions of unfair or undemocratic practices), which appeared in 122 articles.

Group	Frame	Articles
Conflict	Partisan	57
	Institutional	59
	Social	140
Failure	Government	166
	Parties	157
	Institutions	77
	Military	8
Alienation	Corruption	7
	Inequality	31
	Undemocratic	122
	Crime/Violence	539
Total		1,361
None		96

Table 6.5: Political Dysfunction frames in RT and Sputnik coverage of the UK

Given unique events in both the 2017 sample (which saw terror attacks in Manchester and at London Bridge) and the Skripal poisoning in March 2018, the prevalence of frames containing reference to violence and violent crime are unusually high. Not including reports on the Manchester and London Bridge terror attacks or the Skripal poisoning, the ‘Crime/Violence’ frame was detected in 72 articles across all eight weeks.

200 Full tables for coverage in 2017 and 2018 for each of the countries included in the analysis are located in Appendix 4.

Crime articles focused on cybercrimes such as the WannaCry ransomware attack on the NHS in May 2017, and on child sex abuse in 2017²⁰¹ and 2018,²⁰² including references to online child sex crime statistics.²⁰³ Drug use,²⁰⁴ including drug-related crimes,²⁰⁵ and knife crime in London were also featured.²⁰⁶

Articles explicitly alleging corruption were rare, and a relatively small number of articles referenced inequality in the UK and its effects,²⁰⁷ though several of these were presented in the context of party policy proposals during the 2017 election campaign.²⁰⁸ Many more articles contained the 'Undemocratic' frame, including those in which the UK is accused of hypocrisy for dealing with oppressive regimes,²⁰⁹ infringements on civil liberties²¹⁰ and restrictions on free speech.²¹¹

The most common frame relating to conflict within UK politics and society was 'Social conflict,' recorded in 140 articles in total. This frame covers instances of conflict or disagreement between social groups, including religious and ethnic groups, race relations, socio-economic divisions, and conflict arising from immigration and the rise of insurgent anti-establishment political groups. A wide range of areas of social conflict were covered, including:

- Immigration and ethnic tension²¹²
- Terror and religious divisions²¹³
- Extremist political groups²¹⁴
- Anti-Semitism²¹⁵
- Race relations²¹⁶
- Misogyny and hate crime²¹⁷

- 201 'Child sex offenders still at large in Rochdale, says former detective,' RT.com, 16th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388570-child-sex-abuse-rochdale/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 202 'Police Chief Calls Pedophile Ring Claims in Britain 'Sensationalized',' sputniknews.com, 15th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803151062547224-british-pedophile-ring-police/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 203 'Child Cyber Sex Crimes Have Doubled in England and Wales Over Last Year,' sputniknews.com, 1st June 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706011054213946-uk-children-cyber-sex-crimes/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 204 '13 percent of people have drugs on their fingertips – study,' RT.com, 24th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422193-cocaine-heroin-fingertips-study/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 205 'Son severs penis, attacks mother in alleged skunk-induced mental break,' RT.com, 2nd June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/390669-skunk-son-severs-penis/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 206 'Wave of Violence on London's Streets Continues as Two More Men Stabbed to Death,' sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803201062727533-london-murder-investigations-knives/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 207 'UK workers face 'living standards crisis' as real wages fall & prices rise,' RT.com, 17th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388718-inflation-wages-economy-employment/> (Accessed 24th September 2018);
'A sign of the times? Poor children officially fatter than rich kids, study proves,' RT.com, 21st March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421886-fat-rich-poor-children/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 208 For example: 'Ultra-left or blueprint for growth? Labour manifesto gets mixed reviews,' RT.com, 16th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388581-labour-manifesto-reaction-corbyn/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 209 'Saudi Arabia 'Just Defending Itself' by Bombing Yemen - Michael Fallon,' sputniknews.com, 11th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201705111053500371-uk-fallon-saudi-yemen/> (Accessed 24th September 2017)
'Queen told to confront Bahrain's King Hamad on human rights abuses or sever ties completely,' RT.com, 12th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388113-queen-bahrain-abuse-torture/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 210 'Rights Groups Demand Scrapping of Proposed UK Espionage Act,' sputniknews.com, 12th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/20170512105355411-civil-rights-espionage-surveillance/> (Accessed 24th September 2018);
'Theresa May wants sweeping new powers to control the internet,' RT.com, 19th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388987-theresa-may-surveillance-internet/> (Accessed 24th September 2018);
'UN slams Britain's 'Big Brother' anti-terrorism strategy,' RT.com, 30th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/390144-surveillance-terrorism-prevent-un/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 211 'The Slow Death of Free Speech in the UK,' sputniknews.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803221062808818-uk-scotland-mark-meehan-freedom-of-speech/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 212 'Most Britons feel ethnic minorities are threat to 'Britishness,' study reveals,' RT.com, 25th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/389687-immigrants-threat-british-culture/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 213 'Terror in the Dis-United Kingdom,' sputniknews.com, 23rd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803231062845143-terror-in-dis-united-kingdom/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 214 'Alt-right' Generation Identity to hit UK streets after anti-fascists block 'free speech talk',' RT.com, 7th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/420698-london-far-right-speech/> (Accessed 24th September 2018);
'Are FLA heirs to 'Mosley's Blackshirts'? New far-right documentary examines their rise (VIDEO),' RT.com, 23rd March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/422175-fla-far-right-extremism/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 215 'Corbyn Branded 'Hostile' by Jewish Leaders as Anti-Semitism Scandal Deepens,' sputniknews.com, 26th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803261062905600-corbyn-anti-semitism-scandal/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 216 'Black actors take the lead: Activists reimagine film posters to highlight lack of racial diversity,' RT.com, 5th March 2018 (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 217 'Catcalling women should be a hate crime, says Labour MP,' RT.com, 6th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/420588-catcalling-women-hate-crime/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)

Coverage of the government and political parties focused less on partisan conflict and more on failures. 166 articles contained references to governmental failings, and 157 featured failures by political parties, ranging from electoral mistakes (during the 2017 general election campaign), internal disputes or individual gaffes. Examples of government failures included: culpability for the ransomware attack on the NHS;²¹⁸ failures in handling Brexit;²¹⁹ failure to avert terrorism;²²⁰ and – in the 2018 sample – many articles criticising or ridiculing the government’s actions in response to the Skripal poisoning.²²¹ ‘Party Failure’ frames during the 2017 sample included criticism of party manifesto pledges²²² and outlining campaigning mistakes.²²³

Instances of party failures in the 2018 sample included disputes within the Labour Party over internal transgender policy²²⁴ and party conflict over the response to the Skripal incident,²²⁵ as well as the aftermath of a bullying scandal within the Conservative Party.²²⁶

RT and Sputnik articles containing the ‘Institutional Failure’ frame tended to focus on issues of law and order and criticism of the police and intelligence services.

Articles outlined the inability of the police to deal with routine tasks²²⁷ while some focused on the ‘Spycops’ inquiry into undercover police infiltration of activist groups,²²⁸ and covered dysfunction in the prisons system in England and Wales.²²⁹ After the terrorist attacks in Manchester and at London Bridge, multiple articles apportioned blame to failings by the intelligence services²³⁰ and police.²³¹

United States

Coverage of domestic issues in the United States contained some similarities with that of the UK (Table 6.6). ‘Social Conflict’ and ‘Government Failure’ were common frames, as with coverage of the UK. However, there was more of a focus on institutional conflict and failure, and less focus on partisan conflict than might have been expected, given the contemporary political context in the US. Coverage of violent crime was high, with that frame featuring in 245 articles, while allegations of undemocratic practices were also featured in 145 articles.

The results showed that more articles on RT and Sputnik focused on procedural or institutional conflict within American politics than on outright partisan conflict, perhaps reflecting the fact that the coding frame was not designed to record latent or implied partisan disagreement.²³²

- 218 ‘NHS braces for more ransomware hack attacks... but where’s Britain’s health secretary?’, RT.com, 15th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388398-nhs-cyber-attack-hunt/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 219 ‘Britain needs 200,000 migrants per year to save itself from Brexit ‘catastrophe’’, RT.com, 19th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388965-immigration-tory-manifesto-labour/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 220 ‘Theresa May’s cuts to blame for need to deploy army after Manchester attack – police union chief’, RT.com, 25th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/389732-police-federation-slams-may/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 221 ‘Skripal’s Poisoning is Theresa May’s Chance to Make Her Government Great Again’, sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201803161062614239-skripal-poisoning-theresa-may-uk-russia-threat/> (Accessed 24th September 2018); ‘May’s Russia sanctions slammed on social media while MPs laud PM’s strength’, RT.com, 14th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421293-social-twitter-react-russia/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 222 ‘Tory manifesto vows to ‘defeat extremism’... but lacks legal definition’, RT.com, 18th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388852-tory-manifesto-extremism-definition/> (Accessed 24th March 2018)
- 223 ‘Leaked UK Labour Election Manifesto Suggests Refusal to Set Migration Targets’, sputniknews.com, 11th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/20170511053488554-labour-uk-manifesto/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 224 ‘Labour’s ‘TERF’ war: Mass walkout threats over transgender acceptance’, RT.com, 7th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/420739-transgender-labour-feminist-walkout/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 225 ‘Labour Leader Under Fire From Party MPs for Stance on Skripal Poisoning’, sputniknews.com, 21st March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803211062771584-skripal-poisoning-row-labour-conservative/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 226 ‘Family of dead Tory activist launches legal action over bullying claims’, RT.com, 26th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/422364-elliott-johnson-tory-parents-lawsuit/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 227 ‘Major Concern: UK Police Forces Taking Days to Respond to Emergency Calls’, sputniknews.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803221062799766-uk-police-overstretched-austerity/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 228 ‘Mass walkout of Spycops inquiry - RT’s Bill Dod leads debate with activist & retired top cop (VIDEO)’, RT.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/422068-spycop-police-inquiry-undercover/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 229 ‘Tory plans to tackle prison crisis slammed as inmates run riot’, RT.com, 6th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/420583-prison-videos-jobs-cuts/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 230 ‘MI5 failed to stop Manchester bomber despite ‘warnings from friends’ – report’, RT.com, 25th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/389686-mi5-surveillance-manchester-terror/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 231 ‘Police Defend Inaction After London Attacker Seen In Jihadist Documentary’, sputniknews.com, 6th June 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706061054359107-london-attacker-tv-documentary/> (Accessed 24th September 2018)
- 232 Future applications of the coding frame used in this study may benefit from measuring partisan conflict on the basis of personalised attacks as well as between institutions and on issues of policy.

Political coverage was, however, defined by conflict between the various branches of government.

Group	Frame	Articles
Conflict	Partisan	60
	Institutional	224
	Social	137
Failure	Government	195
	Parties	65
	Institutions	185
	Military	76
Alienation	Corruption	23
	Inequality	33
	Undemocratic	145
	Crime/Violence	245
Total		1,388
None		224

Table 6.6: Political Dysfunction frames in RT and Sputnik coverage of the US

For example, the 'Institutional Conflict' frame, which was recorded in 224 articles overall, was dominated by coverage of conflicts between the President and other branches of government and public bodies, including 84 articles concerning the decision of the President to fire the Director of the FBI in May 2017.²³³

Coverage of the Special Counsel investigation into foreign governmental interference in the 2016 presidential election, headed by Robert Mueller, was also prominent,²³⁴ including Sputnik publishing an interview with a Russian analyst who suggested that the investigations into President Trump amounted to a coup.²³⁵

Governmental and other institutions were often described in terms of failures – in implementing policy, in its duty to citizens, or in its dysfunctional workings. Though some articles contained criticism of specific government policies,²³⁶ many more focused on the inability of the government to function effectively due to the ongoing investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 elections²³⁷ or on scandals linked to the President²³⁸ and other government officials.²³⁹

Examples of failure in other institutions focused on issues like police heavy-handedness²⁴⁰ and misconduct,²⁴¹ public health failures, including a measles outbreak,²⁴² public loss of support in the intelligence services,²⁴³ and allegations of torture by the newly-appointed CIA Director.²⁴⁴ 76 articles mentioned failures in the US military, including criminality by army personnel,²⁴⁵ criticism of military budgets,²⁴⁶ and US naval defences being outwitted by Russian submarines.²⁴⁷

- 233 'Trump's Team Gets Crossed Wires Explaining FBI Director's Dismissal,' sputniknews.com, 13th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201705131053581161-united-states-trump-comey-white-house/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 234 'Everything on the table': Senate intel panel issues 2 more subpoenas to Flynn,' RT.com, 24th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/389511-intel-committee-flynn-subpoenas/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 235 'America's Own Arab Spring? The Dire Threats of Getting Rid of Donald,' sputniknews.com, 22nd May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201705221053860218-trump-russia-ties-argumentation/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 236 'Trump's Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Proposal 'Cruel' – Pelosi,' sputniknews.com, 23rd May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201705231053911768-pelosi-trump-budget/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 237 'Trump Under Siege: US Media Prevents Russian Rapprochement With Constant Attacks,' sputniknews.com, 21st May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/2017052110538598-trump-us-media-attacks-russia/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 238 'Stormy Daniels Willing to Pay Back \$130K to 'Speak Openly' on Trump Affair,' sputniknews.com, 12th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803121062454351-stormy-daniels-willing-to-return-hush-money/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 239 'Mnuchin spent \$1mn of govt money using USAF as airline – watchdog,' RT.com, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/421455-mnuchin-million-dollars-military-flights/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 240 'Pennsylvania Cop Arrests Woman Who Filmed Him Kicking Teens Out of Theater,' sputniknews.com, 10th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/viral/201803101062385919-pennsylvania-cop-arrests-woman-who-filmed-him-removing-teens-from-theater/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 241 'California police abuse state databases with impunity – report,' RT.com, 15th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388476-california-police-database-abuse/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 242 'Largest in 30 years' measles outbreak prompts Minnesota officials to request \$5mn,' RT.com, 12th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388052-minnesota-measles-outbreak-somalia/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 243 'Majority of Americans fear surveillance & 'deep state' power – poll,' RT.com, 20th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/421756-americans-fear-surveillance-deep-state/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 244 'Hempel's Nomination as Director 'Suggests CIA's Return to Torture' - Analyst,' sputniknews.com, 15th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803151062572842-hempel-nomination-cia-return-to-torture/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 245 'US Soldier Accused of Stealing Humvees from South Korean Base,' sputniknews.com, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201705181053757899-south-korea-soldier-humvee-theft/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 246 'US Defense Budget is 'Proposed and Pursued in the Wrong Way',' sputniknews.com, 23rd May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705231053900933-us-defense-budget/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)
- 247 'Russian Attack Submarine Cruises Past US Mainland 'Undetected',' sputniknews.com, 17th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803171062620726-russian-attack-submarine-mainland-undetected/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

Allegations of undemocratic practices in the US centred on the surveillance of citizens, including the FBI spying on US citizens,²⁴⁸ government access to mobile phone records²⁴⁹ and fears of tech platform access to personal data (including one RT article republished word for word on the Infowars conspiracy site).²⁵⁰

137 articles contained the ‘Social Conflict’ frame. In RT and Sputnik coverage of the US this took many forms, from coverage of divisions over race relations, immigration, anti-Semitism and the rise of far-right groups, tensions between the Federal government and native Americans, abortion and women’s rights among others.

A list of examples from one week of the analysis gives an indication of the amount of divisive issues included in the news agendas of RT and Sputnik:

- ‘NJ governor vetoes child marriage ban, citing ‘culture & traditions’,’ (RT, 11th May 2017)²⁵¹
- ‘Heavy police presence as 2nd Confederate monument removed in New Orleans,’ (RT, 11th May 2017)²⁵²
- ‘Abortions for ‘free travel’? Alaska House censures rep over “glad to be pregnant” comments,’ (RT, 11th May 2017)²⁵³
- ‘US Congressman Calls on Native Peoples to “Adapt” Amid Arctic Offshore Drilling,’ (Sputnik, 12th May 2017)²⁵⁴

- ‘Oklahoma lawmaker wants to turn non-English-speaking kids over to immigration officials to save cash,’ (RT, 12th May 2017)²⁵⁵
- ‘Torch-Wielding Mob Led by White Nationalist Protests Confederate Statue Removal,’ (Sputnik, 15th May 2017)²⁵⁶
- ‘Battle Looms as Trump Allies Look to “Privatize” Native American Reservations,’ (Sputnik, 15th May 2017)²⁵⁷
- ‘America’s Civil War II,’ (Sputnik, 16th May 2017)²⁵⁸
- ‘FIBA Hijab ruling: Shot in the arm for “sexual apartheid”,’ (RT, 16th May 2017)²⁵⁹

Coverage of violent crime was also widespread. 245 articles in total contained this frame, much of it based on stories taken from local newspapers and other news sites in the US. Stories of this kind included coverage violence in schools,²⁶⁰ gun crime in schools,²⁶¹ infanticide,²⁶² accidental shootings by children²⁶³ and other instances of sensational individual crimes, as well as more general reports on crime statistics and systemic violence in America.²⁶⁴

248 ‘FBI Spying Machine: Who Allowed US ‘Deep State’ to Overstep Its Bounds,’ sputniknews.com, 1st June 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201706011054217629-fbi-spying-violation-privacy/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

249 ‘Do police need a warrant to access cell phone history? Supreme Court to decide,’ RT.com, 5th June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/391003-cell-phone-location-data-court/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

250 ‘Antitrust: Majority of Americans don’t trust Facebook to protect their data – poll,’ RT.com, 26th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/422301-facebook-trust-reuters-poll/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

251 ‘NJ governor vetoes child marriage ban, citing ‘culture & traditions’,’ RT.com, 11th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388038-christie-veto-jersey-child-marriage/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

252 ‘Heavy police presence as 2nd Confederate monument removed in New Orleans,’ RT.com, 11th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388037-2nd-confederate-monument-removed-nola/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

253 ‘Abortions for ‘free travel’? Alaska House censures rep over ‘glad to be pregnant’ comments,’ RT.com, 11th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/387997-alaska-house-lawmaker-abortion/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

254 ‘US Congressman Calls on Native Peoples to ‘Adapt’ Amid Arctic Offshore Drilling,’ sputniknews.com, 12th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/environment/201705121053546612-arctic-indigenous-peoples-offshore-drilling/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

255 ‘Oklahoma lawmaker wants to turn non-English-speaking kids over to immigration officials to save cash,’ RT.com, 12th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388140-oklahoma-children-english-immigration/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

256 ‘Torch-Wielding Mob Led by White Nationalist Protests Confederate Statue Removal,’ sputniknews.com, 15th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201705151053612601-torch-bearing-protest-confederate/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

257 ‘Battle Looms as Trump Allies Look to ‘Privatize’ Native American Reservations,’ sputniknews.com, 15th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201705151053636466-trump-native-american-privatization/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

258 ‘America’s Civil War II,’ sputniknews.com, 16th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201705161053671216-america-civil-war/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

259 ‘FIBA Hijab ruling: Shot in the arm for ‘sexual apartheid’,’ RT.com, 16th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/388566-fiba-hijab-sport-iran/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

260 ‘8yo ‘knocked unconscious & beaten’ at Cincinnati school days before suicide – footage,’ RT.com, 12th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/388112-child-bullied-cincinnati-suicide/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

261 ‘Two injured in Maryland high school shooting, gunman dead,’ RT.com, 20th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/421811-school-shooting-maryland-police/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

262 ‘Utter depravity: Child murderer sentenced to 70yrs in prison for throwing infant son off bridge,’ RT.com, 1st June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/390515-connecticut-son-bridge-murder/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

263 ‘9yo shoots sister in head in argument over video game,’ RT.com, 19th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/421735-9yo-shoots-sister-monroe-county/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

264 ‘Technology, Violence, Vulnerability: Rising phenomenon young people carrying out mass violence in US,’ RT.com, 24th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/422240-us-violence-bombing-shooting/> (Accessed 25th September 2018)

Political dysfunction frames in coverage of Europe

Of comparable significance to how Russian media represent countries in the anglosphere to themselves is how they portray other countries, particularly neighbours and political allies. Though coverage of other sampled countries in English-language output was considerably less common (ranging from 210 articles about French domestic issues to 68 articles about Italy), it was still instructive in demonstrating how RT and Sputnik focused on similar areas of dysfunction in each sampled country. Coverage of Germany and Sweden was notable in the heavy focus on Social conflict, usually related to immigration, though German coverage focused more on immigrant crime, while Swedish coverage focused more on conflict due to differences in culture. Coverage of Italy also focused on immigration, but more through the lens of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, while coverage of France was heavily focused on terrorism (understandable given the attacks that occurred during the analysis), but also divisions between Muslims and other social groups. Ukraine, in conflict with Russia and subjected to active destabilisation measures was more often covered through the frames of governmental failure and undemocratic practices.

Germany

In total, RT and Sputnik published 202 articles in English about German domestic affairs over the eight sampled weeks in 2017 and 2018. 144 of these articles (71%) contained one or more political dysfunction frames. Table 6.7 shows the breakdown of frames as found in German coverage.

Group	Frame	Articles
Conflict	Partisan	3
	Institutional	19
	Social	84
Failure	Government	37
	Parties	23
	Institutions	11
	Military	21
Alienation	Corruption	1
	Inequality	1
	Undemocratic	12
	Crime/Violence	55
Total		267
None		59

Table 6.7: Political Dysfunction frames in RT and Sputnik coverage of Germany

By far the most common frame denoting political dysfunction in Germany was ‘Social Conflict’, which appeared in 84 articles (42% of all articles mentioning Germany; 58% of those containing any dysfunction frames). Social conflict in coverage of German politics and society was most often related to immigration and the integration of refugees who, as shown below, were frequently covered as perpetrators of violent and sexual crimes. Systemic problems caused by immigration were often covered in political stories, such as ministerial calls for the surveillance of children linked to potential Islamic terrorists, which RT reported alongside a history of terrorist attacks in Germany.²⁶⁵

Other stories covered government failures in handling asylum applications,²⁶⁶ and the prevalence of far-right extremism in the Germany military²⁶⁷ and in an ‘established Nazi underground’.²⁶⁸

265 ‘Monitor children too’: German minister urges lower age limit for surveillance,’ RT.com, 3rd June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/390736-children-islamists-terrorism-germany/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

266 ‘Germany to review up to 100,000 asylum applications after soldier poses as refugee – minister,’ RT.com, 1st June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/390372-germany-asylum-application-check/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

267 ‘Bundeswehr Reveals 2,500 Cases of Far-Right Extremism Since 2011,’ sputniknews.com, 11th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/20170511053513432-german-army-far-right/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

268 ‘450+ far-right extremists at large in Germany, ‘established Nazi underground’ feared,’ RT.com, 5th June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/391015-nazi-extremists-germany-fugitive/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

Coverage of refugees and migrants in German news focused heavily on violent and sexual crimes. Trials involving refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq were regularly featured and often subject to multiple articles from both RT and Sputnik, for example:

- ‘Refugee in Germany blinds & mutilates friend in ‘bizarre’ attack over reported €50 debt,’ (RT, 15th May 2017)²⁶⁹
- ‘Iraqi refugee sentenced to 11 years for raping Chinese students in Germany,’ (RT, 16th May 2017)²⁷⁰
- ‘Teenage Syrian Refugee Convicted of Fire Attack on Homeless Man in Berlin,’ (Sputnik, 18th May 2018)²⁷¹
- ‘Afghan refugee who killed 5yo Russian in Germany spent years in prison, wore ankle monitor,’ (RT, 6th June 2017)²⁷²
- ‘Syrian Refugee Threatens Women Who ‘Irritate’ Husbands After Killing Own Wife,’ (Sputnik, 7th March 2018)²⁷³
- ‘Iraqi teen to face trial over planned ‘fireworks’ bomb attack in Germany or UK,’ (RT, 8th March 2018)²⁷⁴
- ‘Afghan Refugee Locked Up for Life After Brutally Raping, Murdering German Girl,’ (Sputnik, 22nd March 2018)²⁷⁵

Generally, coverage of Germany by RT and Sputnik was consistent in its tendency to focus on issues of social conflict related to immigration and asylum, violent crime – particularly those crimes committed by refugees – and to the rise of far-right extremism.

France

210 articles about France’s domestic political and social issues were published by RT and Sputnik in the sample period. Political dysfunction frames were recorded in 159 of these, marking 76% of the total.

The sample periods covered two terrorist attacks in France: a hammer attack on police at Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris on 6th June 2017; and a series of attacks by a single individual in Carcassonne and Trèbes on 23rd March 2018. RT and Sputnik covered these attacks and their aftermaths extensively, contributing to the total of 72 articles containing the ‘Crime/Violence’ frame (Table 6.8).

Group	Frame	Articles
Conflict	Partisan	6
	Institutional	19
	Social	39
Failure	Government	31
	Parties	43
	Institutions	9
	Military	0
Alienation	Corruption	17
	Inequality	3
	Undemocratic	19
	Crime/Violence	72
Total		258
None		54

Table 6.8: Political Dysfunction frames in RT and Sputnik coverage of France

As well as reporting on the attacks themselves, in the case of the Trèbes attack, RT and sputnik also published ‘feature’ articles on the extent of terrorism in France to English audiences, including a list of the deadliest Islamic terrorism attacks,²⁷⁶ and a separate historical account of Islamic terror in France.²⁷⁷ The terror attacks were also presented as partially due to government failings, with Sputnik soliciting critical comments from an interview source that they themselves described as an ‘anti-Islamist NGO activist’.²⁷⁸

269 ‘Refugee in Germany blinds & mutilates friend in ‘bizarre’ attack over reported €50 debt,’ RT.com, 15th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/388474-refugee-germany-mutilate-friend/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

270 ‘Iraqi refugee sentenced to 11 years for raping Chinese students in Germany,’ RT.com, 16th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/388599-germany-refugee-rape-sentenced/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

271 ‘Teenage Syrian Refugee Convicted of Fire Attack on Homeless Man in Berlin,’ sputniknews.com, 18th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705181053718650-syrian-refugee-convicted-fire-attack/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

272 ‘Afghan refugee who killed 5yo Russian in Germany spent years in prison, wore ankle monitor,’ RT.com, 6th June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/391148-refugee-boy-stabbing-criminal-record/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

273 ‘Syrian Refugee Threatens Women Who ‘Irritate’ Husbands After Killing Own Wife,’ sputniknews.com, 7th March 2018, https://sputniknews.com/art_living/201803071062301517-germany-syrian-murder/ (Accessed 20th September 2018)

274 ‘Iraqi teen to face trial over planned ‘fireworks’ bomb attack in Germany or UK,’ RT.com, 8th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420823-germany-isis-bomb-plot-iraqi/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

275 ‘Afghan Refugee Locked Up for Life After Brutally Raping, Murdering German Girl,’ sputniknews.com, 22nd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803221062788562-afghan-refugee-germany-girl-rape-murder/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

276 ‘Deadliest Terrorist Attacks in France: From Charlie Hebdo to Champs Elysees,’ sputniknews.com, 23rd March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803231062841974-deadliest-terrorist-attacks-france/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

277 ‘Trèbes supermarket attack joins long list of ‘Islamist terrorist’ acts in France (GRAPHIC VIDEO),’ RT.com, 24th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422191-france-terror-attacks-timeline/> (Accessed 20th September 2018) <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706021054232502-france-drugs-jihadists/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

278 ‘France Has ‘20,000 Muslim Extremists on Watch List’ - Anti-Islamist NGO Activist,’ sputniknews.com, 24th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803241062869961-thousands-muslims-watch-list/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

Islam was a common theme in RT and Sputnik coverage of France. Articles referencing crime or violence outside of the terrorism often focused on Islam, for example:

- ‘Muslim robe-wearing man stabs customer buying beer in Paris supermarket (VIDEO),’ (RT, 1st June 2017)²⁷⁹
- ‘‘Jihadists’ Drug’ Haul Intercepted in France,’ (Sputnik, 2nd June 2017)²⁸⁰

While ‘Social Conflict’ stories again emphasised the division between Muslims and non-Muslims in France:

- ‘French Police Looking Into ‘No Jihadists’ Road Sign Case,’ (Sputnik, 27th March 2018)²⁸¹
- ‘Not Tough Enough: Most French Want Macron to Crack Down on Islamists – Polls,’ (Sputnik, 30th March 2018)²⁸²

Coverage of government and party politics outside the handling of terror attacks featured widespread coverage of a corruption scandal involving two government ministers in May 2017²⁸³ and reports and commentary on allegations of corruption by former President Nicolas Sarkozy.²⁸⁴

Overall, coverage of France by RT and Sputnik focused heavily on the role of Islam in French society. The commission of two terror attacks during the sample period meant that frames relating to crime and violence were more prevalent than they might have been under other circumstances. However, the linkage of Islam to crime and to other areas of social conflict suggests that divisions in France relating to immigration and religious and social integration are a key theme in Russian media reporting on the country.

Sweden

Coverage of Sweden in the English output of RT and Sputnik was the most narrowly-focused of all the countries analysed. Of 76 articles featuring Swedish domestic politics and society, 67 (88%) contained one or more political dysfunction frame. ‘Social Conflict’ was the dominant frame, appearing in three-fifths of all articles about Sweden (45 articles in total), and this was also narrowly framed in terms of immigration and representations of cultural tensions arising from the integration of refugees (See Appendix 4 for a breakdown of all political dysfunction frames in coverage of Sweden, Italy and Ukraine).

For instance, in the first week analysed, 11th – 17th May 2017, RT and Sputnik published six articles in English about Sweden. Four of these were about immigrants, with the following headlines:

- ‘Swedish Police Brace for Forced Marriage ‘High Season’ Amid Zero Convictions’ (Sputnik, 12th May 2017)²⁸⁵
- ‘Holy Trinity! Sweden in hot water for giving Christian asylum seekers Bible quizzes,’ (RT, 11th May 2017)²⁸⁶
- ‘In Good Faith: Swedish ‘Christianity Exams’ for Refugees Spark Outrage,’ (Sputnik, 16th May 2017)²⁸⁷
- ‘Refugees Protest Eviction From Swedish Castle-Turned-Asylum,’ (Sputnik, 11th May 2017)²⁸⁸

Headlines and stories like these formed the spine of Sweden coverage on RT and Sputnik, often combining ‘Social Conflict’ frames alongside ‘Failure’ frames where articles alleged government or institutional failings in dealing with immigration. This was often presented in a mocking tone within the editorial text of articles, rather than in quotes from external sources. For example, in the article about forced marriage cited above the article text contains the following statement:

279 ‘Muslim robe-wearing man stabs customer buying beer in Paris supermarket (VIDEO),’ RT.com, 1st June 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/390417-paris-attack-muslim-dress-beer/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

280 ‘Jihadists’ Drug’ Haul Intercepted in France,’ sputniknews.com, 2nd June 2017

281 ‘French Police Looking Into ‘No Jihadists’ Road Sign Case,’ sputniknews.com, 27th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803271062963973-france-police-jihadists-road-signs/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

282 ‘Not Tough Enough: Most French Want Macron to Crack Down on Islamists – Polls,’ sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063078561-islamist-radical-macron-france-ban-terror-poll/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

283 ‘Probing Officials Caught in Scandals Job for Prosecution, Not Media – Paris,’ sputniknews.com, 31st May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705311054162918-media-france-minister-scandal/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

284 ‘Sarkozy to Appeal Against Resumption of Corruption Probe – Reports,’ sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803301063052227-europe-france-sarkozy-corruption-appeal/> (Accessed 20th September 2018)

285 ‘Swedish Police Brace for Forced Marriage ‘High Season’ Amid Zero Convictions,’ sputniknews.com, 12th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705121053538678-sweden-forced-marriage/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

286 ‘Holy Trinity! Sweden in hot water for giving Christian asylum seekers Bible quizzes,’ RT.com, 11th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/388397-sweden-refugees-bible-test/> (Accessed 27th September 2018).

287 ‘In Good Faith: Swedish ‘Christianity Exams’ for Refugees Spark Outrage,’ sputniknews.com, 16th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705161053652392-sweden-faith-quizzes/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

288 ‘Refugees Protest Eviction From Swedish Castle-Turned-Asylum,’ sputniknews.com, 11th May 2017, https://sputniknews.com/art_living/201705111053492440-castle-asylum-accommodation-sweden/ (Accessed 27th September 2018)

According to statistics from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), 81 cases of forced marriage, abduction and deception with the intention to marry somebody off were reported last year. The majority of these cases happened during the summer vacation and involved high school children, which is quite an embarrassment for Sweden, whose “feminist” government sees itself as a champion of woman’s rights (Sputnik, 12th May 2017).

A selection of stories from across the sample period indicates that this approach to representing Sweden in terms of a failure to integrate immigrants, but often with a jarring irreverent or mocking tone, persisted across RT and – more often – Sputnik coverage of Sweden in 2017 and 2018:

- ‘Lap Dance Instead of Deportation: “Underage” Refugees Thrive in Sweden,’ (Sputnik, 7th June 2017)²⁸⁹
- ‘Resentment as “New Swedes” Move Into Reputed Retirement Home for Seniors,’ (Sputnik, 7th March 2018)²⁹⁰
- ‘Swedish Lady on Trial for Saying Migrants “Drop IQ to Goldfish Level” – Report,’ (Sputnik, 16th March 2018)²⁹¹
- ‘Welfare Bites: Migrants’ Bad Teeth “Heavy Burden” for Swedish Healthcare,’ (Sputnik, 20th March 2018)²⁹²
- ‘Record Few Children Baptized in Sweden Due to “Demographic Change”’, (Sputnik, 22nd March 2018)²⁹³

The agenda of coverage of Sweden on RT and Sputnik was narrow, focused on immigration and associated threats to Swedish culture. The analysis below of how RT and Sputnik built this news agenda by appropriating material from Swedish news sources suggests that significant effort was expended by the Russian news outlets into monitoring Swedish news output in order to locate information that could be used to build articles about the social dislocation and division resulting from immigration and attempts by the Swedish government to integrate a large number of refugees. This material was often collected from Swedish-language news outlets, translated into English and repackaged by RT and Sputnik and then pushed at English-language audiences.

Italy

Though in total 68 articles about Italian politics and society were published by RT and Sputnik, over half of these were published in the first week of the 2018 sample, which began on the day of the 2018 Italian general election. During the rest of the analysis period only a handful of articles on Italy were published in English on RT and Sputnik.

The political coverage of the 4th March 2018 general election was not especially negative; ‘Failure’ frames relating to political parties were mostly detected where sources accused the ruling centre-left parties of comprehensively failing to convince voters on the issue of immigration²⁹⁴ or on the potential danger of populist parties, including accusations of false promises by the latter.²⁹⁵ Aside from the election, the most prevalent frame was that of social conflict, almost entirely related to the issue of immigration.

289 ‘Lap Dance Instead of Deportation: ‘Underage’ Refugees Thrive in Sweden,’ sputniknews.com, 7th June 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201706071054387307-sweden-refugees-lap-dance/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

290 ‘Resentment as ‘New Swedes’ Move Into Reputed Retirement Home for Seniors,’ sputniknews.com, 7th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803071062312804-sweden-migrants-retirement-home/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

291 ‘Swedish Lady on Trial for Saying Migrants ‘Drop IQ to Goldfish Level’ – Report,’ sputniknews.com, 16th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/viral/201803161062591229-sweden-crime-opinion-police/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

292 ‘Welfare Bites: Migrants’ Bad Teeth ‘Heavy Burden’ for Swedish Healthcare,’ sputniknews.com, 20th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803201062719138-sweden-migrants-teeth-healthcare/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

293 ‘Record Few Children Baptized in Sweden Due to ‘Demographic Change’,’ sputniknews.com, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803221062785205-sweden-baptism-religion/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

294 ‘Italy’s ruling center-left ‘pretty much gone,’ tripped on migration issue,’ RT.com, 5th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420459-italy-elections-results-migration/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

295 ‘Italy’s Vote: ‘Abstract’ Promises Made, No Concrete Issues Addressed – Academic,’ sputniknews.com, 4th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803041062216265-italy-vote-abstract-promises/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

Coverage of social conflict and division in Italy by RT and Sputnik included instances of violent migrant crime,²⁹⁶ a public protest against racism and in support of migrant rights,²⁹⁷ the punishment of an MEP for using racist language,²⁹⁸ the firebombing of the offices of a far-right group²⁹⁹ and violent protests by immigrants.³⁰⁰ Some political coverage related to the election also featured coverage of political divisions between different groups in Italian society³⁰¹ or speculated on social divisions and upheaval that may result from the possible implementation of populist, anti-immigration policies.³⁰²

As with Sweden, coverage of Italy in the English-language output of RT and Sputnik focused significantly on the wider effects of immigration in Italian society. Though coverage of the 2018 general election was relatively straight, the 2018 sample also saw a significant increase in incidences of the ‘Social Conflict’ frame, often in relation to political coverage.

Ukraine

RT and Sputnik together published 101 articles in English about Ukraine over the eight-week sample period. Given Russia’s ongoing conflict with Ukraine, it is surprising that only 71 of those contained frames denoting political dysfunction. Where frames were detected, however, they were often extremely negative. The most common frames were ‘Government Failure’ (26 articles) and ‘Undemocratic Practices’ (24 articles), while ‘Institutional conflict’ and ‘Crime/Violence’ were also common.

Coverage of the Ukrainian military was often mocking or otherwise highly critical. The 30 articles that didn’t contain political dysfunction frames were also often critical in other ways. For example, an article about a weapons purchase from the US was covered in an interview feature where analysts interpreted the fallout from the sale as having a negative effect on Ukraine’s military effectiveness.³⁰³

Government failure heavily featured in the 2017 sample, with focus on an energy crisis in the Ukraine-held parts of the contested Donbass region. Multiple articles were published containing criticism of the government’s policy and the continuation of a state of emergency in that part of the country.³⁰⁴ Other stories alleging government failure focused on evidence of unpopularity of the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, with articles describing rallies calling for his resignation³⁰⁵ and describing him being heckled by crowds.³⁰⁶

Allegations of undemocratic practices in Ukraine centred on the government’s decision in May 2017 to block access to the Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki as part of sanctions against Russian firms. This led to a series of articles containing criticism of the decision on the basis of the deprivation of access to information to Ukrainian citizens and to the denial of ‘communication rights.’³⁰⁷ Other articles containing the ‘Undemocratic’ frame also focused on legislation setting quotas for Ukrainian-language content on television, described as ‘linguistic genocide’ against Russian-speaking Ukrainians in a Sputnik article.³⁰⁸

296 ‘North African Migrant Stabs Security Officers With Knife in Milan,’ sputniknews.com, 19th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705191053759865-north-african-stabs-milan-security/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

297 ‘Without borders’: Tens of thousands rally in Milan to support migrant rights (PHOTOS, VIDEO),’ RT.com, 21st May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/389106-milan-protest-migrants-rights/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

298 ‘Italy’s First Black Minister Hails ‘Historic’ Fine for MEP Over Racist Slur,’ sputniknews.com, 19th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705191053790503-italy-black-minister-racism/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

299 ‘Neo-fascist group’s HQ bombed in Italy,’ RT.com, 8th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420791-italy-casapound-trento-bombing/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

300 ‘African immigrants protest violently in Florence after Senegalese vendor killed (VIDEO),’ RT.com, 6th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420652-florence-migrant-killing-protest/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

301 ‘Political Stress Test: How Far Does Populist Sentiment Go in Italy?’, sputniknews.com, 4th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803041062200869-italy-election-parliament-predictions-analysis/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

302 ‘Abandon Euro, Kick Out Illegals: What Italy’s Lega May Do With Possible Mandate,’ sputniknews.com, 6th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803061062288158-la-lega-italy-promises-top-5/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

303 ‘US Javelin Sale Will Reduce Kiev’s Incentive to Modernize Army – Analysts,’ sputniknews.com, 5th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803051062255212-us-javelin-sale-reduce-modernize-army/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

304 ‘Blockade Backfires: Ukraine Extends State of Emergency in Energy for Month,’ sputniknews.com, 11th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705111053522872-ukraine-emergency-energy-blockade/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

‘After South Africa, Ukraine Turns to US to Get Coal Supplies,’ sputniknews.com, 12th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705121053530782-ukraine-us-coal-imports/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

305 ‘Saakashvili’s Supporters Hold Rally in Kiev Demanding Poroshenko’s Resignation,’ sputniknews.com, 18th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803181062661543-saakashvili-supporters-rally-ukraine-poroshenko-resignation/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

306 ‘Shame on You! Ukrainian President Booed During Public Appearance (VIDEO),’ sputniknews.com, 22nd May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705221053855036-poroshenko-public-encounter-reaction/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

307 ‘Kiev Ban on Russian Social Networks Deprives Ukrainians of Communication Rights,’ sputniknews.com, 16th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705161053661972-ukraine-russia-sanctions/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

308 ‘Ukraine Lawmakers Pass Bill Introducing 75% Ukrainian Language TV Quota – Vote,’ sputniknews.com, 23rd May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705231053889613-ukraine-bill-ukrainian-language-quota/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

During the Russian Presidential election on 18th March 2018, an RT article based on video content gathered by its own service, Ruptly, suggested that Russians in Ukraine were being prevented from voting by Ukrainian nationalists, in collusion with authorities.³⁰⁹

Though there were relatively few articles containing 'Military Failure' frames, those that were identified were extremely critical. These included a report on the state of repair of Ukrainian armoured vehicles,³¹⁰ on a frigate breaking down 'immediately after costly repairs',³¹¹ and on the Ukrainian government wasting money on purchasing supposedly 'useless' equipment.³¹²

Summary: Consistency in Narratives of Division, Dysfunction and Decline

It is difficult in the space available to do justice to the pervasiveness of the dysfunction frame in RT and Sputnik's English-language coverage of Western countries, such is the volume of content that displays evidence of one or several of the frames chosen for analysis in this study.

Coverage of the UK and US is dominated by stories of failure at all levels of public life, with institutional and political conflict also prominent in articles about America. All countries saw a huge volume of coverage describing areas of social conflict, especially so in Sweden and Germany. Coverage of Ukraine was more often covered in terms of governmental failure and undemocratic practices.

The prevalence of the 'Undemocratic' frame across several different countries is interesting and warrants further analysis in future. At its core it denotes assertions that democratic systems do not live up to their name – they are rigged against citizens, constantly threatening to restrict rights and freedoms, and happy to do business with oppressive regimes across the world. The theme of hypocrisy – also noted in RT and Sputnik coverage of NATO – looms large.

Immigration and Islam feature heavily throughout, but particularly so in the Western European countries in the sample, where they are often correlated with violent crime, social dislocation and lack of integration.

This analysis shines some light on the extent to which RT and Sputnik push out a steady stream of content that focuses on the very worst of Western society. Countries are presented as fundamentally divided, let down by incompetent and mendacious political actors and served by stretched or failing public services. Violent crime is a rife, and structurally the political system acts against the best interests of citizens. The consistency of the framing, and the rate at which articles containing these frames are published suggests that the Russian outlets to some extent act as aggregators of negative coverage in their methods of building news agendas that portray politics in the West as inherently dysfunctional.

Building Agendas: RT, Sputnik and Immigration News

Having established that RT and Sputnik put out a consistent diet of news that portrays Western democracies in a consistently negative light, it is worth investigating how these news agendas are constructed. Though RT and Sputnik are well funded in comparison with many other news organisations and enjoy the now-rare benefit of bureaux in several countries outside their base in Russia, in order to produce consistent international coverage they must to some extent rely on third-party information to produce content at volume. Their coverage of the Skripal incident indicates the extent to which they were reliant on UK media for quotes from British officials.

Fortunately, although the analyses in this report highlight some of the ways in which RT and Sputnik challenge the norms of journalism, one journalistic tradition that they do adhere to is regular accreditation of sources. It is unclear whether this is to use the trustworthiness of the original source as a signal of authority within a skewed news agenda (the regular citing of Swedish mainstream sources in immigration stories noted below suggests this), but it does allow for some investigation into how RT and Sputnik build their news agendas when reporting on dysfunctional Western politics.

309 'Russian polling stations in Ukraine blocked by police & radicals (VIDEOS),' RT.com, 18th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421638-russian-elections-ukraine-disrupted/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

310 'Ukraine supplied 88 APCs to Iraq, but only 34 could actually move – inquiry,' RT.com, 22nd May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/389153-ukraine-botched-apc-deal-iraq/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

311 'Ukrainian Navy's Flagship Frigate Breaks Down Immediately After Costly Repairs,' sputniknews.com, 19th May 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201705191053778813-hetman-sahaydachniy-breakdown-after-repairs/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

312 'Ukraine Wastes \$2.7Mln on FAKE Smoke Screen for Military,' sputniknews.com, 18th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201803181062654642-facepalm-ukraine-smokescreens-fake/> (Accessed 22nd September 2018)

Table 6.9 shows the proportion of the RT and Sputnik articles (combined) devoted to certain selected topics, compared with UK media news agendas. A slightly higher proportion of RT and Sputnik news coverage references immigration (4.9% as against 4.0% in UK media content), but a considerably larger proportion makes mention of Islam, and at 13.8% of all coverage, the proportion of coverage mentioning terrorism is considerably higher than in the UK media, even where the sample spans a period containing two major terrorist attacks in the UK.

Subject(s)	RT & Sputnik Articles	% RT & Sputnik Agenda	% UK Media Agenda
Immigration	576	4.9%	4.0%
Islam	1249	10.6%	6.2%
Terrorism	1635	13.8%	7.1%
Racial Tension	237	2.0%	1.8%
Crime	514	4.3%	10.5%
Any of the Above	2904	24.6%	21.2%

Table 6.9: RT and Sputnik news agendas, selected topics

The Russian news sources were also more likely to conflate these issues: 127 articles about immigration also included references to Islam (22% of all immigration articles); 19.8% of RT and Sputnik articles about immigration also referenced terrorism (114 articles) – this compared to just 8.8% of UK media articles (950 in total). Both Russian and UK news media included terrorism in similar proportions of their coverage of Islam (68.1% and 69.2% respectively).

Another method of assessing the construction of the immigration news agenda on RT and Sputnik is to measure the proportion of content built from repackaged copy from major wire services and news agencies. This was achieved by taking a dataset of all RT and Sputnik articles mentioning immigration (tagged as such using the script displayed in Appendix 1) and text-matching it with a dataset of all *Daily Mail* articles that consisted entirely of wire copy.³¹³ The *Daily Mail*'s extensive coverage of wire copy was used as a proxy for all wire service copy made available to subscribers by Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France Presse and the Press Association.

It was found that 74 out of 576 articles published by RT and Sputnik that mentioned immigration contained significant amounts of content that was also available in wire stories covered by the *Daily Mail*. This amounted to 13% of all RT and Sputnik's coverage of immigration, suggesting that the majority of the stories that those outlets publish about Western countries are not just taken from news feeds available to all subscribers. However, it should be borne in mind that though the *Mail*'s use of articles consisting of wire copy is extensive, it appears that only those from major wire services are identified as such, and so it is not clear how much of the rest of the *Daily Mail*'s content is based on information from other news agencies. This caveat applies to RT and Sputnik as well.

A further analysis of RT and Sputnik coverage of immigration in articles about Germany and Sweden also provides evidence that the Russian news sources trawl media content across Europe in order to construct news agendas. Of a sample of 75 articles about immigration in Germany, 33 (44%) cited stories taken from German news sources, including publications such as *Die Welt*³¹⁴ and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.³¹⁵ In coverage of Swedish immigration the number was even higher: out of 34 RT and Sputnik articles about immigration in Sweden, 25 (74%) cited Swedish news sources such as broadcaster SVT,³¹⁶ newspapers such as *Aftonbladet*,³¹⁷ and Norwegian broadcaster NRK (Table 6.10)

Source	Media Type	Articles
SVT (Sveriges Television)	National broadcast (Sweden)	7
SR (Sveriges Radio)	National broadcast (Sweden)	5
Aftonbladet	Newspaper	3
The Local (Sweden)	English-language digital, Swedish edition	2
Svenska Dagbladet	Newspaper	2
Dagens Nyheter	Newspaper	1
Dagens Samhälle	News magazine	1
NRK (Norway)	National broadcast (Norway)	1
Nyheter Idag	Digital/alternative	1
Skaraborgs Läns Tidning	Newspaper	1
Stockholm Direkt	Local newspaper	1

Table 6.10: Media sources in RT and Sputnik coverage of immigration in Sweden

313 The Daily Mail encodes wire copy into its URL library using /wires/ (for example: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-4537906/US-ambassador-UN-halls-Turkish-school-Syria-refugees.html>) The majority of articles published on dailymail.co.uk are wire copy.

314 'Migration & radical European Muslims stir up antisemitism in Germany – parliament chief,' RT.com, 31st March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422883-antisemitism-radical-muslims-germany/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

315 'Germany to Create First Federal Migrant Processing Center By Fall,' sputniknews.com, 29th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803291063014401-germany-europe-migration-processing-center/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

316 'Sweden Retracts 'Utterly Crazy' Child Marriage Brochure After Public Uproar,' sputniknews.com, 30th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/viral/201803301063057929-sweden-child-marriage-brochure/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

317 'Hair-Raising': Sharia Law Makes Its Debut in Swedish Court,' sputniknews.com, 6th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803061062278612-sweden-sharia-law/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

This indicates that much of the coverage that RT and Sputnik publish highlighting social conflict in Northern European countries is actively sought out and gathered by journalists for the Russian news outlets, rather than taken from a wire service and repackaged. While RT and Sputnik both tend to credit the content to the sources from which it has been taken, it still indicates a willingness to construct consistent news agendas relating to political dysfunction by harvesting content on certain topics from other news outlets and translating the content into English for English-speaking audiences. The image of immigration in Sweden that RT and Sputnik present to audiences in the English-speaking world has been through a multi-stage editorial process of selection, repackaging and translation.

Content replication in Russian and UK news media: a two-way process

To determine the extent to which UK media outlets replicated content from RT and Sputnik (and to explore whether the process also happened in reverse), the bulk-matching function of the Steno-Similar tool was used to compare datasets of Russian articles with datasets of UK articles. First, UK media article datasets were loaded into the tool and indexed, then the corresponding week's Russian sample was compared, article by article, against all articles in the UK news dataset. The 'match factor' parameter was set at 30%, and n-gram length set at three words.³¹⁸ Put simply, the Steno-Similar tool broke each Russian article down into overlapping 3-word chunks, assigned each a unique number, and returned any UK article containing 30% or more of the n-grams from any Russian article. It should be clarified that a match factor result of (eg) 40% does not mean that 40% of the words from the Russian article was replicated (see Appendix 1 for details).

The match factor setting of 30% was relatively high. In comparison, some of the results of the Russian military content replication outlined in Section 5 (above) were detected with considerably lower match scores, yet still showed clear evidence of content replication. The results in this section are therefore those in which a very high probability of significant replication was detected. Manual checks by researchers were run to confirm where articles had passages of replicated content. Causality was determined by comparing publication date and time for both articles in each case and recording the time difference in publication.

A caveat must be added here. Articles that were identifiably based on wire copy (ie *Daily Mail* articles featuring '/wires/' as part of their URL structure) were not included in the analysis, but it is difficult to verify cases where both articles may have independently replicated content from a third source. In cases where content from RT or Sputnik was detected in UK media, the Russian articles were checked to see if they included accredited content from external sites. The UK media article was then checked to see if the content they had in common was from RT/Sputnik or from the original source, taking into account minor textual changes or translation issues. All examples in this section are those where it has been confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that content has been directly transferred from RT/Sputnik to a UK site, or vice-versa.

In total, 53 cases were found where content replication had taken place between Russian and UK news publishers. The results suggest that RT and Sputnik were bigger borrowers of content from UK media than vice-versa: 26 RT articles and six Sputnik articles were found to contain significant passages of content from UK publishers – 32 cases in total. 21 cases were identified where UK news outlets had published articles containing content from RT or Sputnik.³¹⁹

UK articles replicating Russian news content

Table 6.11 contains all cases where content from an RT or Sputnik article was identified by the Steno-Similar tool as being present in an article by a UK news outlet. The table shows the match factor (ie what proportion of n-grams in the Russian article were found in the UK article) and the time difference between publication of the two articles.

³¹⁸ See Appendix 1 for further explanation of the match factor and n-gram parameters.

³¹⁹ Full results, including links to all articles, match factor percentages and the time difference between similar articles are available here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bZcpaGSrbSfmV4Vb3nY0nX3yFj7G4JrKbQoqu7li4XU/edit?usp=sharing>

Original publisher	Original headline	Second publisher	Second headline	Match factor	Time difference
Sputnik	Russian Servicemen Carry Out Simulated S-400 Rocket Launches Near Moscow - MoD	Express	Russia put troops on high alert after Moscow 'carries out simulated rocket launches'	36%	3hr 57m
RT	100yr countdown to extinction? Hawking believes humans need to colonize new planet... or else	Daily Star	Armageddon is coming: Humans must find new home SOON warns Stephen Hawking	40%	20hr 16m
RT	Ice-is? Britain issues terrorism warning for Antarctica... & security experts aren't impressed	Express	'It's RIDICULOUS' Britain blasted for branding ANTARCTICA an ISIS terror target	58%	10hr 32m
RT	Pakistani teen 'has hand chopped off' for demanding salary (VIDEO)	Express	Evil boss 'CHOPPED OFF' boy's hand after he asked for his wages and food'	36%	6hr 39m
Sputnik	US Navy Leads 20 Nations in Biggest Training Exercise in Bahrain	Express	Trump in show of military might as US Navy leads 20 nations in biggest training drill EVER	62%	0hr 18m ³²⁰
RT	Astronaut makes history as ISS life-support systems restored in emergency op (VIDEOS)	Daily Star	Heart-stopping footage shows NASA astronauts floating in space on emergency mission	50%	16hr 30m
RT	'WikiLeaks staff are in danger': Pilger, Kiriakou discuss Assange's ongoing legal battle	Express	Claims Julian Assange and Wikileaks staff 'in DANGER' amid UK extradition to US fears	39%	18hr 50m
RT	Widow of 9/11 victim to Trump: Saudis should be held accountable for 'role in murdering 3,000'	Express	Trump urged to 'hold Saudi Arabia accountable for the 9/11 murders' by widow of victim	52%	12hr 55m
RT	Greek parliament passes austerity cuts as Molotov-throwing protesters clash with police in Athens	Express	Greece in CHAOS: Violent austerity protests 'are pointless unless parliament is RAIDED'	31%	9hr 01m
RT	'Autobots, roll out!': Father & son make Transformer out of old Russian car (VIDEO)	Mirror	Father and son make amazing real-life Transformer out of old Lada and it even has guns	35%	(+4 Days)
Sputnik	MEPs Demand Juncker 'Takes Responsibility' for Luxembourg Special Tax Deals	Express	'Explain yourself' Jean-Claude Juncker under fire from own MEPs over special tax deals	42%	4hr 59m
RT	DARPA & Boeing begin construction of futuristic 'Spaceplane' (VIDEO)	Express	Holidays to the Moon? Hypersonic spaceplane on schedule for take-off in a few years' time	48%	15hr 06m
RT	17 humans injected with devastating parasite in search for vaccine	Daily Star	Humans injected with the 'most devastating' parasite that causes body to DISINTEGRATE	72%	14hr 11m
RT	Strange phenomenon under Africa threatens to flip Earth's magnetic field	Express	Africa PHENOMENON threatens to FLIP Earth's magnetic field, taking the poles with it	58%	5hr 38m
RT	'Urgently engage with Russia': US senators call for dialogue after new nuclear arsenal unveiled	Express	World War 3: US senators call for URGENT talks with Russia due to TERRIFYING new weapons	44%	22hr 05m
RT	Indian butcher chops off son's hand over 'porn & cellphone addiction'	The Sun	Butcher hacked off his son's hands after he refused to stop watching porn on his smart phone	37%	21hr 47m
RT	Shocking VIDEO captures horror at Georgian ski resort as chair lift speeds out of control	Daily Star	Terrifying moment people are THROWN OFF ski lift after major malfunction	44%	3hr 36m
Sputnik	Two Pilots Report Mysterious UFOs While Flying Above Arizona Desert (LISTEN)	Express	SHOCK as UFO spotted TWICE by airplane pilots in strange sightings in Arizona, USA	33%	5hr 07m
Sputnik	Dutch MEP: We Don't Want Centralized EU, Where The Commission Dictates Nations	Express	'Enough' Dutch MEP anger at EU 'dictatorship' where Juncker's Commission dictates terms	33%	12hr 12m
RT	'No slither of evidence' against Russia over Skripal attack, George Galloway tells RT (VIDEO)	Daily Mail	Russian spy Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia were poisoned with nerve agent left on their FRONT DOOR, police confirm	38%	8hr 14m
RT	US expulsion of Russian diplomats is 'declaration of war' – George Galloway to RT	Daily Star	US spy expulsion drama is 'declaration of WAR' on Russia	37%	9hr 56m

Table 6.11: UK media articles replicating content first found in RT and Sputnik coverage

320 The short period between publication of the Sputnik article and that of the Express article suggests that these articles may have been independently sourced from the original US Navy press release (https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=100590); however, the Express text contained more similarities with the text in the Sputnik article than with the press release.

All instances of Russian content being replicated were found on the websites of tabloid newspapers, with by far the largest amount found in the *Express* and its stablemate the *Daily Star*:

- *Express*: 13 articles
- *Daily Star*: 5 articles
- *Daily Mail*: 1 article
- *Mirror*: 1 article
- The *Sun*: 1 article

Of the 21 articles three were Science and Technology stories (eg ‘Astronaut makes history as ISS life-support systems restored in emergency op (VIDEOS)’)³²¹ while seven contained traditional tabloid themes, including a ‘UFO sighting’³²² and violent incidents from around the world.³²³ The remaining 11 articles (over half of the total) were about political issues. Four of these articles concerned issues relating to Russia (including the *Express* article identified in Section 5, ‘World War 3: US senators call for URGENT talks with Russia due to TERRIFYING new weapons’)

Articles were replicated in different ways. The *Express* article ‘‘It’s RIDICULOUS’’ Britain blasted for branding ANTARCTICA an ISIS terror target’³²⁴ published on 17th May 2017 closely followed the structure of an RT article published the previous day.³²⁵

The RT article credits the *International Business Times* for the main quotes drawn from the story, while the *Express* article does not. As well as containing the same sequence of quotes as the RT piece, the *Express* article also directly lifts text (‘The UK’s Antarctic territory consists of a 660,000 sq mile chunk of the world’s most inhospitable wilderness.’), though it also adds two sentences not found in the RT article, relating to other British overseas territories and to a recent inquest regarding Foreign Office travel advice.

In other cases, quotes from RT and Sputnik interviews were republished without accreditation. A *Daily Star* article³²⁶ published on 27th March 2018 and relating to the Skripal incident took quotes from an RT interview with the former UK MP George Galloway, who also hosts a programme on RT, without crediting the RT article.³²⁷ An *Express* article on a Dutch MEP’s critical comments about the European Union³²⁸ failed to mention the fact that all quotes from the MEP in question were taken directly from a Sputnik interview.³²⁹

A *Sun* article published on 8th March 2018, about an Indian man who allegedly cut off his son’s hands,³³⁰ contained content from an RT article³³¹ which credits the story to the *Hindustan Times*. The *Sun* article does not reference either publication, but contains text that appears in the RT article, but not in the Indian newspaper’s online article (‘But as he resisted, Khalid bit his father’s hand and fled, only to return in the dead of night when everyone in the house was asleep.’).

321 ‘Astronaut makes history as ISS life-support systems restored in emergency op (VIDEOS),’ RT.com, 23rd May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/viral/389507-nasa-emergency-spacewalk-iss/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

322 ‘Two Pilots Report Mysterious UFOs While Flying Above Arizona Desert (LISTEN),’ sputniknews.com, 26th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201803261062922721-pilots-report-mysterious-ufos-while-flying-above-arizona-desert/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

323 ‘Shocking VIDEO captures horror at Georgian ski resort as chair lift speeds out of control,’ RT.com, 16th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/421495-georgia-cableway-out-of-control/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

324 ‘‘It’s RIDICULOUS’’ Britain blasted for branding ANTARCTICA an ISIS terror target,’ express.co.uk, 17th May 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/805545/Antarctica-Britain-UK-terrorism-ISIS-terror-Foreign-Office-Iraq-Syria> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

325 ‘Ice-is? Britain issues terrorism warning for Antarctica... & security experts aren’t impressed,’ express.co.uk, 16th May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/388579-antarctica-isis-security-threat/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

326 ‘US spy expulsion drama is ‘declaration of WAR’ on Russia,’ dailystar.co.uk, 27th March 2018, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/691735/united-states-donald-trump-george-galloway-moscow-russia-vladimir-putin-sergei-skripal> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

327 ‘US expulsion of Russian diplomats is ‘declaration of war’ – George Galloway to RT,’ RT.com, 26th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/422385-expulsion-russian-diplomats-galloway/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

328 ‘Enough! Dutch MEP anger at EU ‘dictatorship’ where Juncker’s Commission dictates terms,’ express.co.uk, 29th March 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/938528/eu-european-commission-dutch-mep-marcel-de-graaff-dictatorship> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

329 ‘Dutch MEP: We Don’t Want Centralized EU, Where The Commission Dictates Nations,’ sputniknews.com, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803281062999223-marcel-de-graaff-eu-islam-netherlands/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

330 ‘Butcher hacked off his son’s hands after he refused to stop watching porn on his smart phone,’ thesun.co.uk, 8th March 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5753311/butcher-hacked-off-his-sons-hands-after-he-refused-to-stop-watching-porn-on-his-smart-phone/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

331 ‘Indian butcher chops off son’s hand over ‘porn & cellphone addiction,’ RT.com, 7th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/420668-indian-chops-off-sons-hand/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

Out of 21 articles containing content taken from Russian sources, only two credited RT or Sputnik.³³² While it is in some cases only possible to claim that there is a very high probability – rather than certainty – that the content in UK titles was taken directly from Russian news sources, this is impossible to argue in the case of unaccredited interview content republished from RT and Sputnik.

That these interviews related to strong criticism of the European Union and of the actions of Western governments in relation to the expulsions of diplomats following the Skripal incident, it is problematic that audiences of the UK outlets in question were not made aware of the origin of the information. This also holds true for the other political stories that were replicated, especially those that relate to Russian military activities.

Russian articles replicating UK news content

Table 6.12 contains the list of RT and Sputnik articles that carry content from UK news outlets. Though the total number of articles is greater – 32 in total – both RT and Sputnik are considerably more likely to cite the fact that information had been taken from UK sources. Overall, 17 Russian articles cited the original UK media source, slightly over half of the total.

The majority of coverage replicated by RT and Sputnik related to politics – 22 out of 32 articles. Approximately two-thirds of these were from broadcasters or ‘quality’ newspaper sites; only 12 articles contained content found first on the sites of UK tabloids. The most common source of information for RT and Sputnik was the *Guardian*, which had ten articles partially replicated (in seven cases the *Guardian* was given credit).

The popularity of the *Guardian* as a source is a suitable guide to the type of content that RT and Sputnik were replicating: in-depth or investigative reporting on policy and governmental failures, or on social problems or social division, demonstrating in part how RT and Sputnik harvest content in order to sustain the narratives of political dysfunction in the West. *Guardian* articles replicated (and credited) in RT and Sputnik included the following:

- ‘Tony Blair: Iraq war prosecution attempt goes back to court,’ (16th May 2017)³³³
- ‘Offenders in Rochdale child sexual abuse scandal “remain at large”,’ (16th May 2017)³³⁴
- ‘UK downplayed killings in Zimbabwe to guard its interests, study claims,’ (16th May 2017)³³⁵
- ‘Charities say ‘gag law’ stops them speaking out on Tory social care plans,’ (29th May 2017)³³⁶
- ‘“Sensitive” UK terror funding inquiry may never be published,’ (31st May 2017)³³⁷
- ‘Police targeting of dead man’s sister “probably influenced by racism”,’ (7th March 2018)³³⁸

Not all of these articles were credited. An RT piece³³⁹ based on the *Guardian*’s story about the launch of an anti-radicalisation programme in British mosques³⁴⁰ did not mention where the original content had been appropriated from.

Other articles that exemplified the Russian focus on social and political dysfunction in Western countries included a second article about organised child sexual abuse in the UK taken from a *Sunday Mirror* report,³⁴¹ reports of a ‘migrant surge on Britain’s doorstep’ taken from the *Express*,³⁴² and another *Express* report on a terror threat to UK schools.³⁴³

332 ‘Claims Julian Assange and Wikileaks staff ‘in DANGER’ amid UK extradition to US fears,’ *express.co.uk*, 20th May 2017, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/807150/Julian-Assange-Wikileaks-staff-DANGER-UK-extradition-US-fears> (Accessed 27th September 2017)

‘Autobots, roll out!’: Father & son make Transformer out of old Russian car (VIDEO),’ *mirror.co.uk*, 24th May 2017, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/father-son-make-amazing-real-10490497> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

333 ‘Tony Blair: Iraq war prosecution attempt goes back to court,’ *theguardian.com*, 16th May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/16/tony-blair-iraq-war-prosecution-attempt-goes-back-to-court> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

334 ‘Offenders in Rochdale child sexual abuse scandal ‘remain at large’,’ *theguardian.com*, 16th May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/16/offenders-in-rochdale-child-sexual-abuse-scandal-remain-at-large> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

335 ‘UK downplayed killings in Zimbabwe to guard its interests, study claims,’ *theguardian.com*, 16th May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/uk-downplayed-killings-zimbabwe-mugabe-guard-interests-study-claims> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

336 ‘Charities say ‘gag law’ stops them speaking out on Tory social care plans,’ *theguardian.com*, 29th May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/29/charities-gag-law-stops-them-speaking-out-tory-social-care-plans> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

337 ‘“Sensitive” UK terror funding inquiry may never be published,’ *theguardian.com*, 31st May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/31/sensitive-uk-terror-funding-inquiry-findings-may-never-be-published-saudi-arabia> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

338 ‘Police targeting of dead man’s sister ‘probably influenced by racism’,’ *theguardian.co.uk*, 7th March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/07/police-spy-operation-janet-alder-probably-influenced-by-racism-ipcc> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

339 ‘Muslim-run alternative to Prevent launched to tackle radicalization,’ *RT.com*, 23rd March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/422116-prevent-muslim-extremism-terror/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

340 ‘Mosques launch anti-radicalisation scheme as alternative to Prevent,’ *theguardian.com*, 22nd March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/22/mosques-launch-anti-radicalisation-scheme-as-alternative-to-prevent> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

341 ‘Hundreds of underage girls raped, sold for sex & murdered by child-grooming ring in UK,’ *RT.com*, 12th March 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/421032-child-sex-telford-abuse/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

342 ‘New migrant surge on Britain’s doorstep, Calais official warns,’ *RT.com*, 31st May 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/390302-calais-summer-violence-migrant/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

343 ‘UK Schools on Lockdown Over Ramming Threats - Local Police,’ *sputniknews.com*, 28th March 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803281062991453-uk-schools-lockdown-threats/> (Accessed 27th September 2018)

Original publisher	Original headline	Second publisher	Second headline	Match factor	Time difference
Daily Mail	The supercar vending machine: Car dealer in Singapore creates a tower filled with Ferraris and Lamborghinis that are dispensed like chocolate bars	RT	Singapore luxury car 'vending machine' dispenses Ferraris, Porsches	45%	1hr 42m
Daily Mail	Victim of crime? Solve it yourself! Public told to submit evidence online to save police money	RT	DIY justice? Victims of crime asked to submit their own evidence online	44%	11hr 41m
Guardian	Tony Blair: Iraq war prosecution attempt goes back to court	RT	Blair prosecuted for Iraq War? Ex-PM's legal immunity challenged in court	50%	2hr 52m
Guardian	UK downplayed killings in Zimbabwe to guard its interests, study claims	RT	Britain 'turned blind eye to massacres in Zimbabwe to protect its interests,' study claims	66%	6hr 32m
Guardian	Offenders in Rochdale child sexual abuse scandal 'remain at large'	RT	Child sex offenders still at large in Rochdale, says former detective	45%	8hr 00m
Huffington Post UK	Greenwich Bees Swarm On Busy Street As Passersby Take Cover	RT	Thought your commute was bad? Swarm of bees descends on rush-hour London	42%	4hr 28m
Times	Bail or jail? App helps police make decision about suspect	RT	RoboCop: Police use AI to judge whether suspects are jailed or bailed	48%	15hr 10m
BBC	Thousands of police on the beat without current background checks	RT	Thousands of un-vetted police officers on Britain's streets	34%	No Data ³⁴⁴
Guardian	Canada First Nations reserve bars outsiders amid opioid crisis	Sputnik	Canadian First Nations Reserve Bars Outsiders to Help Stop Drug Flow	32%	16hr 05m
Mirror	Black man who lost penis in botched circumcision to have transplanted organ tattooed - because donor was white	Sputnik	Once You Go White... Black Man Receives Penis Transplant, Plans to Tattoo It	43%	26hr 02m
Times	'Brexit virus' feared in 10% of sausages	RT	'Brexit virus': 1,000s of Britons getting hepatitis from EU-imported pork	34%	34hr 27m
Daily Mail	Did Enceladus TIP OVER? Cassini images reveal Saturn's moon might have been knocked over by an asteroid impact	RT	Asteroid strike may have 'tipped axis' of Saturn's moon (PHOTOS)	51%	20hr 43m
Express	Migrant summer chaos as thousands try to get into Britain, French official warns	RT	New migrant surge on Britain's doorstep, Calais official warns	40%	12hr 58m
Guardian	Charities say 'gag law' stops them speaking out on Tory social care plans	RT	Tories 'gagged' us to prevent criticism of Theresa May, charities claim	37%	43hr 27m
Guardian	'Sensitive' UK terror funding inquiry may never be published	RT	Who's funding Britain's terrorists? 'Sensitive' Home Office report may never be published	53%	0hr 45m
Guardian	Police targeting of dead man's sister 'probably influenced by racism'	RT	Police op against black woman seeking justice for dead brother 'likely' motivated by racism	54%	18hr 45m
Guardian	EU chiefs acting like gang leaders over Brexit threats, says Liam Fox	RT	'Ireland first!' EU accused of 'gangster' behavior as it halts Brexit talks over border issue	43%	15hr 33m
Mirror	Premier Inn 'refuses to let homeless people use 19 paid-for hotel rooms turning them away to sleep rough'	RT	Cold shoulder: Heartless hotels sent homeless back out into snow after rooms donated to charity	46%	18hr 09m
Mirror	Tory MP Philip Davies accused of 'shoving' and 'physically intimidating' female comedian during BBC interview	RT	Tory MP accused of 'physically threatening' comedian in BBC interview gone wrong	39%	19hr 51m
Daily Mail	Lecturers are told to attend workshops to 'understand their white privilege' and examine how their 'whiteness' makes them unwittingly racist	RT	'If you're white, you're a racist': UK university teaching staff to deal with own 'whiteness'	45%	11hr 06m
Express	Leave Means Leaves chief says this is ONE THING 'Orwellian EU' TRULY fears	Sputnik	Brexit Campaigner Dubs EU 'Orwellian State,' Reveals Its Fears	40%	9hr 43m
Independent	Met Police respond to another suspicious package sent to Parliament	RT	Police respond to another 'suspicious package' sent to parliament	44%	0h 44m
Independent	Crufts dog show finishes in chaos as animal rights protesters storm winners' presentation	RT	'Canine eugenics': Chaos at Crufts dog show as 'ferrier-ist' storms winner's circle (VIDEO)	47%	11hr 09m
Mirror	Britain's 'worst ever' child grooming scandal exposed: Hundreds of young girls raped, beaten, sold for sex and some even KILLED	RT	Hundreds of underage girls raped, sold for sex & murdered by child-grooming ring in UK	45%	25hr 48m

344 Time of publication of BBC article not available; BBC credited in RT story

Original publisher	Original headline	Second publisher	Second headline	Match factor	Time difference
Sky News	UKIP peer Lord Pearson invites ex-EDL leader Tommy Robinson to Parliament	RT	Tommy Robinson's Parliament invite causes stir after peer asks question on Islam & grooming gangs	44%	24hr 02m
Daily Star	Watch world's first male sex robot TALK and crack jokes in extraordinary video	Sputnik	Best Mate? WATCH World's First Male Sex Robot Who Can Also Tell a Joke	50%	17hr 48m
FT	Scientists discover the origins of gold in space	RT	Origins of gold discovered in space	53%	9hr 03m
Guardian	Mosques launch anti-radicalisation scheme as alternative to Prevent	RT	Muslim-run alternative to Prevent launched to tackle radicalization	33%	16hr 26m
BBC	Musical David Bowie statue vandalised in Aylesbury	Sputnik	David Bowie Statue Vandalized in England	34%	No Data ³⁴⁵
Express	UK schools on LOCKDOWN: Warning 'children will be hit with car'	Sputnik	UK Schools on Lockdown Over Ramming Threats - Local Police	36%	1hr 11m
Guardian	Apple's Tim Cook rebukes Zuckerberg over Facebook's business model	RT	Apple's Tim Cook slams Zuckerberg over Facebook's privacy profiteering	44%	14hr 24m
iNews	Tory MP Bob Blackman 'regrets' sharing Islamophobic Facebook post	RT	'Giving Islamophobia a pass:' Conservative MP accused of spreading anti-Muslim message	50%	4hr 23m

Table 6.12: RT and Sputnik articles replicating content first found in UK media coverage

The results of this analysis indicate that while there is evidence of replication of content from RT and Sputnik articles in UK media, it does not appear to be a systemic problem. While articles were found in tabloid news content, the number of articles is low relative to the total online output of UK media. Russian appropriation of British content is more common – perhaps not surprising given the amount of material available – and the evidence suggests that RT and Sputnik, as they do in Sweden when reporting on immigration, harvest content from UK sources where it supports the narrative of political dysfunction.

This does not detract from the significance of the finding that RT and Sputnik are – if occasionally – used as sources by UK tabloid news outlets, and that this fact is only rarely disclosed to the reader. Of greater concern is that fact that over half of the articles that were detected were about political matters, and some of these related to the power of the Russian military and criticism of the EU – positions that are actively pushed by Russia.

One important qualification to this is that the threshold for detection in this analysis was high: at least 30% of n-grams from RT or Sputnik articles. The analysis of UK coverage of Russian weaponry in the previous section showed that clear examples of replicated content were found in articles with a considerably lower match factor.

Time delay may also have missed some more examples. The datasets compared here were each seven days in length (ie all articles from 11-17 May 2017 published on RT and Sputnik compared against all articles published from 11-17 May in UK publications). The time delay between original publication and replication means that articles published towards the end of a dataset may be replicated in the following weekly sample.

Finally, there is the issue of significant rewrites of articles that take content from other sources but do not repeat it word for word. Several of the articles in this analysis were identified because they replicated lengthy quotes, and on closer inspection had also followed the structure and links of the original story, but with slightly rewritten content. Text-matching is a somewhat inefficient tool in detecting evidence of this in potential articles that do not contain substantial quotes.

345 No BBC publication time; Sputnik article credits BBC

Conclusions

This section has demonstrated that, in line with findings in other studies, themes of dysfunction, division and decline pervade the coverage of Western democracies in Russian English-language news media. It has also shown the methods by which RT and Sputnik build their news agendas about these countries, in part by harvesting content from news sources across Europe and America which is then repackaged and (where necessary) translated and made available to news audiences across the world. Finally, it has demonstrated the extent to which Russian and UK news sources appropriate news content from each other, showing some evidence of the process of ‘churnalism’ in which politicised news content can be seeded in another news environment.

The content analysis of RT and Sputnik’s output demonstrates the level of negativity in coverage of Western democracies in Russian English-language news. With over 80% of articles about selected countries containing one or more frame relating to conflict within politics and society, the failures of public bodies, or alienation within the democratic system. Though coverage of each country is different (often drawing on domestic news coverage there), the large focus on immigration and Islam in European countries indicates a common theme in reporting on and amplifying social divisions. The coverage of immigration in Germany and Sweden, in particular, is striking in its focus on violent crime and on social and religious differences and the problems of integration. Overall, however, the themes that emerge from Russian English-language coverage of Europe and America denote deeply dysfunctional societies marked by bitter divisions between social groups, governed by politicians, parties and institutions characterised by failure.

Analysis of the news agendas on RT and Sputnik backs this up, with a significantly higher proportion of coverage mentioning Islam and terrorism in comparison with the combined news agenda of UK media. Preliminary research of news agenda-building on the issue of immigration suggests that RT and Sputnik rely less on wire services to obtain information about countries in Europe and America and devote significant effort to monitoring and gathering content from local sources, ranging from broadcasters and national newspapers to obscure digital sites. This in part comes back to the argument set out in the introduction to this report – how news is constructed in an age of abundance of information. The evidence uncovered in this analysis suggests that RT and Sputnik use the ubiquity of source material to construct consistent and targeted narratives of decline and division, using substantial resources to translate and repackage content and publish it for audiences in different languages.

Finally, the analysis of content replication between UK and Russian media provides interesting initial insights. The practice is not widespread, and in the UK media it appears to be limited to certain tabloid news outlets, but it does exist. The analysis here involved a relatively threshold for inclusion – further research into instances of smaller portions of content may uncover more examples. The citation of RT and Sputnik coverage of Russian military activity and capability, or on political issues, should be made clear to audiences, if done at all. The tendency of UK media not to acknowledge the fact when obtaining information from such sources effectively means that pro-Russian talking points can make their way to UK audiences through trusted news sources.

The replication of UK news content by RT and Sputnik provides further evidence that those sources use journalism gathered from across the world to craft deliberate narratives about politics and society in Western democracies. The fact that the Russian outlets are relatively diligent in citing the source of the information suggests that the sources are used as signals of authority for the content. RT and Sputnik could credibly say that they are simply reporting on information published elsewhere in traditional – often state-run in the case of broadcasters – news outlets. This argument is somewhat undermined by the prevalence and consistency of narratives of dysfunction throughout the vast majority of RT and Sputnik’s coverage of the US and European countries.

7

Case study: applying the methodology on Russian-language news in Russia and Ukraine

Key findings

To test the applicability of the Steno analysis and comparison tools in a different linguistic environment, a case study was conducted in collaboration with Kyiv-based investigative and open data journalism organisation Texty.org.ua to assess how Steno could be deployed in a Russian-language analysis.

Steno was used to monitor whether content produced by Russian state-linked media outlets could be detected in Ukrainian Russian-language news sites, or whether there was any movement of information in the opposite direction. Content was collected from the Russian outlets RT, TASS and RIA Novosti, and the Ukrainian sites Vesti.ukr.com, Strana.ua, Podrobnosti.ua, Newsone.ua, 112.ua, Obozrevatel.com and Korrespondent.net. The Steno analysis and comparison tools were then tested to determine how easily they could be applied in this context.

Content-scraping and analysis found evidence of heavily negative coverage of the 2018 Independence Day of Ukraine parade on sampled Russian news sites, repackaged for Russian domestic audiences. Use of the Steno content comparison tool on a separate pre-existing database of articles covering the recognition of independence for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church found some evidence of Ukrainian news sites replicating content from TASS, and multiple instances of Russian outlets repackaging Ukrainian news content with added emotional or partisan language.

Applying Steno to Russian-language news in Russia and Ukraine

Steno has been developed to assist journalism and communication researchers in any context. The combination of content collection, partially automated analysis and content matching can be used in any language supported by UTF-8. In addition to single-country analyses of news coverage and content replication between publishers and outlets, it has been adapted to be used to identify instances or patterns of cross-national influences on journalism, and to test the vulnerability or susceptibility of news outlets to content created or curated by motivated external actors.

The analysis in this report has focused on Russian news outlets, their English-language output and the potential for targeted content to become embedded in established news outlets in the UK. This is partly driven by the acknowledgement that the Russian state has pursued longstanding goals – at different intensities at different times – to reach, influence and persuade the populations of other countries, ideally without detection. The UK (or the English-speaking world) is not unique in this sense, and the tools and methods here could be adapted for any languages in which Russian state-linked news outlets produce content. Ideally it will be possible in future to coordinate multi-country studies measuring patterns in the production and replication of such targeted content.

To test the potential use of Steno in an entirely different context a case study was conducted to measure whether similar processes of content replication took place between Russian state media and Ukrainian news outlets. This test was chosen for a variety of reasons: technical challenges relating to language and content collection; the historical relationship, political conflict and proximity of the two countries; and the observation by other researchers of a variety of information warfare activities targeted by Russia at Ukraine. The case study consisted of a collaboration with Texty.org.ua, a Kyiv-based investigative and open data journalism organisation with expertise in using and developing software to conduct complex investigations in multiple languages.³⁴⁶ Through partnership with Texty, a database of Russian and Ukrainian news articles was constructed for researchers to assess the usefulness of Steno as a research tool, and to deploy some of the functions in a limited analysis of Russian coverage of selected events in Ukraine.

Technical challenges³⁴⁷

The selection of Ukraine as the location for an additional case study brought some unique challenges relating to language and early scraper testing. First, though Steno uses UTF-8 character encoding Russian language support had to be added to Steno to allow accurate storage, retrieval and indexing of Russian text. Second, scrapers had to be configured and tested before any analysis could be conducted. This also allowed researchers to interchange Boolean operators in English (AND, OR) to Russian (И, ИЛИ) if needed. In practice, although Ukrainian-language outlets were not analysed directly, adding Russian language support also supported searches using Ukrainian characters (eg і), though further testing of this will be necessary beyond this case study.

In discussion with Texty, it was agreed to focus on Russian-language news content only. Ukraine has a significant minority of native Russian speakers, with a greater concentration in the East and South of the country, including areas with close proximity to the Russian border and areas under occupation during the present conflict between the two countries. It was decided to monitor whether content produced by Russian state-linked media outlets found its way onto Ukrainian Russian-language news sites, or whether there was any movement of information in the opposite direction.

A list of sites was selected, including those of three Russian networks (RT, TASS and RIA Novosti), and the following news outlets based in Ukraine, as suggested by Texty:

- Vesti-ukr.com
- Strana.ua
- Podrobnosti.ua
- Newsone.uk
- 112.ua
- Obozrevatel.com
- Korrespondent.net

Once the scrapers were configured and article collection began, researchers at King's College London with Russian-language expertise then checked the results for each publication to test that the scrapers were working properly, to establish that no extraneous text was being collected and that no article text had been missed. Article collection then began on 15th August 2018. A meeting was then held in which access to the Steno software and output was given to Texty's researchers and the parameters of the case study analysis were agreed.

³⁴⁶ See for example:

Solodko, P. et al. (2015) 'Three Days in February,' Texty.org.uk, http://texty.org.ua/d/maidan_maps_eng/;
Romanenko, N. et al. (2016) 'The Troll Network,' Texty.org.uk, http://texty.org.ua/d/fb-trolls/index_eng.html.

³⁴⁷ More details are available in Appendix 1 below

Aims of the case study

The case study was designed to provide two streams of feedback:

1. Testing data from external researchers on how well the software worked and how easily it could be used in the new context, and what changes may be desirable or necessary for further development of the tools to make them more useful to international researchers.
2. Empirical information on whether patterns of content replication could be identified between Russian-language news sources in Ukraine and Russia.

Prior to the beginning of Texty's analysis it was agreed that coverage of two topics would be analysed. The first, the 2018 Independence Day of Ukraine, fell within the sampling period and would therefore be a useful test of Steno's article collection, searching and text-matching functions. The second, coverage of the potential independence (Autocephaly) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, would involve testing of whether Steno's tools could be applied effectively to analyse a separate, third-party dataset of news articles.

Results³⁴⁸

Testing the Steno user interface and search function for Russian language content

Databases of articles were generated using the Steno Graphical User Interface (GUI) and then split to create two separate databases comprising, respectively, all collected articles from Russian and Ukrainian sources.

The Steno text search and filtering commands were successfully used, and search and tagging exercises were conducted using both the built-in GUI functions and using pre-loaded scripts.³⁴⁹ Search filters worked reasonably well for Russian language content, but greater capacity to include flexibility of word ending inflections would make the tool easier to use (See Appendix 1 for a description of how differences in Russian and English language structure affect text searching in Steno).

The Steno text-matching tool was tested, primarily using default matching parameters (n-gram size of 3 and 40% match threshold – see Appendix 1), but with some adjustments which indicated that in some instances an n-gram size of 2 was more effective in identifying instances of text replication.

The results indicated some instances of overlapping texts, though it was noted that source detection would be easier if the capability to compare timestamps of articles was available.

To test whether the tool can be used to access and analyse external article databases not generated by Steno's own scrapers, it was used to search pre-collected data from approximately 200 Russian and Ukrainian news outlets. The test confirmed that third party datasets holding structured news data can be analysed using Steno.

Analysis of news in Russian using the Steno text-matching tool Independence Day of Ukraine Parade

After filtering the collected articles to select only those about the event, 74 news articles from the Russian news websites (RT, RIA and TASS) were identified, along with 288 articles in the preselected Ukrainian outlets. The two datasets were compared using the default matching parameters (n-gram size of 3; match factor of 40%). The resulting report identified no instances of content from RT, RIA or TASS being replicated on the Ukrainian sites, but multiple instances of Russian sites using Ukrainian content to report on the parade.

In coverage of the parade the selected Russian sites focused on mistakes and negative events. There was exaggeration of an incident where a tank crashed into a business centre after a parade rehearsal, a recontextualised quote from a radical politician to deprecate Ukraine's claims to military power, and focus on a soldier fainting during a speech by the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko. Some overlaps were identified due to the citation of similar sources, and it was recorded that Russian media tended to reference pro-Russian Ukrainian outlets which had already translated negative coverage of the event into Russian.

Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

An existing database of articles from approximately 200 Russian and Ukrainian news outlets was analysed, using Steno to filter those articles about the process of recognition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as independent by the Patriarchy of Constantinople (Istanbul), a process that is opposed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The analysis found one case where a Ukrainian site (Strana.ua) directly cited the Russian news agency TASS about the opinion of Russian Orthodox Church officials who compared the granting of independence to the Ukrainian church with the 11th Century schism between the Eastern and Western churches.

³⁴⁸ This section is an edited version of the report supplied by Texty following the conclusion of the study

³⁴⁹ See Appendix 1 for a summary of Steno functionality as described in this section

Other examples of textual overlap between Russian and Ukrainian articles were ascribed to lengthy quotations from the same source. Outright propaganda from non-mainstream and alternative Russian news sources were identified in Russian state-linked media but not in Ukrainian news outlets. In the depiction of autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church, as with the Independence Day parade, Russian outlets often repackaged articles from Ukrainian sites, manipulated through partial selection of content or the addition of emotional or partisan language.

Summary – using Steno for cross-national or multi-lingual analysis

The case study was largely successful, proving that Steno can be a worthwhile tool for content analysts working in other linguistic and political environments, even those as complex and volatile as Russia and Ukraine. However, it also identified certain improvements that would make the tool more effective still.

The Texty analysis, though limited to specific stories, found that the tool performed as expected and that each of the major analytical functions worked in the context of Russian-language news. It was possible to search, tag and filter articles in Cyrillic, and to use the text-matching function to identify directional replication of content (perhaps most interestingly the most prominent finding was the extent to which Russian state news media use Ukrainian sources to build narratives for a domestic audience – a finding in line with results elsewhere in this study). A surprise benefit of the study was the compatibility of Texty's own article databases with the Steno search and matching functions, indicating that it can be used to analyse pre-existing SQL datasets of news content.

The Russian language and other languages that rely on a large degree of inflection do, however, present challenges to researchers using the current build of Steno. Though not insurmountable, these do make search commands more complex to construct, as specific cases need to be added to any search (eg Москва, Москве, Москву etc to denote 'Moscow'). The addition of a lemmatisation function to Steno would go some way towards simplifying this, as would adding regular expression functionality to search strings. These would be worthwhile additions to the open-sourced version of Steno to assist non-English-language research projects.

An additional issue is the problem of causation when using the text-matching tool, as Steno is currently only able to establish that an article in the 'match' database contains a significant amount of content from an article in the 'query' database (see Appendix 1).

Where the number of articles generated from a database comparison is low, it is relatively straightforward for a researcher to use the URLs to check the timestamps of each article to see which was published first and the length of time. Where results return a very large number of articles, this will however be a strain on research resources. Fixing this poses some problems, both due to inconsistent date and time data recording and formatting on different news sites, and due to the cyclical operation of the Steno scrapers, which scrape each site approximately every three hours in its current version. The latter issue is a relatively straightforward fix, but does not resolve the underlying problem if it remains difficult to record reliable timestamps across a large number of publications.

Overall, the results of the case study are encouraging, and suggest that the aim of developing Steno for international analyses of news coverage and of content replication across and within national media systems is a realisable one.

8.

Conclusions

The introduction to this report highlighted two areas of inquiry:

1. What can we learn from what Russian state-linked news media publish, in English, about key issues central to Russian interests, and about the rest of the world?
2. Is there evidence of churnalism? ie to what extent is Russian English-language content replicated – that is, reproduced word-for-word or with cosmetic alterations – in the media of other countries (in this case the UK), and to what extent do Russian media cherry-pick content from external media outlets to build their own agendas?

The first query was addressed by a series of content analyses, laying out how the Russian English-language news outlets RT and Sputnik performed during an international diplomatic crisis involving Russia, in representing Russian military strength and capability to the world, and in portraying life in Western democracies to English-speaking audiences. These analyses took the form of traditional content analysis projects, assisted by the use of software that allowed a small team to investigate trends in content in a very large number of articles. The results provided will, hopefully, add to the current understanding of the function of news as a potential tool of information warfare, as used by motivated and well-resourced political actors, and help to shape future research in this area.

The second query – on whether evidence of churnalism of can be found in UK media via the replication of content lifted directly from Russian sources – was explored using new software developed especially for this project. Using text-matching software and methods to locate and verify likely instances of churnalism, it was found that this a relatively small problem, but one that should concern journalists in the UK and in other Western democracies nonetheless.

A relatively small number of articles was found in which content was lifted directly from RT and Sputnik, and these were confined to the websites of the UK's tabloid newspapers, with the *Express* foremost among them. Though not widespread, the practice is both needless and indefensible, particularly in the cases identified where information regarding Russian military policy or about the Skripal poisoning was replicated without attribution and presented to audiences. The analyses of RT and Sputnik content in this project and elsewhere should confirm that these are not impartial sources, particularly on issues of international politics or Russian policy.

The results of the analyses of RT and Sputnik content provide useful information about the role and purpose of those sites. In the analysis of their output in the aftermath of the Skripal poisoning it was shown that RT and Sputnik acted largely as vehicles of disinformation through the publication and repetition of a long list of often contradictory narratives, painting a confusing picture of events and attempting to undermine the arguments and motives of Western politicians and media outlets. The mobilisation of a 'parallel commentariat' of Russian and Western sources to provide many of these narratives, including full-blown conspiracy theories, added to the confusion while inflammatory remarks by senior Russian government figures were amplified. The nature of the coverage put out by RT and Sputnik suggests that they played a direct role in 'crisis management' following the Skripal incident, sowing confusion, undermining alternative accounts of events, attacking opponents and repeating the favoured talking points of the Russian government to English-speaking audiences.

The following section demonstrated how RT and Sputnik project Russian strength through extensive coverage of Russian military hardware and technologies, providing a conduit for Russian government and military figures to present information about weapon specifications and capabilities to English-speaking audiences, alongside embedded video and still images of the weapons in action. Sputnik in particular acts as a repository of information about new Russian weapons systems, presenting information in a format closer to a 'fact file' than an interrogation of claims by military or arms industry sources with a clear interest in obtaining favourable coverage of their hardware.

The extent to which this information finds its way into Western media was also explored, with evidence suggesting that UK tabloids rely to some degree on information released by Russia – and often disseminated via RT and Sputnik – when writing articles about the Russian military danger to the UK and its allies. In a small number of instances direct replication of RT and Sputnik content on Russian military issues was found in the websites of the UK popular press.

This also showed how Russian English-language media portray NATO, Russia's main perceived military threat. NATO is presented by RT and Sputnik as, paradoxically, simultaneously weak and incompetent and yet an existential threat justifying substantial military expenditure; both aggressive and yet no match for Russia's superior military capability. This coverage acted as a carrier for common Russian state narratives about NATO's motives and Russia's justified responses, underpinned by the assertion of Russia's inevitable victory in any future confrontation.

The final analytical section outlined how RT and Sputnik gather content to build highly partial news agendas focusing on areas of conflict and dysfunction in Western democracies and framed in such a way as to present a constant portrayal of life there as blighted by social and political division, administrative incompetence, and the erosion of the pillars of democratic society and law and order.

RT and Sputnik, it was shown, are consistent sources of information, stories and columns about conflict, failure and alienation in Western countries. The selection and presentation of stories by both outlets creates parallel news agendas accentuating political dysfunction, and with a comparatively heavy focus on areas of known division in Europe and North America - immigration, religion, and the rise of far-right political groups. Evidence shows that RT and Sputnik largely act as aggregators, scanning local news sources for stories that fit the pre-existing frame(s) of political dysfunction and repackaging and republishing them.

This act of republication, and particularly of translation into English, is key. Conflict and failure in public life are central topics in public interest journalism. It could therefore be argued – at a stretch – that the coverage of public life in the UK and US on RT and Sputnik performs that role, reporting to anglophone audiences on legitimate instances of dysfunction in the political and social spheres (though the consistency, repetition and tone of negative framing undermines this). The public-interest function in RT's and Sputnik's collection, translation and repackaging of non-English content is, however, less clear.

The Russian outlets give the impression less of investigative journalistic organisations holding power to account, and more of highly specific aggregators of stories of immigrant crime and ethnic conflict across Europe. An anglophone member of the public who relied on RT and Sputnik to learn about life in other European countries would receive an extremely skewed picture of societies in crisis.

It is not clear the extent to which this is done primarily to influence English-speaking audiences, or whether it is a by-product of the aggregation of content to be presented to Russian domestic audiences, and it is beyond the scope of this report to investigate. It may be a mixture of both. Future research monitoring how the content that RT and Sputnik harvest from Western news outlets is repackaged in Russian will be key to understanding how the Russian state uses external journalism as a tool for influencing its own domestic audiences as well as audiences internationally.

Next steps

This project marks a useful first step towards better understanding the ways in which motivated actors can use journalism – or 'journalism-like' information – to project content at targeted audiences, and the extent to which trusted local news organisations can be used as intermediaries in doing so.

At a technical level, the project developed a new tool allowing researchers to compare different datasets of articles to locate instances of matching content, and successfully piloted the use of it in identifying patterns of content-sharing between UK and Russian online news. Combined with the existing Steno tool allowing bulk collection and analysis of online news content, it is hoped that future research can build on the techniques employed here and assess how information from organisations like RT and Sputnik spreads across and within news provision in different countries. The availability of Steno to researchers on an open source licence will facilitate this.

The case study conducted on Russian-language news in Ukraine in collaboration with Texty.org.uk, gives some indication as to the possibility of using Steno in substantially different language environments. Though a limited study, minor adjustments to Steno's code and language support enabled researchers to gather articles, conduct content analysis and text-matching investigations, and detect patterns of information transmission between outlets in Russia and Ukraine. There is much scope for future collaborative research between groups running linked or parallel analyses using Steno.

As with all projects of this type, more research is needed to better understand how journalism is constructed in a digital age. Further investigation of the spread of wire copy beyond the largest agencies (Reuters, AFP, AP, etc) is needed, and reducing the time-consuming practice of establishing causality in digital news publishing is a key next step in facilitating research.

Finally, there is a significant lacuna in this study – the use of social media as a mechanism of information transmission to international audiences by motivated hostile actors. Though evidence is presented here of the indirect use of mainstream media to reach targeted audiences with information, the use of social networks by hostile actors to seed and spread disinformation is a critical issue in modern democracies.

Impressive and innovative research is being conducted to monitor the ways in which the Russian state does this;³⁵⁰ joined-up research projects investigating how traditional and new media are used as parallel channels of disinformation by hostile actors will be of significant importance in tackling the problem.

As will journalism itself. If foreign-language output by government-owned Russian news organisations is one of a range of information warfare weapons deployed by the Russian state, then ensuring that authoritative and trusted news organisations in targeted countries are not accidental conduits of disinformation will be an important means of blunting its effectiveness. RT and Sputnik demonstrate that journalism can be weaponised; it can also be democracies' most important defence.

350 For example: Demos (2018) Russian Influence Operations on Twitter, <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Russian-Influence-Operations-Working-Paper.pdf> (Accessed 2nd November 2018)

9.

Russian disinformation and international media: background and context

Russian Journalism as Disinformation

RT and Sputnik: Russian Journalism for Western Audiences

RT and Sputnik are the primary international news outlets through which the Russian state can advance its views to Western audiences. RT was established in 2005 as 'Russia Today' and subsequently rebranded and refocused as an 'alternative' news source; content production was also re-orientated from a focus on news about Russia to a broader international agenda. In 2013 it launched a video platform: Ruptly.TV (based in Berlin).³⁵¹

Sputnik was established in 2014 and built on the foundations of Voice of Russia as a multimedia organisation and news outlet. A new media agency, Rossiya Segodnya (which translates to 'Russia Today' but is not related to the original RT branding), was created in 2013.³⁵² It replaced RIA Novosti, which became a subsidiary media brand (a Russian-language news website) alongside Sputnik and other outlets such as InoSMI (a website that produces Russian language translations and summaries of Western media output). Rossiya Segodnya is tasked with generating 'coverage abroad of the state policy of the Russian Federation and public life in the Russian Federation'.³⁵³

Senior figures at Rossiya Segodnya and RT have multiple roles within the Russian media sphere. Dmitri Kiselev – head of Rossiya Segodnya – is also Deputy Director of the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VTGRK) and hosts the popular news programme Vesti Nedeli ('News of the Week') on Rossiya-1. Margarita Simonyan is Editor-in-Chief of both RT and Rossiya Segodnya. RT and Sputnik are well funded, at a level comparable with other international broadcasters, such as the BBC.³⁵⁴

Media reports cite a figure of \$376 million for RT (2015)³⁵⁵ and \$69 million for Sputnik (2017).³⁵⁶ Rossiya Segodnya and (ANO) TV-Novosti are the primary vehicles for funding Sputnik, RT and the other state-owned media brands (according to documents filed under the Foreign Agents Registration Act with the US Department of Justice).³⁵⁷

There is broad agreement among analysts and in academic literature on Russia's unconvincing claims of impartiality and the positioning of RT and Sputnik as 'alternatives' to the mainstream media (Sputnik and RT often incorporate these claims within their output).³⁵⁸ Public statements by executives also restate this position, for example in a statement to the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, Anna Belkina (RT UK) said: 'there seems to be a bit of a knee-jerk reaction and a rather harmful trend to dismiss a voice that is saying something different simply for challenging the established narrative on particular issues'.³⁵⁹ The number of investigations into RT output by the UK's broadcast regulator Ofcom suggests that the station's coverage goes beyond providing an alternative viewpoint within the framework of UK journalism.³⁶⁰ In the US, Congress revoked the credentials of RT in 2017.³⁶¹

The extent of RT's and Sputnik's reach in the UK is difficult to assess. RT and Sputnik report figures based on their potential market share.³⁶² Several studies cite the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) figure of 744,000³⁶³ and RT claims to have achieved five billion YouTube views. Though much of the content put out via RT and Sputnik is entertainment, sport or other 'soft' news genres, the seeding of stories in Western mainstream media by Russia has been identified by experts as an important area requiring research.

351 'RT launches 'Ruptly' - full-service global video news agency', RT.com, 4th April 2013, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/ruptly-news-agency-launch/> (accessed 12th May 2018)

352 President of Russia (2013) 'Указ о мерах по повышению эффективности деятельности государственных СМИ' [Decree on measures to improve the performance of state-run media], President of Russia Website, 9th December 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54513> (accessed 12th May 2018)

353 Ibid.

354 Meduza Project (2017) 'Comparing Russian and American government "propaganda"', Meduza.io, 14th September 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/short/2017/09/14/comparing-russian-and-american-government-propaganda> (accessed 25th May 2018)

355 Shuster, S. (2015) 'Inside Putin's On-Air Machine', Time Magazine, 5th March 2015, <http://time.com/rt-putin/> (accessed 21st May 2018)

356 Meduza Project (2017) Op. Cit.

357 RT America (File 6485); Sputnik (File 6524) available through the U.S. Department of Justice portal <https://efile.fara.gov/pls/apex/f?p=135:10>

358 'RT under fire because it 'gives a voice to critics of US system while MSM parrot govt line'', RT.com, 10th January 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/415490-rt-us-alternative-views/> (Accessed 12th May 2018)

359 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2017) The United Kingdom's relations with Russia, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmfaff/120/120.pdf> (Accessed 20th May 2017)

360 Waterson, J. (2018) 'RT faces seven new investigations in aftermath of Salisbury poisoning', Guardian, 18th April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/apr/18/rt-ofcom-salisbury-poisoning-coverage> (Accessed 12th May 2018)

361 'Withdrawal of RT America's accreditation on Capitol Hill 'dire development'', RT.com, 30th November 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/411456-rt-us-congress-accreditation/> (Accessed 11th May 2018)

362 'Distribution', RT Website, No Date, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/distribution/> (Accessed 3rd June 2018)

363 Smirnova, O. (2016) 'Russian TV: Contesting European Values', Reuters Institute, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/russian-tv-contesting-european-values> (Accessed 11th May 2018)

As Kier Giles states: ‘the nature of the internet means that the effective placing of disinformation in reputable news outlets is vastly cheaper, simpler, and more permanent than in previous decades when the primary medium was newspapers’.³⁶⁴

The use of Western experts by Russian news outlets has been identified as a strategy for building credibility with target audiences. A 2016 study by Monika Richter focused on RT’s editorial strategy and published a list of Western experts who have appeared on RT.³⁶⁵ The UK press has also reported on the hiring of political figures such as Alex Salmond (former First Minister of Scotland and MP) and George Galloway (a former MP) to host shows on the network.³⁶⁶ The benefit to Russia is the generation of credibility and attention. A different dynamic is emerging around the role of ‘experts’ and commentators within the Rossiya Segodnya ecosystem. Examples of this include the inclusion of content from RIA Novosti or Russian-language RT (rt.russian.com) articles.

Existing Research on RT and Sputnik

Work by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2016) provides a sophisticated conceptual analysis of Russian media output in comparison with information warfare in the Soviet period. Case studies are presented by experts on target countries: Germany; Sweden; Poland; the Czech Republic; Slovakia and Hungary. The project models pathways that Russia has developed for exporting narratives and identifies instances of direct input into Western media (using RT and Sputnik but without analysing the UK). Examples of meta-narratives surrounding coverage of the Crimean conflict identified in the study include: ‘Russia as a passive outsider’; ‘the people of Crimea are united’; ‘Russia is reacting to Western aggression’; and ‘the conflict is about a new European security order’.³⁶⁷

An earlier study by Nils Borchers (2011) examined RT as a public diplomacy tool deployed against the Baltic states (through an analysis of the RT programme Spotlight).

It analyses Russian coverage through the framework of public diplomacy, in terms of Russian attempts to shape public debates and influence publics and institutions in the Baltic states, and identifies early examples of Russian attempts to challenge ‘facts’ in the mainstream media of target countries.³⁶⁸

A RAND Corporation study (Paul and Matthews, 2016) outlined four distinguishing characteristics of the Russian propaganda model. These are: scale (multiple channels and messages); continuous, rapid and repetitive content; inconsistency (multiple narratives); and a willingness to disseminate truth and fiction alike.³⁶⁹ The study is notable because it examines the mechanics of Russian information operations and builds on communications and psychology research. Examples include: the use of multiple sources taking different routes to the same conclusion; a focus on large numbers rather than ‘quality’ of users; the use of multiple channels to increase the chance of messages being picked up; and multiple sources being used to strengthen credibility. The report interrogates why the Kremlin transmits contradictory messages or narratives that are easy and quick to disprove: ‘high volume can consume the attention and other available bandwidth of potential audiences, drowning out competing messages’.³⁷⁰ They also note the ‘ sleeper effect of low credibility sources becoming more persuasive over time as information can be retained by audiences more easily than the identity of the source who provided it.’³⁷¹ Most significantly, the authors identify the issue of Russian propaganda being ‘picked up and rebroadcast by legitimate news outlets’ resulting in the Kremlin’s themes and messages being repeated and amplified’.³⁷²

A study by Martin Kragh and Sebastian Asberg (2017) focuses on Sweden and provides one of the few studies focused on Sputnik.

364 Giles, K. (2016a) ‘Handbook of Russian Information Warfare’, NATO Defence College ‘NDC Fellowship Monograph Series’ Website, 23rd November 2016, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?picode=995> (Accessed 10th May 2018)

365 Richter, M. (2016) ‘The Kremlin’s Platform for “Useful Idiots” in the West: An Overview of RT’s Editorial Strategy and Evidence of Impact’, Kremlin Watch Report, 18th September 2016, <http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Overview-of-RTs-Editorial-Strategy-and-Evidence-of-Impact-1.pdf> (Accessed 7th May 2018)

366 Humphries, W. and M. Wade (2018) ‘Alex Salmond urged to cut ties with Kremlin-backed TV channel RT’, Times, 19th April 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/alex-salmond-urged-to-cut-ties-with-kremlin-backed-tv-channel-rt-3782dq2zg> (Accessed 3rd June 2018)

367 Pynnoniemi, K. and A. Racz (2016) ‘Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine’, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/fog-of-falsehood> (accessed 8th March 2017)

368 Borchers, N. (2011) ‘Do You Really Think Russia Should Pay Up for That? How the Russia-Based TV Channel RT Constructs Russian-Baltic Relations’, Javnost The Public Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture, 18:4

369 Paul, C. and M. Matthews (2016) ‘The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model’, RAND, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> (accessed 17th May 2018)

370 Ibid

371 Ibid

372 Ibid

The authors carried out a content analysis of 3,344 articles published on Sputnik Sweden (before the 'Nordic' Sputniks were closed in 2016). 10 Metanarratives were identified: Random news; 'clickbait'; Western policy failures, setbacks and incompetence; West is unreliable and hateful; Negative image of countries in Western sphere of influence; International cooperation with Russia; positive image of Russia and Russian success; Divisions within the West and NATO; Western or NATO aggressiveness or propaganda; crisis in the West.³⁷³ Their findings support a conclusion of Russian 'reflexive control', they also present examples of Russian 'active measures' eg forgeries to further undermine society. They conclude 'Metanarratives in public diplomacy and active measures towards Sweden have acted as communicating vessels, where Russian media outlets have filtered and broadcast internationally false information appearing in the Swedish media climate in order to sow doubt about the integrity of Sweden's political system'.³⁷⁴

Fletcher et al. undertook an in-depth study for the Reuters Institute (2018). They measured the reach of fake news in Italy and France, acknowledging that 'we lack even the most basic information about the scale of the problem in almost every country'.³⁷⁵ The research focused on 'sites that independent fact-checkers have shown to publish demonstrably false news and information', also looking at RT and Sputnik.³⁷⁶ It concluded that: 'false news websites in these countries are far less popular than major established news sites' and that '[p]articularly in France, some false news outlets generated more or as many interactions as news outlets'.³⁷⁷

Olga Smirnova (2016) analysed the framing of immigration in Europe on Russian television. The output of Russian domestic TV channels Channel 1 and RT were analysed in relation to three frames: 'Threat', 'Crisis' and 'Weakness'.³⁷⁸ The conclusions are also supported by research published by the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (2018) consisting of an extensive content analysis examining the framing of content in different states focusing on frames such as 'the horrors of life' portray political dysfunction in the West.³⁷⁹

Yablokov (2015) examined the coverage of established conspiracy theories on RT (for example, the Bilderberg Group; CIA drugtrafficking; 9/11). The research demonstrated RT's pivot towards alternative narratives and the decision to present Russia as fighting against US hypocrisy.³⁸⁰ Kohei Watanabe (2018) carried out a sophisticated analysis of Sputnik-published conspiracy theory content and Twitter engagement over the course of a year (2017-2018). He demonstrates that Russia attempts to use conspiratorial content to advance narratives that undermine wider public trust in institutions across Western society.³⁸¹

The Russian State and Russian media: control, coordination and communication

The potential for RT and Sputnik to seed content in Western media should be considered within the context of the wider Russian media environment and the approach of the Russian state to controlling outlets, agendas, and messages.

During the Putin era, media control and centralisation became priorities for the Kremlin. There are few truly independent mainstream outlets providing news and critical analysis with alternative viewpoints. At the national level, the media is largely state-owned or state-controlled by holding companies owned by loyal oligarchs with close ties to the Presidential Administration and to Putin himself. However, opaque ownership arrangements, tangled relationships, mergers, the transfer of assets and subsidiary relationships make accurate, definitive assessments of the control of media outlets challenging.

The main structures for state ownership and control are the Federal Agency for State Property Management (Rosimushchestvo) and the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VTGRK). Gazprom Media Holding controls a significant number of assets, in particular, NTV and Ekho Moskvyy. The oligarch-backed media holding companies control most of the influential privately owned outlets: National Media Group (Yuri Kovalchuk); ESN Group (Grigory Berezkin); Mail.ru Group (Alisher Usmanov); Afisha. Rambler.SUP (Alexander Mamut); and News Media Holding (Ashot Gabrelyanov).

373 Kragh, M. and S. Asberg (2017) 'Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40:6

374 Ibid

375 Fletcher, R., A. Cornia, L. Graves and R. Kleis Nielsen (2018) 'Measuring the reach of "fake news" and online disinformation in Europe', Reuters Institute <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/measuring-reach-fake-news-and-online-disinformation-europe> (accessed 26th May 2018)

376 Ibid

377 Ibid

378 Smirnova, O. (2016) Op. Cit.

379 Popovych, N., O. Makukhin, L. Tsybul'ska and R. Kavatsiuk (2018) Op. Cit.

380 Yablokov, I. (2015) Op. Cit.

381 Watanabe, K. (2018) Op. Cit.

In addition to control through ownership, the Russian state exerts influence through legal frameworks. As well as media laws, legislation on Non-Governmental Organisations, foreign investment, public order and security legislation have been used by the state as checks on media organisations. The use of financial audits or criminal investigations are also long-standing tools for exerting control. Administrative measures to constrain the media include SORM (System for Operative-Investigative Activities) telecommunications regulations (intercept mechanisms for controlling internet service providers) and the use of Roskomnadzor (the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) to block websites, issue fines or withhold licenses. The Kremlin has also been able to exert pressure on companies by forcing changes to editorial staff, and the Presidential Administration is able to use access to sources as to incentivise favourable coverage.³⁸² The high level of media control allows the Presidential Administration to disseminate and coordinate messages and mobilize support (the concept of ‘temniki’ – ‘themes’ – denotes the informal process whereby senior media figures are directed by the Kremlin).³⁸³

The effectiveness of the Kremlin’s system of domestic control has the advantage of insulating the Russian media from content and narratives from foreign states. The rationale for the Russian approach to the media (both domestic media and outward-facing outlets like RT and Sputnik) is based on two elements: regime security³⁸⁴ and a zero-sum approach to political competition.³⁸⁵ Dissenting views are tolerated only outside of first-order issues.³⁸⁶ In comparison with the domestic sphere, Russia has far fewer tools to exert influence in the international sphere.

Information warfare and Russian disinformation: central concepts

Defining information warfare

Several different conceptual approaches have been applied to analyse Russian disinformation: information warfare; soft power; strategic communication; PR and marketing. Information warfare is the most convincing conceptual approach but requires some adjustments to be applied to Russia.

Russia’s military operations in Syria and Ukraine, and alleged interference in Western elections have focused public, media and academic attention on Russian information warfare. There are fundamental differences in how the core concepts are understood in Moscow and in the West, which can complicate understanding of the issue. Key differences relate to: strategic culture; threat perception; identity; democratic development; security framework; force structure; and policy goals. Russia also has a long history at the forefront of theorising on information warfare and developing theory based on its own information operations, military strategy and history.³⁸⁷

‘Soft power’ is useful but amorphous. Western definitions focus on the projection of a positive view of a state in other countries.³⁸⁸ In the Russian formulation, *myagkaya sila* (‘soft force’), an additional active quality is present, relating to the purposeful destabilisation and undermining of an enemy.³⁸⁹ The literature built around soft power or public diplomacy frameworks often advances explanations referencing psychological research on audience reception of communication. However, it is weaker at defining boundaries between public diplomacy, international broadcasting and propaganda. Research couching the issue as ‘information warfare’ is generally more convincing at identifying the key elements that apply to Russian disinformation, in part because they engage with the Russian conceptualisation of soft power.³⁹⁰

382 Kovalev, A. (2017) ‘In Putin’s Russia, the hollowed-out media mirrors the state’, *Guardian*, 24th March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/24/putin-russia-media-state-government-control> (Accessed 28th August 2018)

383 EUvsDisinfo (2017) ‘Temnik – the Kremlin’s route to media control’, EUvsDisinfo, 30th March 2017, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/temnik-the-kremlins-route-to-media-control/> (accessed 29th May 2018)

384 Person, R., (2017) ‘Balance of threat: The domestic insecurity of Vladimir Putin’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8:45

385 Charap, S. and T. Colton (2017) *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Abingdon: Routledge

386 Kovalev, A. (2017) Op. Cit.

387 Thomas, T. (2014) ‘Russia’s Information Warfare Strategy: Can the Nation Cope in Future Conflicts?’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27:1

388 Nye, J. (2011) ‘The Future of Soft Power in US Foreign Policy’, In I. Panmar and M. Cox (eds.) *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge)

389 Perrson, G. (2014) ‘Russian influence and soft power in the Baltic States: the view from Moscow’, in M. Winnerstig (Ed.) *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-military Influence in the Baltic States* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency)

390 Giles, K. (2015) ‘The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare’, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Website, No Date, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/next-phase-russian-information-warfare-keir-giles> (Accessed 2nd May 2018)

'Hybrid warfare' has been an enduring concept for examining modern Russian propaganda efforts.³⁹¹ The term has also been used by NATO to refer to Russian combined military and communication activity.³⁹² However, the term can be overused and can over-emphasise the sense that disinformation and information operations are 'new' in this context.³⁹³ Renz and Smith (2016) outline weaknesses in the 'hybrid warfare' concept and its use in relation to information warfare: 'What analysts refer to when they speak about Russian 'hybrid warfare' against the West are first of all Russian attempts to use information channels (media, social media and political statements) to influence public opinion or political processes in other countries, but they also include actions as diverse as cyber attacks originating in Russia'.³⁹⁴

For Russian theorists, information warfare is a broad, holistic concept with greater nuance than in Western usage, with the notable difference that information warfare is carried out in peacetime.³⁹⁵ Peacetime information operations and an aggregated approach that draws no distinction between cyberattacks and propaganda as appropriate tools present a challenge to many states. Giles explains that the only meaningful division that can be applied to the Russian concept is between the notion of information-psychological warfare (targeting the population and armed forces of an adversary under normal conditions) and information-technology warfare (conceived to affect adversarial technical systems during conflict).³⁹⁶

Western states are disadvantaged when competing with Russian information warfare. Traditionally states have prepared for narrowly-defined cyberattacks but under the Russian conceptualisation, they face a multifaceted approach combining, for example, disinformation campaigns from Russian state-linked media, trolling and information dissemination via social networks and cyberattacks. The West is yet to fully grasp the threat and craft effective responses and coherent policies to deal with this threat.³⁹⁷

In this regard the concept of an 'information space' is a useful device. Russian policy documents, such as the National Security Strategy (2015) and the Military Doctrine (2014) indicate policy at the highest level. The Military Doctrine lists 'activities aimed at violent change of the constitutional system' as an internal military danger.³⁹⁸ The Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation (2016) deals directly with Russian national security in the 'information sphere'. It outlines a position that dominates Russian strategic narratives, namely that Russia is the victim of information warfare and pressure from hostile states.³⁹⁹ The importance of regime security and control of domestic communication are key drivers of Russian government decision-making in this area.⁴⁰⁰

The Russian (and previously Soviet) concepts of 'maskirovka' (tactical misdirection), 'active measures' (political warfare) and 'reflexive control' (a means of influencing the decision-making of an adversary) are relevant for understanding contemporary information warfare. The point of maskirovka is to promote confusion in the mind of an enemy and 'promote a massive "fog of war"'.⁴⁰¹ Active measures are synonymous with the Soviet-era Committee of State Security (KGB), designed to disrupt target states and the concept has been convincingly applied to modern Russian methods.⁴⁰²

391 Chivvis, C. (2017) 'Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare" And What Can Be Done About It' [Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee on 22nd March 2017], RAND, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html> (Accessed 15th May 2018)

392 Westerlund, F. and J. Norberg (2016) 'Military Means for non-military Measures: The Russian Approach to the Use of Armed Force as Seen in Ukraine', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29:4

393 Kasapoglu, C. (2015) 'Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control' [NATO Research Paper No. 121], NATO Defence College Website, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=877> (Accessed 3rd June 2018)

394 Renz, B. and H. Smith (2016) 'Russia and Hybrid Warfare – Going Beyond the Label' Aleksanteri Papers Website, 2016, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/4920> (Accessed 23rd June 2018)

395 Giles, K. (2016a) Op. Cit.

Franke, U. (2015) War by non-military means: understanding Russian information warfare, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) <https://www.foi.se/reports/summary?reportNo=FOI-R--4065--SE> (Accessed 23rd June 2018)

Sayfetdinov K. (2014) "Information Operations on the Battlefield", *Military Thought*, 23:3

396 Giles, K. (2016a) Op. Cit.

397 Ibid

398 Embassy of the Russian Federation to the UK (2014) Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, [Rusemb.org.uk](https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029), 29th June 2015, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029> (Accessed 29th June 2018)

399 President of Russia (2016) 'Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5th December 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCKB6BZ29/content/id/2563163 (Accessed 23rd June 2018)

400 The salience of this issue can be found in the creation of a new Military Political Directorate in the Ministry of Defence (30 July 2018). There is also bill in the Federal Assembly to prevent military personnel posting on social media (Bill No. 546450-7, 12th September 2018). This is notable because Russia's initial denials of involvement in Crimea (2014) were undermined by social media posts by Russian servicemen.

401 Kasapoglu, C. (2015) 'Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control' [NATO Research Paper No. 121], NATO Defence College Website, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=877> (Accessed 3rd June 2018)

402 Abrams, S. (2016) 'Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia', *Connections*, 15:1

The concept of 'reflexive control' is particularly useful in understanding information warfare. Thomas (2004) defines the concept as: 'a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action'.⁴⁰³ It refers to methods for shaping the perceptions of the adversary so as to create conditions that are positive for Russian strategic interests. This could be focused on military personnel or the public (eg undermining trust in institutions).

Continuity, change and ideology: the Soviet legacy

Beyond the concepts outlined above, the notion of continuity and change and the Soviet legacy must be considered when examining contemporary disinformation. Two elements are particularly important: The role of ideology; and the substantive difference between Soviet-era and contemporary propaganda. In the Soviet period, Marxism-Leninism provided the basis for the political system and provided the justification for high-level security, military and foreign policy such as the structure of military doctrine.

'Sovereign democracy' or 'Putinism' have been put forward as conceptualisations of contemporary Russian state ideology. However, rather than ideology, a zero-sum approach to international affairs and policy flexibility with a consistent narrative of Russian 'greatness' are defining characteristics of the Kremlin's outlook. In sharp contrast with the Soviet approach, 'disinformation from Moscow is primarily not selling Russia as an idea, or the Russian model as one to emulate'.⁴⁰⁴ A narrative of the 'Eurasian' pathway can be identified in Russian media outlook but this should be treated more as a sub-element of more dominant anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives, and is focused on developing Eurasian 'alternatives' to European institutions.

A second distinction is the diminished role of 'objectivetruth' in the Russian approach to information warfare. As Peter Pomerantsev argues, under the current conditions, objective truth is almost irrelevant: 'Soviet measures went to great lengths to make their forgeries look convincing, now the Kremlin doesn't seem to care if it is caught: The aim is to confuse rather than convince, to trash the information space so the audience gives up looking for any truth amid the chaos'.⁴⁰⁵ This view is widely supported within alternative analyses.⁴⁰⁶ Pomerantsev also applies the argument to internal and external politics in Russia which outlines Russia's holistic understanding of information warfare.⁴⁰⁷

Media disinformation as a tool of information warfare: the Ukrainian conflict and beyond

Research on Russian disinformation operations in the Ukrainian conflict is well-developed.⁴⁰⁸ A report for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2016) focused on three media outlets that advanced Russian narratives as they reported on the military campaign (April-December 2014): Komsomolskaya Pravda (a daily tabloid which publishes a Ukrainian version); *TV Zvezda* (owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence); *I.A. Regnum* (a Kremlin-affiliated news agency).⁴⁰⁹ The project raised some interesting points in terms of defining audiences in a bilingual target population. Language is a crucial factor in the dissemination of disinformation across Europe as Russia has invested in bespoke language channels for both RT and Sputnik, in addition to investing in personnel with language skills.⁴¹⁰

Walker (2016) argues that 'State or state-friendly media in Russia – Life News, NTV, Channel One Russia, Russia 24 – disseminate not just the Kremlin's narratives but also outright fakery to domestic audiences and those in the Russian-speaking space [including parts of Ukraine]. These outlets spread the same stories via social media as well. RT, meanwhile, pushes this manipulated content out to international audiences'.⁴¹¹

403 Thomas, T. (2004) 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 17:2

404 Giles, K. (2015) 'The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/next-phase-russian-information-warfare-keir-giles> (Accessed 2nd May 2018)

405 Pomerantsev, P. (2015). 'Inside Putin's Information War', *Politico Magazine*, 4th January 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/putin-russia-tv-113960> (Accessed 2nd May 2018).

406 Shevtsova, L. (2015) 'Forward to the past in Russia', *Journal of Democracy*, 26:2
Giles, K., (2016a) Op. Cit.

407 Pomerantsev, P. (2014) 'Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare,' *The Atlantic*, 9th September 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/> (Accessed 17th May 2018)

408 Snegovaya, M. (2015) 'Putin's information warfare in Ukraine (Russia report No. 1)', *The Institute for the Study of War*, [CACHED LINK] (Accessed 2nd September 2018.)

409 Sazonov, V. et al. (2016) *Russian Information Campaign Against The Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: Combined Analysis*, https://www.ksk.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Report_infoops_08.02.2017.pdf. (Accessed 14th July 2018)

410 Giles, K. (2016a) Op. Cit.

411 Walker, C. (2016) 'The Hijacking of "Soft Power"', *Journal of Democracy*, 27:1

Empirical work on Russian influence is being generated by fact-checking and ‘debunking’ projects such as the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab); StopFake (Stopfake.org); European External Action Service (East Stratcom Task Force); the EUvsDisinfo Project (Euvdisinfo.eu); Citizen Lab (citizenlab.ca); PropOrNot (propornot.com); and Bellingcat (bellingcat.com). These projects, generally staffed by small teams with a crowdsourcing component, generate case studies and analytical reports explaining and unmasking pro-Russian influence operations, mindful of issues of transparency and the ethics of publishing lists of pro-Kremlin websites or establishing the threshold for disseminating Kremlin-approved content.⁴¹² DFRLab and StopFake have published significant insights and contributions in this area and have both been targeted in negative coverage from Sputnik. RT itself has attempted to nullify the work of these groups by launching a ‘FakeCheck’ section on its website.

Investigations such as those by *The New York Times*,⁴¹³ *Buzzfeed*⁴¹⁴ and *Bellingcat*⁴¹⁵ are also extremely useful in demonstrating the workings of Russian efforts to influence foreign publics and mainstream media.

The techniques behind Russian information operations are characterised in several works. Ben Nimmo has made multiple high-quality contributions to the literature and methodologies to tackle Russian disinformation. His typology (later adopted by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations) is well-established and lists the following techniques: Ping pong (multiple websites to promote content); Misleading title; Zero proof (no sources); False visuals; Totum pro parte (using one expert to portray an official position of a government); Altering the quotation, source or context; Loaded words or metaphors; Ridiculing, discrediting and diminution; Whataboutism; Conspiracy theories; Joining the bandwagon; and ‘Drowning facts with emotion.’⁴¹⁶

Defining ‘Success’ in Disinformation Campaigns and Formulating Policy Responses

The difficulty of establishing the impact of information operations is clearly articulated in the literature. Fedor and Freidheim (2017) identify the Kremlin’s methodology for assessing impact: ‘preoccupation with rankings of all sorts: trending hashtags on Twitter, top videos on YouTube, viral social media content, and the most shared news articles’.⁴¹⁷ Resource allocation and bureaucratic competition provide further insight: ‘For bureaucrats search engine rankings also offer a way of quantifying their achievements and justifying their achievements and justifying their continued existence’.⁴¹⁸ However, more research is required to assess how Moscow measures success if it is accepted that Moscow is trying to undermine the ‘fundamentals of information and credibility that informed debate are supposed to rest upon’.⁴¹⁹

Hellman and Wagnsson (2017) present a typology of potential state responses expressed as a continuum (ranging from engagement to disengagement): confronting; blocking; naturalising; ignoring.⁴²⁰ In terms of practical steps for states subjected to Russian disinformation campaigns there is a degree of agreement within the literature: publicly debunk the claims; compete (in diasporas and Russian language); develop EU projects and private debunking projects; administrative means (social media and regulation); increase funding on research and marketing as a countermeasure.

Recommendations outlined by Paul and Matthews (2016) to counter the ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ are rooted in psychological research. They argue that traditional counter-propaganda will likely be ineffective. Attempts to refute should be made at the time of initial exposure; the refutation should be repeated; an alternative story should be presented (ie the isolated facts should not just be removed).

412 PropOrNot (2016) ‘Black Friday Report: On Russian Propaganda Network Mapping’, PropOrNot.com, 26th November 2016, <http://www.propornot.com> (Accessed 10th May 2018)

413 Macfarquhar, N. and A. Rossback (2017) ‘How Russian Propaganda Spread From a Parody Website to Fox News,’ *New York Times*, 7th June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/07/world/europe/anatomy-of-fake-news-russian-propaganda.html> (Accessed 17th July 2018)

414 Gray, R. (2014) ‘How the Truth is Made at Russia Today,’ *Buzzfeed News*, 13th March 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosiegray/how-the-truth-is-made-at-russia-today> (Accessed 17th July 2018)

Roonemaa, H. and I. Springe (2018) ‘This is How Russian Propaganda Actually Works in the 21st Century,’ *Buzzfeed News*, 29th August 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/holgerroonemaa/russia-propaganda-baltics-baltnews> (Accessed 30th August 2018)

415 Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018) ‘Skripal Suspect Boshirov Identified as GRU Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga,’ *Bellingcat*, 26th September 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/09/26/skripal-suspect-boshirov-identified-gru-colonel-anatoliy-chepiga/> (Accessed 26th September 2018)

416 Nimmo, B. (2015) ‘Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia’s Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter it,’ *StopFake*, 19th May 2015, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/> (Accessed 8th May 2018)

417 Fedor, J. and R. Freidheim (2017) ‘“We need more clips about Putin, and lots of them”: Russia’s state-commissioned online visual culture,’ *Nationalities Papers* 45:2

418 Ibid

419 O’Loughlin, B. (2015) ‘The permanent campaign’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 8:2

420 Hellman, M. and C. Wagnsson (2017) ‘How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework’, *European Security*, 26:2

Other recommendations include: competing to reach the intended audience; tackling the cause rather than trying to fight the symptoms; and using technical means to prevent propaganda.

Policy recommendations advanced by Mark Galeotti (2017) include: identifying curators and their methods and interests; addressing the counter intelligence gap; and 'fighting gullibility, not disinformation'.⁴²¹

421 Galeotti, M. (2017) 'Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe', European Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe (Accessed 4th June 2018)

10.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology

Appendix 2: Codebooks and coding frames

Appendix 3: Narratives and sources – Skripal coverage

Appendix 4: Political dysfunction frame tables, by country

Appendix 1: Methodology

Steno as an analytical tool

This report is based on an analysis of the output of two groups of media outlets over two four-week samples in 2017 and 2018. In each case the software tool Steno was used to collect and store content from pre-selected news sites for analysis by researchers using a combination of automated tagging and manual content analysis.

The Steno tool has been in full development since 2015 by the developer Ben Campbell (for the UK think tank The Media Standards Trust) and in conjunction with Dr Gordon Ramsay (initially at the Media Standards Trust, latterly at the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power in the Policy Institute at King's College London). The tool was developed in part to make large-scale manual content analysis a quicker and easier endeavour, and partly in response to a growing corpus of research that sought to fully automate digital and social media content analysis. In recognition of the necessity of a combination of researcher expertise and technical capability in future analyses of news content in a digital age, Steno was developed to combine large-scale automated collection with a user interface that allowed expert researchers to practice analytical methodologies on large bodies of news data.

A central aim of the present project was to build into the existing Steno tool the capacity to assess the extent to which news texts contained overlapping or duplicated content, to see the extent to which news sites lift and copy information put in the public domain elsewhere. This grew out of the Media Standards Trust project 'Churnalism.org', which provided researchers with a tool to compare large selections of news articles with commercial press releases, to measure the extent to which news content was based on information designed for replication by motivated private actors. The current project takes some of the principles behind Churnalism.org and applies them to the comparison of two separate databases of news content to test (in this case) whether content placed in Russian English-language news outlets was being picked up and recycled by news outlets in other countries. In the process of development an additional function was added – the capacity to match specific blocks of text (generally single news articles or quotes) with full datasets.

This section outlines how the different tools in the Steno package work, beginning with the standard text search and analysis tool, followed by the new content matching tool. It will also list the changes that were made to Steno in the Ukrainian/Russian-language case study.

Text search and analysis with Steno

Scraping content:

Steno is built around the capacity to scrape content from news sites to be stored in a structured way for retrieval by researchers using a local Graphical User Interface. The article discovery system is based on per-source configuration, so a relatively simple scraper is set up to scan all URLs published on a preselected site, only collecting those not already in the database. In practice this means that preselected publications must have a scraper configured for each one, and article collection begins at the point that the scraper begins operation. This means that back-dated article collection is considerably more difficult, and so forward planning of research and publications is highly desirable.

Once the scrapers are active they store the text of each article on a server, along with some metadata, including: publication, headline, publication date, byline, URL, and keyword/section (depending on whether publications are structured in such a way as to include this information).

For this project, scrapers had been running a continuous collection of all articles on most of the relevant UK-based media outlets since before 2017. For RT and Sputnik however, backdated articles for the 2017 sample had to be added by the developer, but by January 2018 scrapers had been configured to collect all content published on those sites.

Selected news outlets in this project:

News outlets were selected in two groups: UK mainstream news sites, comprising the main public service broadcasters, national newspapers and high-profile digital-only news sites; and Russian English-Language state-linked news sites RT and Sputnik.

UK mainstream media:

Broadcasters⁴²²

BBC: bbc.co.uk/news

ITV: itv.com/news

Channel 4: channel4.com/news

Sky News: news.sky.com

Newspapers (includes Sunday variations)

The Daily Mail: dailymail.co.uk

The Daily Express: express.co.uk

The Daily Mirror (also includes the Sunday People): mirror.co.uk

The Daily Star and Daily Star Sunday: dailystar.co.uk

The Daily Telegraph: telegraph.co.uk

The Financial Times: ft.com

The Guardian: theguardian.com/uk

The i: inews.co.uk

The Independent: independent.co.uk

The Times (including The Sunday Times): thetimes.co.uk

The Sun: thesun.co.uk

Digital Only

Buzzfeed UK: buzzfeed.com/?country=uk

Huffington Post UK: huffingtonpost.co.uk

Russian sources:

RT: rt.com

Sputnik International: sputniknews.com

Manual content analysis

Once collected, researchers use a Graphical User Interface (GUI) to pull articles from the servers by date range and store them in local databases (in SQLite format). Larger datasets (over approximately 30,000 articles) can be slow to work with, depending on the processing power and memory of the computers used by researchers, so by convention projects using Steno have tended to break articles down into weekly databases. In the context of this project, this meant that 24 databases were constructed – one for each of the eight weeks for each group.

The GUI allows researchers to perform a number of functions on the collected datasets, including:

- Searches using simple Boolean operators (NOT, AND, OR) built around metadata categories, for example:
 - ‘content: (putin AND nato)’
 - ‘headline: putin AND content: “united states”’
 - (NOT functions expressed as ‘-’ before a category): ‘content: putin -content: nato’
- The capacity to manually add and remove tags on selected articles, or to delete selected articles from the database.
- The ability to apply automated scripts for tagging and deletion (see below).

Steno also includes a text pane displaying the text of any selected article, with quotes and search terms highlighted to assist researchers in locating information about sources or about selected topics.

Tagging and scripts

Pre-written scripts can be applied to any dataset and used to perform automated tagging and deletion functions. Autodeletion scripts are especially necessary in order to filter out types and genres of articles not relevant to the analysis. Usually, this involves the removal of sports coverage, lifestyle content, reviews and other types of content not based on journalistic reportage or commentary, however, this must be tailored to the nature of the project. Care must also be taken to be conservative with bulk deletion functions in order not to lose relevant content.

Tagging scripts apply the tagging function (or untagging if needed) on the basis of search terms. The fragment of the ‘Immigration’ tag below is a simple example of the use of text strings to automatically assign tags. While immigration is a topic in which a relatively short list of terms are present in most or all relevant articles, it is still likely to produce false positives in the case of articles mentioning animal migration.

‘Immigration’ Tagging Script (Tag = ‘imm’)

immigration => TAG imm

immigrants => TAG imm

immigrant => TAG imm

migration => TAG imm

“asylum seekers” => TAG imm

“asylum seeker” => TAG imm

migrants => TAG imm

migration => TAG imm

migrant => TAG imm

422 The analysis is of text articles published on broadcasters’ websites, not articles that consist solely of video or audio content.

The potential for producing false positives using this method means that manual checking by researchers is desirable when ensuring that article tagging is entirely accurate. Repeated testing and re-iteration of tagging scripts is also necessary to ensure that results are accurate.

In this project, some targeted smaller databases were created for easier analysis of specific themes (NATO and the Skripal Incident). Additional information on how Steno was used to conduct those analyses are set out in Appendices 2 and 3 below.

Content matching and similarity testing with Steno

A content matching component for Steno was created for this project and consists of two functions: the comparison of two database files to test which articles are wholly or partially replicated in the target (Match) database from the input (Query) database; and the capacity to match a text fragment against a database file to see how many articles it is wholly or partly reproduced in.

Whole-database comparisons

The whole-database comparison function requires the designation of a Query database (eg Russian media articles, 4th-10th March 2018) and a Match database (eg UK mainstream media articles, 4th-10th March 2018) and comparing the database according to certain variables. This process involves taking the full text of each article in the Query database, converting each word to lowercase and removing punctuation, removing common stop words (such as 'a', 'in', 'and' etc) and applying stemming (reducing all words to their root form - eg converting all variants of 'to run' – running, runs, ran – to 'run'). The resulting text for every article is then converted into n-grams of a preselected length. For example, for a text reading “one two three four five” where n-grams were set at a size of 3 strings, the resulting n-grams would be (1) “one two three”; (2) “two three four”; (3) “three four five”. Each n-gram is then allocated a unique document ID so that it can be associated with a specific article.

Steno then scans the Match database and, for each article, records which Query database n-grams are recorded. For each article, a match threshold is calculated on the basis of (1) how many n-grams from an article in the Query database appear in the Match database article, and (2) the resulting number divided by the total number of n-grams in the Query database article. So, a match factor of 0.5 would indicate that exactly half of the n-grams from an article in the Query database appear in an article in the Match database, indicating a very high chance that content has been replicated.

The results of a comparison such as this are then produced in an HTML file including hyperlinks to the Query and Match articles where replication has been identified. These can then be analysed by researchers to determine whether content duplication has taken place.

Results can be configured according to three variables. These are:

- **Match threshold**, where 0 = no match and 1 = full match. The default setting is 0.4
- **N-gram size**, where the default setting is 3 strings/ words (eg “one two three”)
- **Article length**, where articles below a certain word length can be discarded (typically to remove video-only articles)

A resulting comparison may therefore be configured to ignore all articles under 100 words in length or with a match factor of below 0.4, based on an n-gram length of three strings/words.

Targeted Text Comparison

In addition to the database comparison it is possible to use the Steno-Similar tool to test whether a fragment of text appears in a database. This allows researchers to paste a block of text – typically the body of an article or a full quote – into the Steno-Similar GUI and run a similar process, with the same variables of match factor / n-gram length / word limit. This allows for a more targeted assessment of whether certain articles or quotes of high salience or interest can be quickly run against a full dataset of articles to see if, or how often, it is replicated.

There is an issue of causation in using both of the Steno-Similar functions. Given the possibility of two-way content appropriation between news outlets in each dataset, the results produced by Steno-Similar do not account for who published the content first – only whether the Query text/database is replicated in the Match database. It is therefore necessary for researchers, when analysing results, to determine using timestamps where the content was first published.

Adjustments for Non-English Language Case Study

For the purposes of the Ukraine case study a number of additional minor features had to be imported into both the Steno text analysis tool and the Steno-Similar comparison tool.

Scraper reconfiguration

A new set of scrapers had to be constructed to pick up the sample of Russian and Ukraine-based Russian-language outlets. These were:

Russian Outlets

TASS: tass.ru

RIA Novosti: ria.ru

RT: Russian.rt.com

Ukrainian Russian-Language News Outlets

Vesti-ukr.com

Strana.ua

Podrobnosti.ua

Newsone.ua

112.ua

Obozrevatel.com

Korrespondent.net

Scrapers for these sites were configured and began collecting information on Wednesday 15th August, although issues with the configuration of date and time markups on Korrespondent.net meant that article collection for that site was delayed by several days. These scrapers then ran until the end of the case study analysis period on 25th September.

Russian language support

Steno uses UTF-8 character encoding and so was can be used to collect and store content in Cyrillic. Russian language support was added to Steno to allow indexing, search, tagging and script writing using the Russian alphabet. Although the news outlets sampled all published in Russian rather than Ukrainian, testing showed that after the addition of Russian language support for the search and text-matching functions, words containing Ukrainian characters (for example, і) were also searchable. Boolean operators in the search function of Steno subsequently worked in English (AND, OR) and Russian (И, ИЛИ).

As a synthetic language (as opposed to an analytic language like English) Russian is less well served by Steno's stemming function. Though some attempts were made to integrate lemmatisation into the Steno code to better identify Russian case endings in search, this was not completed at the time of the case study testing, and so searches had to be handled using specific word cases (eg Москва, Москве, Москву etc to denote Moscow).

Note on Transliteration and Translation

Where applicable, this report adopts transliterations used in quoted or discussed publications.

Translations are the author's own, unless stated otherwise.

Appendix 2: Codebooks and coding frames

Political dysfunction analysis

Political dysfunction code sheet replica

Political dysfunction code sheet	
Article data	
Source: _____	
Date: _____	
Headline: _____	

Country focus: _____	

Dysfunction frames	Notes
Conflict, Partisan: _____	
Conflict, Institution: _____	
Conflict, Social: _____	

Failure, Government: _____	
Failure, Other Parties: _____	
Failure, Institutions: _____	
Failure, Military: _____	

Corruption: _____	
Inequality: _____	
Undemocratic: _____	
Crime/Violence: _____	

Political dysfunction codebook

Article data

Source	Source of article Values: 1. RT 2. Sputnik
Date	Date of article
Headline	Article headline
Country Focus	Which country does the article focus on? (Eligible countries: UK; USA; France; Germany; Italy; Sweden; Ukraine)

Dysfunction frames

To be recorded as 'Y' if they appear anywhere within the text of the article:

Variable Name	Description
Conflict, Partisan	Conflict or disagreement between rival political parties or groups within the context of policy-making in formal political institutions (Only includes formal political parties or blocs)
Conflict, Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict or disagreement between formal political institutions, eg: Between branches of government (executive-legislative-judiciary) Between unions/NGOs and government Between competing NGOs / Representative groups Between national and sub-national government
Conflict, Social	Conflict or disagreement between social groups – religious, ethnic, racial, or economic (includes mention of insurgent anti-system groups)
Failure, Government	Descriptions of government failure (eg failure to deliver policies, incompetence, intra-governmental divisions). Includes political corruption or scandals.
Failure, Other Parties	Descriptions of failure, incompetence, corruption or scandals involving other political parties or entities
Failure, Institutions	Descriptions of administrative failure by public bodies or significant private entities, eg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Police Security services Health services Education services Banks
Failure, Military	Descriptions of failure within the armed services of an eligible country. Includes failure abroad, or administrative failure at home (including legal cases brought against armed services)
Corruption	Any explicit mention of economic or political corruption in an eligible country (may be double-counted with political corruption in 'Failure' frames)
Inequality	Any mention of economic inequality in an eligible country
Undemocratic	Any mention of undemocratic or unfair practices; hypocrisy by democratic states (includes freedom of speech)
Violent Crime	Any mention of political violence (including terrorism) or instances of violent or sexual crime

Political Dysfunction Inter-Coder Reliability Testing Results

The table below shows the results of an Inter-Coder-Reliability (ICR) test run on two coders, with results calculated using ReCal2. Each coder had independently applied the Political Dysfunction coding frame to a subset of 80 articles. The variables correspond to the 'Dysfunction Frame' variables in the coding frame outlined above (ie 'Variable 1' = 'Conflict, Partisan')

The results demonstrate a very high percentage agreement on the coding variables between the two coders, ranging from approximately 91% to 100%. For some variables (1 – 'Conflict, Partisan'; 5 – 'Failure, Parties'; 8 – 'Corruption'; and 10 – 'Undemocratic') the Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha scores are comparatively low, though disagreements between coders were also low – this may be ascribed to the fact that positive '1' scores for these binary variables were relatively rare. More and larger-scale ICR testing using this dataset would help to diagnose this. While researchers were confident that coder agreement on all variables was satisfyingly high, results derived from Variables 1, 5, 8 and 10 should be approached with some caution.

	Percent Agreement	Scott's PI	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha	N Agreements	N Disagreements	N Cases	N Decisions
Variable 1	95	0.473684211	0.480519481	0.476973684	76	4	80	160
Variable 2	95	0.803921569	0.804161567	0.805147059	76	4	80	160
Variable 3	97.5	0.885714286	0.885714286	0.886428571	78	2	80	160
Variable 4	95	0.749608764	0.749608764	0.751173709	76	4	80	160
Variable 5	98.75	0.66029724	0.661016949	0.662420382	79	1	80	160
Variable 6	96.25	0.802550391	0.802631579	0.803784451	77	3	80	160
Variable 7	97.5	0.81981982	0.820224719	0.820945946	78	2	80	160
Variable 8	97.5	0.487179487	0.487179487	0.490384615	78	2	80	160
Variable 9	100	1	1	1	80	0	80	160
Variable 10	91.25	0.616306954	0.617486339	0.618705036	73	7	80	160
Variable 11	92.5	0.72445465	0.725714286	0.726176808	74	6	80	160

NATO analysis and Russian military frames

NATO frames

The analysis of NATO coverage on RT and Sputnik was based on the subset of articles in which NATO was mentioned in any capacity. The database of articles was determined initially by using tagging to identify all articles containing “nato” within the article text or headline. The resulting articles were then checked manually to remove any ineligible articles. These generally took two forms: those listing NATO identifiers when mentioning weaponry (and containing no other references to NATO as a body), and those using NATO as a comparator when mentioning alternative international bodies (such as referring to a potential Middle Eastern military alliance as “the Arab NATO”). This resulted in a total of 617 articles (169 RT and 448 Sputnik articles over all eight weeks of both samples).

The set of frames applied to RT/Sputnik NATO coverage was developed following an analysis of a subset of articles by two researchers to determine the main repeating themes. Five themes were identified, and articles were then analysed to determine which were present in each article, reflecting the researchers’ observations that relatively few articles did not contain at least one substantive claim about the organisation. A final frame was added to record those articles that contained no evaluative reference or – in very few cases – a positive reference to the effectiveness of NATO.

Frame	Description
Criticism of NATO	Descriptions of NATO as aggressive, expansionist, provocative or otherwise threatening to Russia. Also includes references to NATO’s illegitimacy, accusations of illegality or ingrained ‘Russophobia’, and references to NATO’s ineptitude.
Conflict within NATO	Descriptions of actual or speculative disputes between member states of NATO, or between member states and other allies.
Negative effects of membership	Assertions that membership of NATO is bad for member states and their populations, in relation to: security; cost; loss of sovereignty; democratic deficit.
Russian justifications for response	Description of Russia’s justifications for responding to NATO behaviour, particularly the threat NATO poses to Russian interests. Also includes: positive references to Russian strength in relation to NATO (including NATO’s implied weakness and fear of Russia); assertions of Russian military and technological edge over NATO.
Lack of negative frame	Any article mentioning NATO that doesn’t include any of the other four frames.

Weapon coverage frames

For the analysis of coverage of Russian weaponry and military capability in both RT/Sputnik and in the UK media, a series of weapons were selected for keywords searches. This list of weapons was generated from an analysis of RT and Sputnik articles before and during the sample periods in 2017 and 2018.

Russian weapon demonstrations in 2017

The 2017 sample begins on 11th May, two days after the Russian Victory Day celebrations commemorating the Soviet victory in the Second World War. The military parade, held in Red Square, is traditionally a showcase of Russia’s military power and includes new weapons systems. The 2017 parade did not include aircraft due to adverse weather conditions, but weapons previously displayed in 2015 (including the T-14 ‘Armata’-tracked heavy battle tank) featured, in addition to the Iskander and Yars missiles and air defence systems such as the Triumf/S-400, the Tor-M2U SAM, Pantsir-S1 and Buk-M2. The arctic variants of Pantsir (Pantsir-SA) and Tor (Tor-M2DT) were featured in the parade for the first time, reflecting increased Russian focus on the region.

State procurement plans are a strong driver of content on weapons and an indicator of the Kremlin’s security priorities. The State Armament Programme (GPV) is a classified framework document for Russian procurement which is fulfilled by an annual State Defence Order (GOZ). The drafting of a new GPV (2018–2027) was the subject of statements by senior defence figures (including Putin) during the 2017 sample. Insights into procurement also relate to priorities in terms of R&D, as Putin stated: ‘The planned work will not just provide the army and navy with modern weapons and equipment, but will lay the scientific and technological ground for developing completely new types of weapons’.⁴²³ Sergey Shoigu (Minister of Defence) reported progress on military modernisation to the Federation Council noting that planned procurement ‘will allow us to meet the target which was put by the President of the Russian Federation and get to the level of equipping Armed Forces with modern weapons and technology not below 70 percent at the end of 2020’.⁴²⁴ Shoigu cited plans for procurement of the T-50 (Su-57, stealth fighter aircraft), S-500 (air defence system) and the equipping of forces with the Yars, Iskander and Kalibr missiles.

423 President of Russia (2017) ‘Meeting on drafting of the State Armament Programme for 2018–2025’, President of Russia Website, 17 May 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54513> (accessed 27 July 2018).

424 Ministry of Defence (2017) ‘Russian Defence Minister gave a speech at the session of the Federation Council within the government hour’, Ministry of Defence Website, 24 May 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12125102@egNews (accessed 4 June 2018).

The ongoing Syrian conflict is a source for generating RT and Sputnik content. It is an opportunity to criticise the US for ‘supporting’ Daesh (Islamic State – ISIS) and report on Russian military success. For example the Kalibr missile strike on Palmyra (reported on 31 May 2017).⁴²⁵ The reliability of Russia as a partner is a frame applied across RT and Sputnik and can take the form of articles focused on potential defence deals, agreed contracts and state visits. Examples of deals with the Philippines and India can be found within the 2017 sample. Military tensions played out either through aircraft intercepts or scheduled exercises also generate weapons content.

Russian weapon showcasing in 2018

The 2018 sample was also shaped by significant military and political events. Most notably the presidential election (18th March 2018) and President Putin’s ‘State of the Nation’ speech to the Federal Assembly on 1st March, three days before the sample began. Putin’s speech listed examples of Russian military development and weapons. These included: Sarmat (ICBM); Avangard (hypersonic glide vehicle) and Kinzhal (hypersonic missile). Putin also announced an MOD public competition to name some of the new systems, including an underwater drone (Poseidon), a nuclear-powered cruise missile (Burevestnik) and a combat laser system (Peresvet).⁴²⁶ In addition to Putin’s speech, the sample period saw tests of new systems and existing capabilities (such as Iskander).

Putin’s framing of the new weapons omitted or downplayed key elements that would be required for an effective assessment. This includes issues such as: funding; technical viability; timescales; technological development and the development of similar systems by rival militaries. In terms of funding, putting prototype systems into testing and then serial production is expensive. The lack of transparency in military spending and investment in the modernisation of the defence industries, makes it challenging to provide effective oversight. This can result in budget reductions in the form of sequesters and reallocations or increases through the provision of state credit.

Technical viability is difficult to verify as there is little independent information available and there are many different stages where a system can be reported as being in ‘development’ (ie design, prototyping, testing, procurement, production or deployment in combat). This is particularly relevant for new systems. For example, hypersonic missile speeds represent a significant challenge in terms of the temperatures generated, requiring cutting-edge materials research. Related to the technical challenge, and by no means peculiar to Russia, are the changing timescale of complex projects which can be delayed for many reasons (such as funding gaps, technical deficiency or a change in security priorities).

The extent to which weapons are actually ‘new’ technology should also be considered. In terms of both design and production, much of Russia’s defence economy is based on Soviet R&D and design. Moreover, the modernisation of military involves both the deployment of new weapons and upgrading existing systems. The Kremlin has sought to improve this area with oversight and leadership provided by the Military-Industrial Commission (VPK); Foundation for Advanced Research and a broader role for the MOD with the creation of specialised research centres. At the current stage of modernisation, it is too early to assess these changes and even the completion of some of the complex naval projects (due for completion in the 2020s) may come too early for the improved approach to defence technology to yield results.⁴²⁷

Selected weapons for content analysis

The preliminary analysis produced a list of weapons that had been prominently featured in Russian Victory Day parades, had been featured in Putin’s 2018 ‘State of the Nation’ speech in March 1st, had been tested during the sample periods, or had been prominently covered by RT or Sputnik. Many of these weapons are new or in development, and so there is a clear interest by the Russian state in portraying them in as positive a way as possible.

425 Reuters (2017) ‘Russia fires cruise missiles at Islamic State targets from Mediterranean’, Reuters, 31 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/russia-fires-cruise-missiles-at-islamic-state-targets-from-mediterranean-idUSKBN18R0IK> (accessed 22 July 2018)

426 Ministry of Defence (2018) ‘Названия новейшего оружия’ [Naming the latest weapons], Ministry of Defence Website, No date, <http://vote.mil.ru/> (accessed 8 May 2018).

427 This also requires continued investment in the defence industries themselves (in terms of production capacity and modernisation) and education for attracting skilled engineers, scientists and designers which the sector was previously guaranteed when it was at its zenith during the Soviet period.

Name/keyword	Description
Sarmat/ Voevoda	Sarmat (RS-28) is a new Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). It was discussed extensively in Putin's Federal Assembly speech but the project has been in the public realm for several years. The UK press often refers to the missile as 'Satan II' as it will replace the Voevoda (dubbed 'Satan I') which Russia has begun to phase out. Sarmat is a heavy ICBM (200 tonnes) with a reported range of just under 11,000km. ⁴²⁸ In terms of destructive power, Sarmat will be able to carry 10-24 warheads depending on type. Voevoda silos will be compatible with the new missile which will represent an evolution and scheduled upgrade rather than a significant new capability or increase in destructive power. It is projected to reach full-scale production in 2020. ⁴²⁹
Underwater Drone <i>Poseidon</i>	The underwater drone announced in Putin's March 2018 speech, and subsequently named 'Poseidon' by the public vote. Putin provided an update on a leaked 2015 specification sheet titled: 'Oceanic Multi-purpose System - Status 6'. This system is a submarine-launched, nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed, autonomous torpedo. The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (2018) also cited the development of the system (codenamed Canyon). ⁴³⁰ Poseidon would require a change in Russia's approach to managing nuclear weapons due to the time between launch and potential impact and the potential for the system to be intercepted or disabled. ⁴³¹
Kinzhal	Kinzhal is an air-launched, hypersonic missile which utilises stealth technologies and enhanced manoeuvrability. The project differed from other weapons described in Putin's speech because it is relatively further along in its development. It was reported to be operational in late 2017, on trial combat duty in Russia's Southern Military District. ⁴³² The missile is launched from a modified MiG-31(K) and both were included in the 2018 Victory Day military parade. The missile is described as hypersonic but because it is launched at altitude it from a moving aircraft it is not a 'pure' hypersonic weapon.
Iskander	Iskander is a missile system that is extensively deployed by the Russian military. It is versatile, with several different variants and is highly mobile. It can be deployed armed with high explosive or a tactical nuclear warhead. The missile has been in full-scale production since 2006. Iskander missiles were stationed in Kaliningrad as a response to U.S. missile defence systems in Europe. It is used to target enemy air defence and missile systems and has been successfully deployed in Syria. ⁴³³
Kalibr	Kalibr, originally developed as an anti-ship missile, is a well-established system. It is modular and can be used with different launch platforms, on varying targets at different ranges with a range of warheads. The anti-ship variant can evade defences and flies at a low altitude. ⁴³⁴ The Kalibr family of weapons developed from R&D projects in the late-Soviet period which subsequently came to fruition in the 1990s.
Avangard	Avangard is a hypersonic glide vehicle. Putin introduced the weapon as being 'in production' in his March 2018 speech. ⁴³⁵ A subsequent video released in July by the Ministry of Defence included footage of an Avangard workshop. ⁴³⁶ The main innovations of this weapon – hypersonic speed and high manoeuvrability – also represent a major technological challenge. The operating temperature of the vehicle would be extremely high due to heat generated by travelling faster than Mach 5. More information is needed to assess the credibility of Putin's claims but, if deployed, Avangard would represent a significant technological achievement. ⁴³⁷
Zircon	Zircon is a hypersonic missile project that pre-dates Avangard. It is expected to be able to operate at speeds of Mach 6-8. ⁴³⁸ It will replace the Granit anti-ship missile and can be fired from the same launchers as the Kalibr and Oniks missiles. In terms of technology, the speed of Zircon, potential instability and heat resistance are the key issues which need to be independently confirmed.
Armata/T-14	The Armata unified combat platform was the 'headline' new weapon from the 2015 Victory Day parade. It was designed to provide the basis of several different projects. The most notable of these was the T-14 (next-generation battle tank). Procurement targets have been delayed due to production capacity and costs. Serial production will begin in 2019 on the T-14 and T-15 (132 units have been contracted for). ⁴³⁹
Soratnik	Soratnik is a tracked, autonomous, armoured vehicle designed to conduct reconnaissance and protect territory. It can perform mine clearance and clear obstacles. Russia has stated that unmanned systems will be a significant component of their military capability. The system has been combat tested for mine clearance but it is unlikely that it will be put into serial production and will instead form a basis for future projects. ⁴⁴⁰

428 Levin, E. (2018) 'Военный эксперт рассказал, чем "Сармат" может отличаться от "Воеводы"', TV Zvezda Website, 19 July 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/opk/content/201807191224-e87h.htm> (accessed 19 July 2018).

429 Maierova, N. (2018) 'Ракета "Сармат" выполнила более 50 поставленных задач в ходе испытаний' [The 'Sarmat' rocket completed more than 50 assigned tasks during testing], TV Zvezda Website, 30 March 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/opk/content/201803301405-tm78.htm> (accessed 9 May 2018).

430 Office of the Secretary of Defence. (2018) 'Nuclear Posture Review', Department of Defence Website, February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> (accessed 3 May 2018).

431 Sutyagin, I. (2016) 'Russia's underwater "doomsday drone": Science fiction, but real danger', Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 72, No. 4: 243.

432 TASS (2018) 'Russian Aerospace Forces test launch Kinzhal hypersonic missile', tass.com, 11 March 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/993439> (accessed 11 May 2018).

433 Yablochkin, K. (2018) 'Оперативно-тактический комплекс "Искандер-М"' [Operational-tactical complex 'Iskander-M'], TV Zvezda Website, 11 January 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/opk/content/201801101852-kae8.htm> (3 June 2018).

434 Grishchenko, N. (2017) 'На Каспии пройдут боевые пуски крылатых ракет "Калиб" "' [Kalibr' cruise missiles will be launched in the Caspian Seas], Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 3 October 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/10/03/reg-skfo/na-kaspii-projdu-t-boevye-puski-krlyatyh-raket-kalibr.html> (accessed 8 June 2018).

435 Putin, V. (2018) 'The President's Address to the Federal Assembly', President of Russia Website, 1 March 2018, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/37> (accessed 15 May 2018).

436 Golovko, A. (2018) 'Лазерный "Пересвет" и гиперзвуковой "Кинжал": в МО РФ рассказали о готовности новейшего вооружения' [Laser 'Peresvet' and hypersonic 'Dagger': Russian Defence Ministry described the readiness of the latest weapons], TV Zvezda Website, 19 July 2018,

437 Putin, V. (2018) 'The President's Address to the Federal Assembly', President of Russia Website, 1 March 2018, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/37> (accessed 15 May 2018).

438 Gavrilov, Y. (2018) 'В десять раз быстрее звука' [Ten times faster than sound], Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 15 January 2018, <https://rg.ru/2018/01/15/pochemu-novaia-raketa-cirkon-vyzvala-neshutochj-azhiotazh-na-zapade.html> (accessed 17 June 2018).

439 Tsygankova, S. (2018) 'СМИ: Серийные поставки БМП на платформе "Армата" начнутся в 2019 году' [Media: Serial deliveries of infantry fighting vehicles on the Armata platform will begin in 2019], Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 28 August 2018, <https://rg.ru/2018/08/28/smi-serijnye-postavki-bmp-na-platfome-armata-nachnutsia-v-2019-godu.html> (accessed 2 September 2018).

440 Interfax (2017) 'Концерн "Калашников" завершил испытания боевого робота "Соратник"' [Kalashnikov' completed tests of the combat robot 'Soratnik'], Interfax Website, 22 May 2017, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/563280> (accessed 12 August 2018).

Name/keyword	Description	Name/keyword	Description
T-50/Su-57/ PAK-FA	PAK-FA is a project to develop a 5th-generation stealth fighter aircraft. Sukhoi developed the new aircraft designated T-50 (Su-57). It first flew in 2010 and is due to be introduced into service in 2019, having been tested in Syria. However, it has not been put into serial production with (a limited MOD contract for 2 units for delivery in 2019). ⁴⁴¹ The project has had a tumultuous history and is unlikely to be purchased at volume, at least until a new engine development project has been completed. A joint initiative was developed with the Indian military for a specific export variant but India withdrew from that project in 2018. ⁴⁴²	Borei	Borei submarines were briefly referenced in Putin's Federal Assembly speech. The lead boat of the Borei-class - Yury Dolgorukiy – was the first submarine launched in the Post-Soviet period. There are two variants, the original Project 955 and an updated version (Project 955A), due to have updated communications, stealth and redesigns to improve crew habitability. The first of the modified Borei boats - Knyaz Vladimir - will be commissioned in 2019. ⁴⁴⁵ Due to the technical complexity of the Borei project and budget pressure there have been several delays. Difficulties with the development of the Bulava missile have also impacted the Borei project.
Topol	Topol (RT-2PM2) is an ICBM that can be launched from a silo or mobile launcher. It is being phased out to be replaced with the Yars missile (RS-24) which can carry multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRV).	Bulava	Bulava nuclear missiles are launched from Borei submarines
Triumf/S-400	S-400 is an air defence system. It is an important element of Russia's approach to layered air defence. It can be integrated with later S-300 models and the S-500 system (under development). The S-400 has value as a political tool as it can be offered to foreign states. During the period of analysis a potential deal with Turkey was a source of tension with the US. In a report to the Federation Council, Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu noted that 13 regiments were equipped with the S-400. ⁴⁴³	S-500	S-500 ('Triumfator-M' or 'Prometheus') is a cutting-edge air defence system which together with the S-400 will form an advanced integrated air defence system ultimately replacing the S-300. It will be able to simultaneously engage 10 targets, within a radius of 600km, and at higher altitudes than any current system. The missiles will be developed in conjunction with the S-400 and will potentially be able to provide a defence from hypersonic missiles. ⁴⁴⁶ The S-500 will be delivered in 2020. ⁴⁴⁷
Yars	The Yars missile (RS-24) is due to replace Topol. Yars was briefly referenced in Putin's speech. It was first tested in 2007 and has been in service since 2010. The development of Yars was framed as a response to US missile defence plans. It can carry 10 warheads (MIRVs) and is launched from a mobile launcher or a silo, with a range of approximately 11,000km. A railway version of the missile was developed (designated 'Barguzin') but the project was wound down on cost grounds, due to the wider modernisation of the strategic nuclear arsenal. ⁴⁴⁴	Granit	Granit (P-700) is an anti-ship missile which is being replaced with the newer Oniks, Kalibr and Zircon missiles (launched from a common 3C-14 launcher). ⁴⁴⁸
		Tu-160	Tu-160 is a supersonic bomber (designated Blackjack by NATO and 'White Swan' by Russia). The aircraft is being modernised and the new version (Tu-160M2) only retains the airframe of the original. ⁴⁴⁹ By upgrading the current aircraft there is less demand on the PAK-DA stealth bomber project. The Tu-160M2 is planned to be put into mass production in 2021. ⁴⁵⁰
		Kornet	Kornet is an anti-tank missile that has been in use since the 1990s and is exported and produced under license abroad (the variants are designated E/EM/D). The system is highly portable and effective against UAVs and helicopters. It has the capability to resist jamming and can defeat targets with active protection due to an advanced targeting system and an ability to launch a two missile salvo. ⁴⁵¹
		Tor-M2DT	Tor-M2DT is a short-range surface-to-air missile system. This variant is modified for use in arctic conditions. ⁴⁵²
		Tornado-S	Tornado-S is a mobile rocket launcher system. It was approved for serial production in 2017. It boasts significant firepower. ⁴⁵³

441 RIA Novosti. (2018) 'Минобороны получит первую партию самолетов су-57 в 2019 году' [MOD receives the first batch of SU-57s in 2019], RIA Novosti Website, 30 June 2018, <https://ria.ru/arms/20180630/1523703825.html> (accessed 12 August 2018).

442 Lenta.ru. (2018) 'Индия лишила Россию Су-57' [India lost Russia the Su-57], Lenta.ru Website, 23 April 2018, <https://lenta.ru/news/2018/04/23/su57/> (accessed 28 May 2018).

443 Federation Council (2017) 'Стенограмма - четыреста двенадцатого заседания Совета Федерации' [Transcript – 412th meeting of the Federation Council], council.gov.ru, 24 May 2017, <http://council.gov.ru/media/files/PXuCeUSj6Nq3xrRRUnYQknR4Cz32dAIY.pdf> (accessed 9 June 2018).

444 Ptichkin, S. (2017) 'Ракеты на рельсы не встанут' [Rockets on the rails will not rise], Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2 December 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/02/razrabotka-boevykh-zheleznodorozhnykh-kompleksov-novogo-pokoleniya-prekrashchena.html> (9 June 2018).

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448 VPK.name., 'Универсальный корабельный стрельбовый комплекс 3С14 "УКСК"' [Universal naval launch complex 3S-14 'UKSK'], VPK.name Website, No Date, <https://vpk.name/library/f/uksk.html> (accessed 21 July 2018).

449 Yudin, A. (2017) 'Секреты ПАК ДА и Ту-160М2: каким будет крылатый щит России' [Secrets of the PAK DA and Tu-160M2: what will be the winged shield of Russia], tass.com, 22 December 2017, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4827520> (accessed 3 June 2018).

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453 TV Zvezda., (2016) 'Второй после атомной бомбы: "Торнадо-С" стирает с лица земли сто футбольных полей' [Second after the atomic bomb: Tornado-S erases one hundred football fields from the face of the earth], TV Zvezda Website, 16 April 2016, https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201604161434-6acb.htm (accessed 22 July 2018).

Framing weapon coverage in the UK media

To analyse how Russian weaponry and military capabilities were covered in UK media, a list of keyword-related searches was generated from the above list of weapons, taking into account alternative spellings (eg Voevoda/Voyvoda) and alternative callsigns (Su-57/T-50/PAK-FA). These keyword searches were then run on the eight weekly UK MSM datasets, and all articles containing a reference to one or more of the listed weapons were then analysed. Each weapon mentioned was treated separately (some articles could contain references to multiple weapons). Within each relevant article, each separate mention of a weapon was then analysed for the presence of the following information.

- **Weapon specification:** Technical details and quantitative information on the weapon's specification, including speed, capacity, equipment.
- **Weapon capability:** Any assessment of the effectiveness or destructive capacity of the weapon (includes capacity to evade or bypass existing defences, and descriptions of the damage that the weapon could inflict on military or civilian targets).
- **Russian quote:** Any quote within the article from a Russian military, government or expert source describing the weapon's properties and capabilities.
- **Footage:** Embedded footage within the article, supplied by Russian news, military or government sources.
- **Comparison:** Favourable comparisons of the weapon relative to Western equivalents, or the inability of existing Western defensive systems to counter the Russian weapon.

Appendix 3: Narratives and sources – Skripal coverage

Defining narratives

Following the discovery of the poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury on Sunday 4th March and the subsequent international diplomatic crisis, it was decided to alter the dates of the second 4-week sample to cover the aftermath of this event and to see how Russian English-language news outlets reported on the story. Accordingly, the 2018 sample ran from 4th March until 31st March 2018. This analysis set out to analyse which narratives relating to the incident and its aftermath were advanced by, or on, Russian state-linked English-language news media. Through analysing content on RT and Sputnik chronologically over the four-week period, a list of narratives was generated, comprising each separate explanation of events attributed to an identifiable source (including anonymous quoted sources) or through editorial statements within articles. The use of the term ‘narrative’ may be disputed here in light of methodological disagreements within the social sciences, but the definition of the unit of analysis employed here can be summarised as: ‘Any statement within an article that offers a coherent explanation of the circumstances leading to the poisoning or the motives of actors involved in the event or its aftermath.’

The analysis involved recording each separate interpretation of events, how many articles they appeared in and which source they were attributed to (in the very small number of instances where more than one source provided the same narrative, it was attributed to the first source to do so). Articles were analysed chronologically and narratives logged to ensure that each was separate and discrete, and therefore mutually exclusive.

Once all articles had been analysed and all narratives collected, they were then allocated to separate categories (all separate narratives are listed by group below):

- **Skripals:** All explanations of how or why the Skripals may have been poisoned, including supposed accounts of the events of 4th March 2018, speculation about the perpetrators and their motives, and the method of delivery of the nerve agent.
- **Russian response to Skripal:** Accounts of the nature and justification of Russia’s response to the events (and to accusations of responsibility). These included the assertion that Russia – as a reliable international partner – was willing to support the investigation but was being blocked from doing so by the UK and its allies. Additional narratives included stating that Russia had no motive to conduct the attack, and that the failed nature of the attack proved that Russia had not been involved.
- **Conspiracies:** A small set of narratives included elaborate conspiracy theories, usually surrounding the commission of the poisoning. Examples include: that the UK government and/or intelligence services poisoned the Skripals as a pretext for exerting international pressure on the Russian State; that the Skripals were poisoned by the intelligence services of a third country to harm relations between the UK and Russia; and that no poisoning ever took place and the entire event is a hoax.
- **Novichok:** Speculation about the use of the nerve agent Novichok in the attack, including different accounts of where the agent could have been manufactured, speculation about whether Novichok was in fact used at all, and that Russia, having destroyed its stockpiles of Novichok, could therefore not have been responsible.
- **Geopolitics/conflict:** Interpretations of the geopolitical motives of relevant actors, including allegations of possible conflict being pursued by the UK and its allies against Russia. Examples include: assertions that the UK is preparing cyberattacks on Russia in response to the poisoning; that the West’s response is a pretext for further military interventions, including in Syria; and that the Salisbury incident will be used to justify war with Iran.
- **UK/West response to Skripal incident:** All evaluations or explanations of the motivations of the UK and allies in responding to the Salisbury poisoning. These narratives ranged from the supposed motivations of the UK government (eg “Russophobia”; rush to judgement; “accusations despite no evidence being available”) to interpretation of the supposed aim of the UK’s response (to disrupt the Russian Presidential Elections, to disrupt the FIFA World Cup) and the legality of Western responses in respect to following due process, or the framework of international law.

- Western domestic politics: Assertions that the UK's and the West's (particularly the US) response is in order to distract from deteriorating conditions domestically. Most prominent in this was the assertion that the UK's response was designed to distract from failures in negotiating Brexit. Other examples included that 'Hawks' in the US were using the incident to manipulate public opinion against Russia.

A final, separate, group of Alternative narratives comprised those counter-narratives by external (usually government or institutional) actors which cut against the interpretations of events by Russian sources. These included the assertion that Russia was responsible for the poisoning, that Russia has been stockpiling nerve agents for the purpose of an attack like that which took place in Salisbury, and that Putin had personally ordered the attack. This group did, however, include narratives that were sympathetic to the Russian position, including the assertion that dialogue should be maintained with Russia, and that facts are needed before blame should be apportioned.

Care was taken to ensure that the narrative list included no overlap. However, some narratives are subtly different (such as the assertion that Russia has been stockpiling Novichok and the assertion that Russia has been planning to deploy nerve agents for years). These are similar, but not identical, claims and so were categorised separately. Some narratives are also more general than others and therefore tended to appear more often. The claim that there is no available evidence linking Russia to the crime is relatively general and can be articulated in many different ways, while allegations of (for example) the delivery mechanism of the nerve agent used in the poisoning are by their nature a more specific interpretation of events. It can therefore be assumed that more general narratives are more likely to feature most often.

Sources were recorded if they were either directly quoted as supplying a narrative, or if a narrative was explicitly attributed to them in the text of the article. In the case of anonymous sources representing an institution, attribution was only made if the source was clearly identified (eg "A Russian government spokesperson said..." was recorded, while "Russia said..." was not). A full list of sources to whom Skripal-related narratives were attributed is included below. This is not a list of all quoted sources within stories in the Skripal datasets; it is only those sources to whom narratives from the list were attributed.

Narratives in RT and Sputnik Coverage

UK/West response to Skripal incident

Narrative code	Narrative description
A01	UK rushed to blame Russia without establishing facts
A02	No evidence that Russia is responsible
A03	Emotional Response/Hysteria by UK
A04	"Russophobia" driving response
A05	Biased UK/Western media inflaming tensions
A06	"Witch hunt" / no intention of proper investigation before blaming Russia
A07	Response designed to interfere with Russian presidential election
A08	UK non-disclosure of information suspicious
A09	Response designed to disrupt World Cup 2018 in Russia
A10	UK actions illegal / not following due process
A11	Response a pretext to closing Russian media in UK
A12	UK response dictated by security and intelligence agencies
A13	UK use of "likely" phrasing means no proof
A14	UK avoiding OPCW because they have no case
A15	Washington dictating UK's response
A16	UK's 'information campaign' failed; strategy is now damage limitation
A17	UK Government response steered by media and 'neo-con think tanks'
A18	UK illegally blocking Russian authorities from seeing citizens
A19	UK 'lying' about having evidence of use of Novichok
A20	Diplomatic expulsions will harm the investigation
A21	US expulsions of diplomats against international law
A22	Response a convenient opportunity to enact preplanned expulsion of Russian diplomats
A23	Western response in bad taste, immediately after fire in Kemerovo
A24	US planning to use opportunity to take over European gas markets
A25	UK Cherry-picking unreliable narratives from the internet
A26	UK has no interest in trying to ease tensions with Russia
A27	West's behaviour is in response to Putin's election victory
A28	UK dossier on Salisbury events is rigged
A29	Response is last-ditch attempt by 'the West' to maintain dominance
A30	UK dossier amateurish and incompetent
A31	UK trying to demonstrate power to EU before Brexit
A32	UK government searching Russian passenger planes to salvage reputation

Skripals

Narrative code	Narrative description
B01	Poisoning could be drug use
B02	Could be organised crime / Skripal had many enemies
B03	Yulia Skripal may be complicit or have been used
B04	Could have been a rogue Russian agent
B05	The Skripals were never poisoned
B06	Novichok may have been planted in Yulia Skripal's luggage
B07	UK is hiding the Skripals
B08	A "mystery woman" sprayed the Skripals with nerve agent
B09	Sergey Skripal may have been poisoned via his car's air-conditioning system
B10	Novichok may have been planted on car door/seat/steering wheel
B11	The Skripals were poisoned at the cemetery
B12	Yulia Skripal is being held against her will
B13	The antidote must have been administered immediately, or Skripals would be dead
B14	Skripals' phones were turned off to keep a meeting secret
B15	The Skripals were poisoned by/at their front door
B16	The Skripals were not poisoned by their door handle, as they would be dead

Russian response to Skripal

Narrative code	Narrative description
C01	Russia is being reasonable and offering cooperation; West not reciprocating
C02	Russia has no motive to conduct the poisoning
C03	Russia wouldn't be as incompetent as the attack demonstrates
C04	Russia concerned for the wellbeing of its attacked citizens
C05	Russia wouldn't do anything as low as the Salisbury poisoning
C06	Poisoning is a terrorist attack on Russian citizens that the UK failed to prevent
C07	Russian citizens threatened in the UK due to coverage of the poisoning
C08	Russia should receive all info from OPCW since Yulia Skripal is a Russian citizen
C09	The poisoning doesn't fit with Russian intelligence methods
C10	The attack was attempted murder on Russian citizens and Russia requests help in order to investigate
C11	Russia demands access to Yulia Skripal; UK not obliging

Conspiracies

Narrative code	Narrative description
D01	The poisoning is a set-up by UK authorities to harm Russia
D02	Attack carried out by a 3rd party intelligence agency to harm Russia
D03	No evidence of contamination in Salisbury
D04	Incident is a hoax; poisoning never happened
D05	Novichok chosen as a credible weapon due to publicity in UK TV drama
D06	OPCW investigation rigged, so results won't be credible
D07	US orchestrated poisoning and international response

Novichok

Narrative code	Narrative description
E01	The Novichok used is or could be from Porton Down
E02	The Novichok used wasn't made in Russia
E03	The Novichok may be Russian, but not made by the state
E04	All Russian Novichok stockpiles had been destroyed prior to attack
E05	Novichok could be from another post-Soviet state
E06	No proof that the nerve agent used was Novichok
E07	The Novichok could have been stolen
E08	Novichok could be from a Western country
E09	The nerve agent used was definitely not Novichok
E10	The Novichok may have belonged to Sergey Skripal
E11	The Novichok programme never existed
E12	Any laboratory could be used to produce Novichok
E13	Porton Down can't identify the nerve agent as Novichok or Russian
E14	Novichok specifically created by UK & US, not Russia
E15	UK does not have any Novichok to identify
E16	Porton Down confirmed to UK government that there's no evidence the Novichok was made in Russia
E17	The Novichok could be from Iran
E18	UK deliberately withholding samples of Novichok
E19	Porton Down trying to destroy own stocks of Novichok
E20	Novichok developed in the US

Geopolitics/conflict

Narrative code	Narrative description
F01	UK planning to use cyber attacks on Russia
F02	Response is a pretext for NATO build-up/Expansion
F03	Pretext to split Russia and Europe
F04	Plot to keep UK in the EU
F05	UK waging a propaganda war
F06	Plan to expel Russia from the UN Security Council
F07	Pretext for Western military interventions (including in Syria)
F08	UK risking wider conflict through careless language
F09	Western countries in disagreement over blame
F10	Russia accused because West is losing in Syria
F11	US aiming to re-establish 'unipolarity'
F12	Russia will launch cyberattacks in self-defence
F13	UK manipulating OPEC Secretariat to support false narratives
F14	UK building anti-Russia coalition of countries to punish Russia
F15	Western NGOs using Skripal poisoning to attack Russia
F16	UK manipulating allies into Anti-Russian campaign against their interests
F17	Response is an EU plan to wage Cold War on Russia
F18	UK is exploiting situation to repair relationship with EU
F19	US urgently needs to make UK 'calm down'
F20	European countries each have individual reasons to combine to undermine Russia
F21	Many countries didn't join diplomatic expulsions as they don't believe UK
F22	West wants to use situation to keep Russia weak
F23	UK's allies are questioning Britain's account of events
F24	OPCW report will not provide the truth, as the organisation will be 'leant on'
F25	Incident used as a pretext for war with Iran
F26	Allies/Western countries only expelled diplomats because of huge pressure from US

Western domestic politics

Narrative code	Narrative description
G01	UK exploiting Skripal poisoning to distract attention from domestic problems
G02	UK actions due to May government's weakness domestically
G03	UK exploiting events to deflect from Brexit failures
G04	UK government using the incident to weaken Jeremy Corbyn's position
G05	UK government trying to salvage May's reputation after misjudged initial response
G06	UK applying financial sanctions on Russian 'dirty money' to alleviate coming losses due to Brexit
G07	US using Skripal to deflect from internal problems
G08	Situation exploited by UK government to distract from child sex abuse
G09	US response designed to placate "deep state" opponents of Trump
G10	British public don't believe in Russian culpability, at odds with government
G11	Trump's own response driven by anti-Russian factions and "deep state"
G12	Western governments are acting against the interests of their citizens
G13	US hawks using situation to sway domestic public opinion towards war with Russia
G14	European countries using Skripal poisoning to unite citizens after migrant crisis
G15	UK government using Skripal poisoning as a pretext to restrict free speech domestically

Alternative narratives (other governments and non-pro Russian sources)

Narrative code	Narrative description
H01	Russia is responsible; Russia most likely culprit
H02	Russian negligence is a factor
H03	Dialogue with Russia needed
H04	Shouldn't rush to apportion blame; Facts needed
H05	UK not obliged to provide samples of nerve agent to Russia
H06	Attack a warning by Russia to potential dissidents
H07	Attack was Putin's decision
H08	Russia has been stockpiling Novichok for years
H09	Russia should be given Novichok samples
H10	Attack designed to shore up support for Putin in Russian Presidential election
H11	Evidence Russia planning nerve agent deployment for some time

Sources of narratives in RT and Sputnik coverage⁴⁵⁴

Russian government sources (individual and institutional)

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Sergey Lavrov	Russian Foreign Minister	67	94
Maria Zakharova	Press Director, Russian Foreign Ministry	64	90
Dmitry Peskov	Putin's Press Secretary	39	51
Russian Government	Russian Government Statement	36	42
Russian Embassy in UK	Russian Embassy in UK Statement	28	44
Russian Foreign Ministry	Russian Foreign Ministry Statement	17	31
Alexander Yakovenko	Russian Ambassador to UK	17	28
Vasily Nebenzya	Russian Envoy to UN	13	29
Vladimir Ermakov	Director, Department for Nonproliferation and Arms Control	8	26
Sergey Ryabkov	Russian Deputy Foreign Minister	6	11
Vladimir Putin	Russian President	6	12
Anatoly Antonov	Russian Ambassador to US	5	10
Russian Embassy in US	Russian Embassy in US Statement	5	7
Alexander Shulgin	Russian Envoy to OPCW	3	5
Vladimir Chizhov	Russian Ambassador to EU	3	4
Alexander Lukashevich	Russian Permanent Representative to OSCE	2	3
Dept. of Nonproliferation	Russian Foreign Ministry	2	2
Gennady Gatilov	Russian Permanent Representative to UN (Geneva)	2	4
Svetlana Petrenko	Russian Investigative Committee Spokesperson	2	3
Aleksey Chepa	Deputy Chair, State Duma International Affairs Committee	1	1
Denis Manturov	Russian Industry and Trade Minister	1	1
Russian Embassy in US	Russian Embassy in US	1	2
Halit Aisin	Russian Consul-General in Seattle	1	1
Igor Rybalchenko	Head of the Laboratory for Chemical and Analytical Control	1	1
Sergey Naryshkin	Director, SVR (Foreign Intelligence)	1	1
Viktor Luzin	Former Russian Consul General in US	1	1
Vladimir Dzhahbarov	Dep. Chair, Federal Council's C'ttee on International Affairs	1	1
Yuri Filatov	Russian Ambassador to Ireland	1	1

Other Russian Sources⁴⁵⁵

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Leonid Rink	Former Soviet Scientist, 'Novichok' programme	3	11
Valery Morozov	Businessman/Russian citizen/corruption whistleblower	3	3
Alexander Mikhailov	Russian Foreign and Defence Policy Council (NGO); Ex-FSB	2	6
Igor Morozov	Russian Senator	2	3
Nikolay Kovalev	Ex-FSB	2	3
Alexander Nekrassov	Former Russian Government	1	5
Anatoly Torkunov	Rector, Moscow State Institute of International Relations	1	2
Andranik Migranyan	Ex-Yeltsin Administration; Political scientist (Moscow)	1	3
Andrey Klimov	Russian Senator	1	1
Andrey Lugovoy	Russian Duma; Accused of Litvinenko murder; ex-FSB	1	1
Andrey Ontikov	"Russian Journalist"	1	1
Anton Utkin	Russian Chemist/Weapons Inspector	1	1
Boris Titov	Russian Presidential Commissioner for Entrepreneurs' Rights	1	1
Dmitry Kiselyov	Host, Russia-1; Head, Rossiya Segodnya; Dep. Dir., VGTOK	1	1
Dmitry Svishev	Russian Curling Federation President; Duma Deputy (LDPR)	1	2
Fyodor Ladygin	Ex-GRU Head	1	1
Igor Nikulin	Russian "Chemical weapons expert"	1	1
Leonid Slutsky	Chair, Russian Lower House International Affairs Committee	1	1
Lev Korolkov	Former Russian Intelligence Service Veteran	1	2
Mikhail Lyubimov	Former Soviet Intelligence Agent "turned writer"	1	1
Ramzan Kadyrov	Head of Chechen Republic	1	1
Russian Intel Agent (Anon)	Russian Intelligence Agent (Anon)	1	2
Sergey Buravlev	"London Resident" (Also, Profile Russia website)	1	1
Sergey Krivosheyev	Head, Vympal Analytical Centre; Ex-FSB	1	1
Sergey Stepashin	Ex-FSB Head; Former PM	1	3
Sergey Kalashnikov	Russian Senator	1	1
Stepan Lvov	Head, Political Research Department, VTsIOM (Polling)	1	1
Vadim Soloviev	Historian; Former Journalist, 'Nezavisimaya Gazeta'	1	1
Viktor Luzin	Former Russian Consul General in US	1	2
Viktoria Skripal	Cousin of Yulia Skripal	1	1

454 Three sources featured in more than one group: Phil Butler, Jim Jatras and George Szamuely appeared both as commentators and as external sources.

455 Quote marks denote descriptions of sources provided by RT/Sputnik, where no further information is readily available

Other Russian Sources⁴⁵⁵

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Vladimir Dzhubarov	First Deputy Chair, Federal Council C'ttee on Int'l Affairs	1	3
Vladimir Mikhailov	Ex-FSB	1	1
Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	Leader, Russian LDPR Party	1	1
William Rooda	Ex-Russian Intelligence	1	1

RT/Sputnik commentary

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Finian Cunningham	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	7	41
Neil Clark	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	7	23
Jon Gaunt	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	6	19
John Wight	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	4	12
Robert Bridge	Writer; Former Editor-in-chief, The Moscow News	2	9
Anton Lisitsyn	RIA Novosti Journalist	1	3
Brian Becker	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	1	1
George Szamuely	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	1	2
Ivan Danilov	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	1	8
Jim Jatras	Journalist, The Duran	1	1
John Laughland	"Historian and specialist in international affairs"	1	4
Nafeez Ahmed	Exec. Dir., Institute for Policy Research and Development	1	11
Phil Butler	Blogger, Sputnik; "geopolitical analyst"	1	4
Suliman Mulhem	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	1	3
Viktor Marakhovsky	RT/Sputnik Journalist/Commentator	1	7

RT/Sputnik editorial

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Sputnik Editorial	Sputnik Editorial Statement	176	220
RT Editorial	RT Editorial Statement	89	123

External sources

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Theresa May	UK Prime Minister	106	119
UK Government	UK Government Statement	27	29
Boris Johnson	UK Foreign Secretary	19	24
Jeremy Corbyn	UK Labour Party Leader	14	17
European Council	European Council Statement	11	11
Annie Machon	Ex-MI5; RT & Sputnik regular contributor	5	12
George Galloway	Former UK MP; RT contributor/host	5	15
Rex Tillerson	US Secretary of State	5	5
UK Media	UK Media as Source	5	8
Craig Murray	Former UK Ambassador to Uzbekistan; Blogger	4	11
Karin Kneissl	Austrian Foreign Minister	4	4
Dean Hayden	Metropolitan Police Spokesperson	3	3
Donald Trump	US President	3	3
Earl Rasmussen	Executive Vice President of the Eurasia Centre	3	5
Emmanuel Macron	French President	3	3
Gavin Williamson	UK Defence Secretary	3	3
Jonathan Allen	UK Envoy to UN	3	3
Raj Shah	White House Deputy Press Secretary	3	3
Seumas Milne	Director of Communications for Jeremy Corbyn	3	5
Times Source	UK Media as Source	3	3
US Government	US Government	3	3
Alexander Mercouris	Journalist, 'The Duran'	2	9
Angela Merkel	German Chancellor	2	2
Anonymous Source (Aggregate)	Anonymous Source	2	2
Anonymous UK Intel Source	Anonymous UK Intelligence Source	2	2
Anthony Webber	Independent MP from Guernsey Parliament	2	2
Benjamin Griveaux	French Government Spokesperson	2	2
Boyko Borissov	Bulgarian Prime Minister	2	2
Dr Tara McCormack	Academic, University of Leicester	2	4
Heather Nauert	US State Department Spokesperson	2	2
John Pilger	UK/Australian Journalist; Author	2	8
Julian Assange	Editor, Wikileaks	2	3
Nigel Sussman	UKIP member	2	3
Nikki Haley	US Ambassador to UN	2	2
Patrick Hanningsen	Executive Director, 21st Century Wire	2	3
Prof Piers Robinson	Academic, University of Sheffield	2	4
Rob Abdul	"Author and digital expert"; robabdul.com	2	4
Sarah Huckabee Sanders	White House Press Secretary	2	2
Sebastian Kurz	Austrian Chancellor	2	2

External sources

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Jens Stoltenberg	NATO Secretary General	2	5
"Local Reports" (Anon)	Anonymous Local UK Authorities Source	1	1
ABC News	US Media as Source	1	1
Ahmet Uzumcu	OPCW Director-General	1	1
Alex Christoforov	Journalist, 'The Duran'	1	3
Alex Salmond	Former SNP leader; RT presenter	1	1
Alexander Cerny	Deputy Chair, Czech Defence Committee	1	1
Alexander Gauland	Co-Leader, AfD	1	1
Andre Vitohek	"Writer and filmmaker"	1	1
Andrejs Mamikins	MEP - Latvia Social Democratic Party 'Harmony'	1	2
Andrew Neil	UK Journalist and presenter	1	1
Avigdor Eskin	"Israeli political analyst" (Moscow-based)	1	1
Aymeric Chauprade	Independent MEP	1	2
Basam Raja	"Political Scientist"	1	2
Bela Kovacs	Hungarian MEP, Jobbik	1	1
Bill Browder	Anti-Putin Campaigner; Investor	1	1
Bogdan Polishchuk	"Analyst"	1	3
Dan Kovalik	"Lawyer and Author"	1	1
Daniel McAdams	Exec. Dir., Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity	1	5
Daniele Pozzati	Journalist, Russia Insider News	1	2
David Vidicette	Former UK Police	1	5
Diana Johnstone	"Writer"	1	6
Dimitrios Lyacos	"Greek Journalist and Foreign Affairs Columnist"	1	2
Dr David Lowe	"Terrorism and Security Expert"	1	4
Dr Roland Hartwig	AfD Spokesperson	1	1
Dr Theophanis Exadakylos	Academic, University of Surrey	1	1
Dragana Trifkovic	Head, Centre for Geostrategic Studies	1	2
Fabrizio Bertot	Former MEP, Forza Italia	1	3
Francesca Totolo	"Independent Italian Journalist"	1	1
French Government	French Government Source	1	1
Geoffrey Roberts	Academic, University of Cork	1	3
George Szamuely	RT/Sputnik Contributor	1	3
Gerard Batten	UKIP Acting Leader	1	1
Gilbert Doctorow	"Independent Political Analyst"	1	1
Gilbert Mercier	"Geopolitical Analyst"; Editor, News Junkie Post	1	3
Greg Barns	Barrister; Advisor to Julian Assange	1	3
Helga Zepp-La Rouche	German Solidarity Group	1	1
Igor Cibula	Head, Foreign Intelligence, Slovak Information Service	1	4

External sources

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
James Mattis	US Defence Secretary	1	1
James Petras	Academic, Binghamton University	1	4
Jan Kavan	Former Czech Foreign Minister	1	1
Janusz Korwin-Mikke	Chair, Polish 'Liberty' Party	1	1
Jean-Pierre Raffarin	Former French Prime Minister	1	1
Jessica McCarnun	UK anti-poverty campaigner	1	1
Jim Jatras	Journalist, The Duran	1	2
Jim Kavanagh	Editor, ThePolemicist.net	1	1
John Graham	"Former US Diplomat"; RT Contributor	1	2
John McDonnell	UK Shadow Chancellor	1	1
Joint Statement (Western Govts)	Joint Statement by Western Governments	1	1
Jon Huntsman	US Ambassador to Russia	1	1
Jury Turin	"Philosopher and Journalist"	1	3
Karel Vereycken	French Journalist/Politician	1	1
Ken Livingstone	Former London Mayor; Labour Politician	1	7
Laurie Bristow	UK Ambassador to Russia	1	1
Luca Susa	"Italy-based Balkans and security analyst"	1	1
Manuel Ochseneiter	Right-Wing German Journalist/Activist	1	1
Marina Litvinenko	Wife of Alexander Litvinenko	1	1
Marine Le Pen	Leader, Front National (now Rassemblement National)	1	1
Martin McCauley	"Historian and Author"	1	1
Mary Dejevsky	UK Journalist	1	1
Matthew Gordon Banks	Former UK Conservative MP	1	2
Michael Maloof	Ex-Pentagon	1	1
Murat Bilhan	Dep. Head, Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies	1	1
Natalia Sabelnik	President, Congress of Russian Americans	1	1
Nicolai Petro	Academic, University of Rhode Island	1	1
Paolo Raffone	Director, CIPI Foundation	1	1
Peter Ford	"Retired UK diplomat"	1	3
Peter Hitchens	UK Journalist	1	1
Peter Kuznick	"Author"	1	1
Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal	Austrian Government Spokesperson	1	1
Phil Butler	Blogger with Sputnik; "geopolitical analyst"	1	1
Philip Girdaldi	"Former CIA Officer"	1	2
Prof Alastair Hay	Academic, University of Leeds	1	2
Prof M. Ferrada De Noli	Editor, 'The Indicter'	1	2
Reiner Braun	Co-President, International Peace Bureau	1	3
Richard Wood	UKIP member	1	1
Riyad Haddad	Syrian Ambassador to Russia	1	1

External sources

Source	Description	No. of articles	No. of times narrative attributed
Roberto Jonghi Lavarini	Brothers of Italy Party Member	1	1
Rod Liddle	UK Journalist	1	1
Sigmar Gabriel	Former German Foreign Minister	1	1
Sir Chris Deverall	British Army	1	1
Stephen Cohen	Academic, NYU and Princeton	1	5
Stephen Ebert	"Independent Political Analyst"	1	3
Sunday Times	UK Media as Source	1	2
Taro Kono	Japanese Foreign Minister	1	1
Thierry Mariani	Member of French Les Republicains Party	1	1
Todd Pierce	Former US Army; Historian; Sputnik Contributor	1	1
Tom Packalen	Finnish MP - True Finns	1	3
Tom Secker	Sputnik contributor; Author, Spyculture.com	1	3
Tony Kevin	Ex-Australian Diplomat; Author	1	1
UK Foreign Office	UK Foreign Office Statement	1	1
UK Ministry of Defence	UK Ministry of Defence	1	1
Waldemar Birkle	AfD Member	1	1
William Dunkerley	Academic, American University (Moscow)	1	1
Working Group	Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda	1	1
Zdenek Zbytek	Czech Businessman (linked to Milos Zeman)	1	3

Appendix 4: Political dysfunction frame tables, by country

UK

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	45	12	57
	Institutional	30	29	59
	Social	73	67	140
Failure	Government	85	81	166
	Parties	69	88	157
	Institutions	45	31	76
	Military	5	3	8
Alienation	Corruption	4	3	7
	Inequality	19	12	31
	Undemocratic	44	77	121
	Crime/Violence	298	241	539
Total		717	644	1,361
None		52	44	96

France

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	4	2	6
	Institutional	8	11	19
	Social	16	23	39
Failure	Government	14	17	31
	Parties	17	26	43
	Institutions	3	6	9
	Military	0	0	0
Alienation	Corruption	4	13	17
	Inequality	2	1	3
	Undemocratic	11	8	19
	Crime/Violence	29	43	72
Total		108	150	258
None		35	19	54

US

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	30	30	60
	Institutional	118	106	224
	Social	73	64	137
Failure	Government	75	120	195
	Parties	25	40	65
	Institutions	91	94	185
	Military	47	29	76
Alienation	Corruption	14	9	23
	Inequality	13	20	33
	Undemocratic	59	86	145
	Crime/Violence	109	136	245
Total		654	734	1,388
None		151	73	224

Germany

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	3	0	3
	Institutional	8	11	19
	Social	43	41	84
Failure	Government	9	28	37
	Parties	12	11	23
	Institutions	9	2	11
	Military	16	5	21
Alienation	Corruption	1	0	1
	Inequality	1	0	1
	Undemocratic	8	4	12
	Crime/Violence	29	26	55
Total		139	128	267
None		38	21	59

Sweden

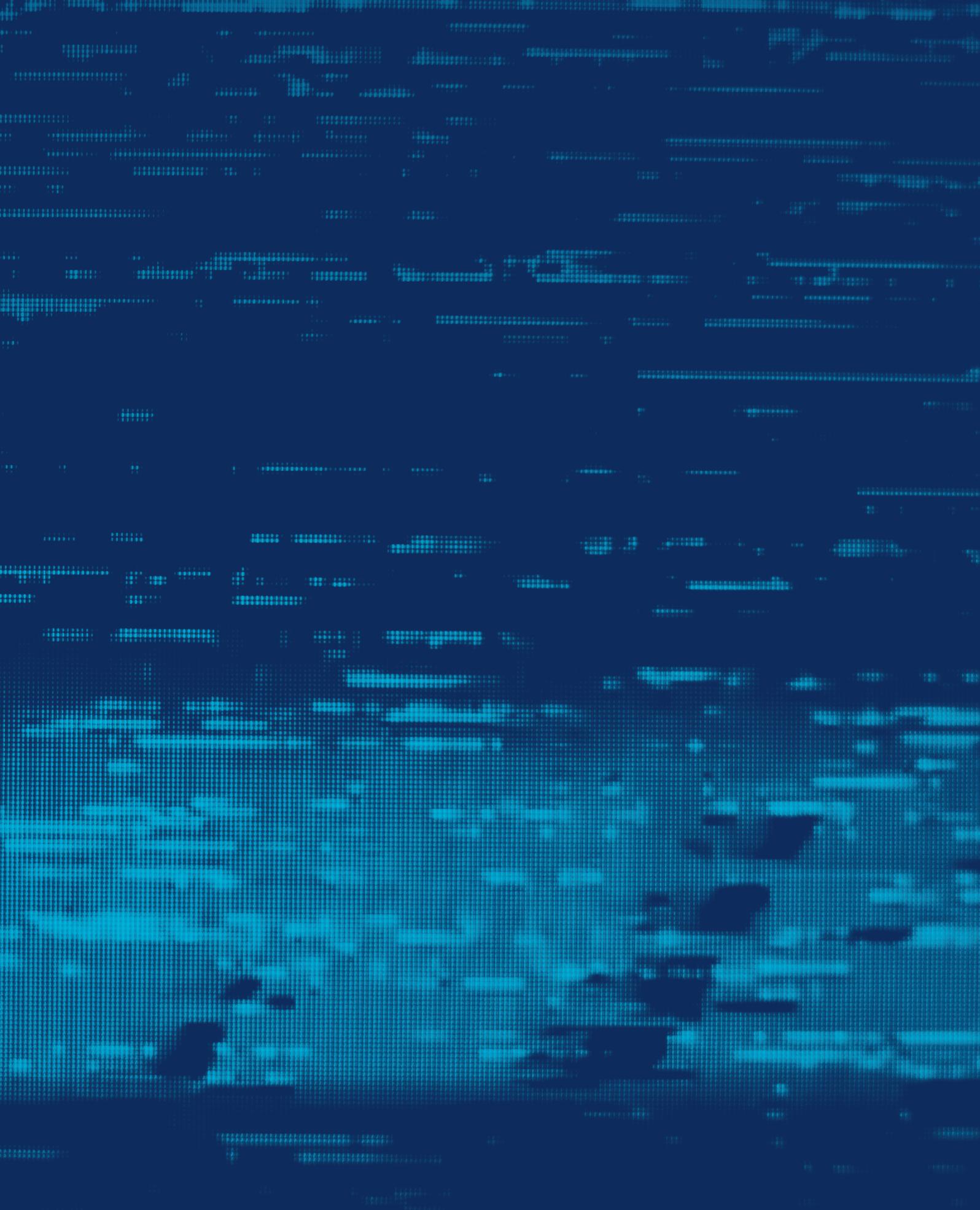
Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	0	1	1
	Institutional	3	4	7
	Social	17	28	45
Failure	Government	4	7	11
	Parties	0	10	10
	Institutions	13	2	15
	Military	1	2	3
Alienation	Corruption	0	0	0
	Inequality	0	4	4
	Undemocratic	4	3	7
	Crime/Violence	10	8	18
Total		52	69	121
None		6	3	9

Ukraine

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	0	0	0
	Institutional	5	6	11
	Social	7	0	7
Failure	Government	15	11	26
	Parties	0	1	1
	Institutions	2	3	5
	Military	4	1	5
Alienation	Corruption	0	5	5
	Inequality	0	1	1
	Undemocratic	18	7	25
	Crime/Violence	1	10	11
Total		52	45	97
None		25	5	30

Italy

Group	Frame	2017	2018	Overall
Conflict	Partisan	0	2	2
	Institutional	3	3	6
	Social	5	20	25
Failure	Government	0	4	4
	Parties	0	28	28
	Institutions	1	0	1
	Military	2	0	2
Alienation	Corruption	1	1	2
	Inequality	1	1	2
	Undemocratic	0	0	0
	Crime/Violence	6	4	10
Total		19	63	82
None		3	10	13



Commissioned and published by the **Policy Institute, King's College London**
Designed and produced by **Day 1**, day1.org.uk
Approved by **Brand**, brand@kcl.ac.uk, January 2019

