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Dissertation

Putinism:

a threat to liberal democracy in Russia?

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He who can make an exception is sovereign.

-Carl Schmitt, 1922

History has proven that all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government, are transient.
Only democratic systems are intransigent.

-Vladimir Putin, 1999

Abstract:

Russia is back, and it is bringing its personalized authoritarianism to center stage. In a short period of time, Russia has rebuilt and rebranded itself for the world. This has heavily benefitted the regime's political and economic interests in the long term, even while dealing with sanctions that have negatively affected its economic interests. Putin's political regime is ready to show the world that it is challenging, and possibly even replacing, liberal democracy.

This thesis looks at the regime from two separate, but equally important, perspectives. The first angle that this thesis looks at is the form of the Russian political regime. This thesis calls the regime's governing form **Putinism**. Provided in chapter one will be the political ideology of the regime, where it comes from, and how to implement this personalized form of authoritarianism into real world governance.

Chapter two focuses on a specific element, or as I call it here, the tool Putin uses for regime stability. This tool is an expansive propaganda machine that is intended to influence people's thoughts and perceptions on Putin's regime. This section establishes the psychological manipulation strategies the regime uses, and then both the covert and overt ways in which Putin uses them to manipulate society into a constituency of passive onlookers.

This thesis presents the new Russian challenge to liberal democracy. But I do not propose in my thesis question if there is a new challenger. We already know there is. The question of this thesis goes further: Will Putinism replace liberal democracy as the preferred regime form for states who question liberal democracy's staying power? Politicians and policymakers must take Russia's rise seriously. This thesis will show readers why it's imperative for anyone living in a liberal democracy, why Russia's rise is dangerous.

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Introduction:

Authoritarianism is not some new specter haunting political regimes around the world. Its personalized sibling, though, is. What is this unfamiliar regime form then, and why does it seem to be appearing in more and more political regimes throughout the world? Personalized authoritarianism is a regime style that finds its authority from a single figure who governs while manipulating many or all facets of political society. Essentially, it is a regime form that is built around one person.

Russia's political regime is an example of personalized authoritarianism in action. Russia's regime revolves around its charismatic leader, Vladimir Putin. There is little opposition within its politics, and where there is, it is managed. It has become clear in recent years that Putin's personalized form of governance is the antithesis of liberal democracy. The political scene in Russia since Putin's first presidential election has invalidated many liberal norms the West values most. Whether it is the crack-down on Non-Government-Organization, his politicization of minority groups like the LGBTQ+ community, or media censorship and centralization, it is clear, Putin does not favor liberal or democratic norms. These crack-downs are what have created a new regime style that seeks to replace liberal democracy, addressed in this thesis as Putinism.

Russia is considered one of the **Big Five** authoritarian regimes.¹ This recognition is quite the feat for the Russian Federation considering it's fairly new state status. Remember that in only three decades the Russian Federation has escaped its Soviet pasts and rebranded itself. Since its inception in 1991, Russia's political system has sustained constant attacks and critiques from the academic community. They have predicted multiple times, with error, that the

¹ Diamond, Larry, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker. *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

regime would fail and the state would collapse. Under Putin's leadership, however, instead of faltering, the regime has flourished.

The personalized style of Russian politics has shown itself to be a durable, legitimate challenger to liberal democracy. But is it a legitimate substitute for it? This is the question I attempt to answer in the dissertation. It must be recognized, as this thesis will present, that Russia is Putin's to govern. There is not an independent Russia, but only a Russia dependent on Putin. Therefore, the dissertation is called Putinism; it is the regime style that governs and is not going anywhere as long as Putin is alive. This dissertation has two major objectives in its writing, seen easily through its chapter's titles.

Chapter one is titled **Putinism: Historical and Contemporary Roots**. There are three sections within this chapter, each providing context for what Putinism is. Section 1.1 will provide an ideology for the regime style. This section will present arguments that the regime is conservative, populist, and autocratic; this is the skeleton of Putinism. Section 1.2 will present Ivan Ilyin, the philosopher whose writings have inspired this regime form. This will establish where the regime comes from. Section 1.3 provides arguments for how Putin strategically moved Russia from a state of inevitability to eternity, thus implementing Ilyin's writings into reality. The aim of this chapter is to provide insights into what Putinism is and where it comes from.

Chapter two is titled **Propaganda and Social Manipulation**. The objective of this chapter is to provide a contemporary insight into the influential "tool" Putin uses for regime stability. Putinism demands a powerful propaganda machine which manipulates society into passively watching without contest. Similar to chapter one, chapter two has three sections. Section 2.1 will present the concepts of **information warfare** and propaganda creation. Provided will be a brief analysis of the impact the regime's psychological warfare strategy has on individuals'

perceptions. Section 2.2 will discuss the effects of the broadcast channel RT in “branding” the Russian regime. This presents Russia’s overt tool, a major media broadcaster, and its influence on the regime's image. Finally, section 2.3 will argue that Russia abuses the traditionally open social media platform, Twitter, to expand and propagate the regime's message. This section discusses Russia’s covert operation for influencing individual perceptions of Putin’s regime. The major objective of chapter two is to present what is unique about Putinism that previous authoritarian regimes have lacked: innovative communication technology. Propaganda is nothing new in politics; targeting audiences in cheap, effective ways is, however. With expansion in communication technologies like social media, the ability to talk directly to foreign audiences has never been easier. How states can use this ease of access to people directly will be the underlying point of chapter two.

After presenting what Putinism is and how it manipulates society into political submission, there will only be one question to answer: has Putinism replaced liberal democracy in Russia?

Chapter 1:

Putinism: Historical and Contemporary Roots

1.1 Putinism

Russia, under Putin's leadership, is a prime example of personalized authoritarianism. Vladimir Putin is not a politician in political society but is political society. In this section we will look at Dr. Steven Fish's arguments for **Putinism**. Putinism is a regime form that is conservative, populist, and autocratic. It is a regime form that has shown its ability to challenge liberal democracy. Here we will analyze how Putinism is conservative, populist, and autocratic. This will generally establish what Putinism is and help answer the question, has it replaced Russian liberal democracy?

Conservative:

Conservatism here is not used in the policy sense, but in the form of regime stability. According to Fish, "Putinism is conservative in the deepest sense."² The only priority of Putin's regime is longevity. In essence, the regime wants to conserve the political system as it is, and if need be, squash any political opposition. There is also an element of foreign legitimacy which Putin's conservatism seeks. Conservatism, then, has two objectives, one domestic and the other foreign, for regime stability.

The first strategy for conservative enforcement is the regime's tolerance for religious faiths. Russia has multiple native religions throughout its sovereign territory. These faiths consist primarily of Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.³ Russia's religious background is unique to its borders. These faiths have different beliefs and even call for different social customs within them. Take, for example, Islam, which has different "forms of Islamism that seek to recreate Muhammad's prophetic community,"⁴ essentially calling for changes to politics and society.

² Fish, Steven. "What Has Russia Become?" *Comparative Politics*, 50(3), 327-346 (2018): doi:10.2307/26532689
https://www-jstor-org.proxy.consortiumlibrary.org/stable/26532689?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents⁵⁹ Accessed August 3, 2020.

³ Ibid, pg. 329

⁴ Ibid, pg. 329

This is where Putin's conservatism draws the line on religiosity. Though the regime condones and supports religious choice, "it rejects such restorative programs, which require a radical break with the status quo."⁵ Putin is comfortable with the practices and morality of traditional Russian religions as long as its religious leaders and followers do not question the legitimacy of the political regime. Naturally, the regime supports Russians' desire for religion as long as it disregards the dogma or theism of the religion.

Furthermore, this conservatism allows for the government to pose as the guardian of traditional values.⁶ Fish argues that "Putin and his staff readily accept God's loss of grip on the popular imagination and do nothing to encourage religious fervor, nor are they believers themselves."⁷ The regime does, however, appear to Russians as a moralist one. Religious leaders throughout Russia consecrate this moralist perception for the regime.

The Orthodox church is one such religious organization that is supportive of Putin's regime. Fish presents the case of the Patriarch, Kirill, who is the leader of the Orthodox church even today, as one example of a religious leader legitimizing Putin's regime. At a public meeting between leadership from multiple different religious organizations throughout Russia, Kirill said on record that Putin, "played a massive role in correcting [the] crooked twist of the 1990s in [Russia's] history."⁸ The Patriarch then followed this statement by dismissing all opposition protests over the suspected falsification of results in the 2011 Parliamentary elections.

Kirill's connection with Putin is one that goes back many years and raises questions about financial interests, something Fish addresses in his 2018 article. He states that Putin "de facto appoints, bankrolls and tasks," religious leaders by embodying him as the national spirit. The

⁵ Ibid, pg. 329

⁶ Ibid, pg. 329

⁷ Ibid, pg. 329

⁸ Ibid, pg. 330

Orthodox Church has worked closely with Putin's government. For example, in the '90s, the church was granted permission to sell "duty-free" cigarettes and was also involved with the importation of tobacco into Russia.⁹

More recently, in 2004, while in Putin's first term as President, the Duma "passed a law to return to the church all its pre-revolutionary property."¹⁰ This legislation made the Orthodox church potentially the largest landowner in Russia.¹¹ Moving forward to 2012, Kirill was heavily involved in Putin's third presidential election, even at times campaigning for him on T.V. In one television interview, he stated that "liberalism will lead to legal collapse and then the Apocalypse."¹² Though financial interests are not publicly disclosed, Kirill's, and the Church's, public support of Putin does seem to emulate Putin's conservative, preservation-based, regime form. The Orthodox church has surely benefitted from exclusive financial agreements (tobacco sales) and the Duma's legislation regarding land policies. It is easy to see that the church is hesitant to support any opposition party in Russia and they are justified to do so. The Orthodox church has a close relationship with Putin, who also benefits from this relationship. Both the clergy, who endorse Putin, and Putin's supportive policies with at least the Orthodox church, assist in both the church's financial stability and the regime's moralist perception.

Putinism's conservatism in Russia seeks to prevent regime change. It is no coincidence, then, that the regime's second strategy for implementing its conservatism depends on foreign legitimacy. Putin's regime does not want or support any form of regime change in authoritarian states. They seek to prevent and reverse any attempt at regime change, specifically, because if Russian citizens see revolutions succeeding in other authoritarian

⁹ Pomerantsev, Peter. "Putin's God Squad: the Orthodox Church and Russian Politics". Newsweek, September 10, 2012. <https://www.newsweek.com/putins-god-squad-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics-64649> [Accessed August 3, 2020].

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

states, what is preventing one from starting in Russia? Any resemblance to revolution, from Russia's perspective, must be stopped. One can see both concepts, squashing any revolution and foreign legitimacy, by Putin, in full practice in Syria.

In January 2017, the Russian military assisted Bashar al-Assad's regime in retaking a major city in Syria, Aleppo, back from revolutionary rebels. Focusing on the Russian conservative perspective here, one can see that the regime does not favor any form of revolution and is wary of even historical ones. This can be seen by the statements from Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, who publicly said that "the chain of 'color revolutions' spreading across the Middle East and Africa has been broken."¹³ Shoigu even went as far to state that Syria's political regime would have collapsed without the assistance of Russia in its civil war.¹⁴

Defense Minister Shoigu's statements are interesting, though. As Joshua Tucker outlines in his article, *Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions*, the region where the "colored revolutions" occurred and timeline are unfitting and unrelated to the Middle East and African nations. Throughout the years of 2003-2005, four countries, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, successfully overthrew the political regimes that were believed to be partaking in voter fraud.¹⁵ These 'colored' revolutions were incited by popular outrage from fraudulent democratic elections.

There is little in common between the 'colored revolutions' of Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and the one in Syria. But there are two major similarities that will be quickly noted. First, is the fact that there were anti-regime forces who sought to replace the al-Assad

¹³ Reuters Staff. "Russia Says its Airstrikes in Syria Have Killed 35,000 Rebels". Reuters, December 22, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-shoigu/russia-says-its-air-strikes-in-syria-have-killed-35000-rebels-idUSKBN14B1AC1> Accessed August 3, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Tucker, Joshua. "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions". *Perspective on Politics*, Vol. 5, Issue 3 (2007): 535-545. https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/7D77E56D2AC79DBCEB649CE698BA5584/S1537592707071538a.pdf/enough_electoral_fraud_collective_action_problems_and_postcommunist_colored_revolutions.pdf Accessed August 3, 2020.

regime, as there were in the ex-Soviet countries of the ‘colored revolutions.’¹⁶ The other major, key, similarity here is that the regimes that were replaced during the colored revolutions were authoritarian ones which had close relations with the new Russian Federation, as Syria does today. But unlike the years 2003-05, when Russia was weaker and unable to prevent regime change in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, or Kyrgyzstan, they heavily assisted Syria’s authoritarian regime in maintaining political power.

From the conservative legitimacy angle, Russia’s successful assistance of al-Assad’s regime in this conflict has provided a safety net for other authoritarian regimes. Because of Russia’s quick involvement in this conflict, rebel groups who form in other authoritarian states may think twice before starting a revolution; they may have to fight their authoritarian regimes, plus Russia. Basically, any challenge to an authoritarian regime is an opportunity for and challenge to Russia’s personalized authoritarianism. Simply, “the Syrian venture... afforded Putin the opportunity to audition his legitimist approach as an alternative to Western liberal internationalism and democracy promotion.”¹⁷ Putin’s regime succeeded in Syria. Russia’s legitimacy around the world was only inflated from these actions, whatever the perception may be. And at least in Russia, its conservatism has prevented the rise of any real political opposition.

Populism:

Because Putin is the center of the political regime, his task is to make sure it survives. Russia is still a democracy; just a highly influenced and managed one.¹⁸ This brings us to the first concept that must be presented before delving into the populist angle of Putinism. This concept is called **political technology**. Political technology is a “euphemism commonly used

¹⁶ Fish, Steven. “What Has Russia Become?”. [Fig.](#) 330.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 330.

¹⁸ Wilson, Andrew. “‘Political Technology’: Why is it Alive and Flourishing in the Former USSR?”. Open Democracy, June 11, 2011. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/political-technology-why-is-it-alive-and-flourishing-in-former-ussr/> [Fig.](#) 2. Accessed August 3, 2020.

in the former Soviet states for what is by now a highly developed industry of political manipulation.”¹⁹ The priority of political technologists, those who create new strategies to manipulate political outcomes, is to create a “facade” which presents a legitimate regime.²⁰ One such technique for legitimizing a regime is having political parties.

In the Duma, Russia’s lower body of its legislative branch, the major political party is United Russia. United Russia is the party that endorses Putin, but it is not like any political party seen in western liberal democracies. Wilson argues that United Russia “is a classic ‘party of power.’”²¹ What is strange about United Russia is that, though it is the leading party in the Duma, it does not truly govern Russia. As Wilson outlines, United Russia is “a victim of its own success.”²² Political technologists who were influential in creating this party have made it into a puppet party.

Wilson argues that “political technology can create Frankenstein’s monsters that escape the bonds of control, but mainly it creates fake dramas and inert political agents.”²³ The issue with political technology, at least with this example, is that Russians are generally aware that they are being conned.²⁴ United Russia’s legitimacy, though they still succeed in their reelection campaigns, is frequently questioned. Some have publicly spoken up on this idea, saying “United Russia is like Pinocchio – it is trying to become real, but it can’t. It’s trying to become a political subject, but after all, we all know that there’s only one political subject.”²⁵ The political subject referred to here is Putin.

Traditionally, populist leaders have prioritized popularity. They have used techniques like fomenting hostility towards minority groups or even excluding entire classes or ethnicities

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 1.

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 4.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 4.

²² Ibid, pg. 4.

²³ Ibid, pg. 4.

²⁴ Ibid, pg. 4.

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 4.

from partaking in politics or society. These types of regimes (and leaders) were comfortable with creating tension within society as long as they were the ones creating it. Essentially, violence against minorities or elites was okay if doing so fulfilled the leaders objectives. This is where Putinism's populism differs.

Fish argues that Putinism's populist roots focus heavily on "demobilization."²⁶ Concentration of power in the hands of a group of people is what Putin seeks to avoid. Unlike in other authoritarian regimes (think of Maoism during the Cultural Revolution in China), Putin does not call on the people to complete political tasks or to weaken a strong political influence.²⁷ He just weakens it himself.

Masha Lipman points out in an article one "curiosity" she has about Putin: he lacks a message.²⁸ She argues that Putin has been successful at weakening opposition and weakening institutions he's not a member of. However, he has not replaced what he's erased with anything. She concludes that Putin does not want to mobilize society. Mobilization would too closely resemble a revolution or dependence on others. Instead, Putin attempts to neutralize Russian political society by creating a "community of passive onlookers."²⁹

Putin has been successful in creating such a community of passive onlookers. Unlike in other authoritarian populist regimes, Putin's form of populism is designed in a nationalist sense. What this means is the rhetoric used by the regime, and strategies seen for creating a passive constituency does not include "anti-Semitism, islamophobia, or ethnonationalism."³⁰ This is a major difference compared to other nationalist movements in other states. Putinism, from a

²⁶ Fish, Steven. "What Has Russia Become?". Pg. 331.

²⁷ Ibid, pg. 331.

²⁸ Lipman, Masha. "Putin's Demobilization Project". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 15, 2006. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2006/03/14/putin-s-demobilization-project-event-859> Accessed August 3, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Fish, Steven. "What Has Russia Become?". Pg. 331.

populist perspective, is inclusive to the majority of Russian society while also being xenophobic.³¹

Putin does not create internal conflicts between minority groups, similar to how he supports anyone's choice of religion. However, he “portrays the world outside the motherland as a realm of wicked revolutionaries and powerful foes who seek to weaken Russia.”³² Putin’s populism aligns with the eternal politician’s; he poses as the defender of all Russians against a foreign enemy who disrupts the “tranquility” of Russia.³³

Putinism’s inclusivity only extends so far, though. Beginning in the late 2000s, when oil prices became unstable, and when Putin faced fierce protests regarding possibly-fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2011-12, spectators saw a change in rhetoric from the government for a minority group in Russia. Fish argues that Putin’s anti-LGBTQ+ stances are a populist push that appeases “traditional folk morality.”³⁴ Putin’s pocket-parliament has also passed multiple laws against LGBTQ+ people since this change in rhetoric.

On June 29, 2013, the Duma passed legislation and Putin signed into law No.13-FZ, known as the ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law. This law is intended to prevent the “promotion of nontraditional sexual relations to minors.”³⁵ The legislation defines the promotion of nontraditional sexual relations towards children as:

“Spreading information aimed at instilling in minors nontraditional sexual arrangements, the attractiveness of nontraditional sexual relations and/or a distorted view that society places an equal value on traditional and

³¹ Ibid, pg. 331.

³² Ibid, pg. 331.

³³ Ibid, pg. 331.

³⁴ Ibid, pg. 332.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch. “No Support: Russia’s ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law Imperils LGBT Youth”. Human Rights Watch, (2018). https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/russia1218_web2.pdf Pg. 14. Accessed August 3, 2020.

non-traditional sexual relations or propagating information on nontraditional sexual relations making them appear interesting.”³⁶

Individuals sharing posts on social media, non-government organizations organizing educational events, or even media sources in print, television, or radio, are subject to consequences for violating this law. The legislation was also enacted during a time when homophobic rhetoric by state media and violence against LGBTQ+ people was on the rise.³⁷

Dr. Fiona Hill, writing for the Brookings Institute, argues that Putin is an expert at “reading the popular mood.”³⁸ Unsurprisingly, then, the propaganda law outlined previously is only what a majority of the Russian people support. The Levada Center, a state-run Russian polling agency, produced data showing that 63% of respondents “believe there is a subversive force working in Russia to destroy ‘Russian values’ through the spreading of ‘gay propaganda.’”³⁹ In 2017, too, the same polling agency found that 81% of respondents disapproved of same-sex relationships.⁴⁰

Again, Putin is an expert in reading public opinion. Furthermore, Russia, as seen in polling data, shows that Russians support the state’s position on LGBTQ+ related issues. Putin uses the lack of support of LGBTQ+ people to further propel his own agenda. In July 2020, a referendum vote was called, which included more than 200 constitutional amendments, one of them defining marriage strictly between a man and a woman.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid, pg. 15.

³⁷ Ibid, pg. 15.

³⁸ Hill, Fiona. “Putin and the Kremlin are Experts at Reading the Popular Mood. And they Were Watching America”. Brookings Institute, November 11, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/11/11/putin-and-the-kremlin-are-experts-at-reading-the-popular-mood-and-they-were-watching-america/> Accessed August 3, 2020.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch. “No Support: Russia’s ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law Imperils LGBT Youth”. Pg. 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 12.

⁴¹ Venkatraman, Sakshi. “Russian Voters Back Referendum Banning Same-Sex Marriage”. Out News, July 2, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/russian-voters-back-referendum-banning-same-sex-marriage-n1232802> Accessed August 3, 2020.

Putin politicized this amendment heavily, branding himself as the protector of ‘traditional’ relationships, of which the majority of relationships in Russia are. Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, stated after the election results were published that, “Putin and his administration used propaganda brochures leading up to the election promising a return to ‘traditional family values,’ using marriage between loving couples as a wedge to push through his nefarious agenda. It is shameful, manipulative, and malicious.”⁴²

Putin’s populist strategy is simple: present himself as the defender of heterosexual relationships. The LGBTQ+ community in Russia is small. And unlike attacking an ethnic or religious group, which could transcend Russia’s borders, this community is contained and politically unfavorable. Finally, LGBTQ+ related issues are not viewed favorably by a majority of Russians. By villainizing an underrepresented community in Russia that is not viewed favorably by Russians, Putin’s populism is cheap but effective.

Autocracy:

Finally, Putinism is a full-fledged autocracy.⁴³ Fish begins this portion of his argument by first defining what an autocracy is. According to Fish, Putinism is autocratic because “supreme power is concentrated in a single entity.”⁴⁴ But this simple definition is not enough to justify this extensive argument though. He continues, putting limitations (or empowerments) into his definition now; autocrats are “not constrained by the law, other entities, or other people.”⁴⁵ Finally, Fish provides a simple logic to Putinism's autocratic tendencies. He writes, “Auto’ refers to ‘self’; the ‘autocrat rules on his own, beholden and answerable only to himself.”⁴⁶ Fish argues that Putinism is autocratic, at least from how he

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Fish, Steven. “What Has Russia Become?”. Pg. 333.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 332.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pg. 332.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pg. 332.

defines autocracy because the regime's power structure is centralized, concentrated, personalized, and sovereign.

The first aspect to look at is the centralization of power in Russian politics. Russia is, technically, a federalized country. This means that provinces throughout the state have their own regional governments with their own governors and legislatures. In his first term as President, Putin would heavily centralize the political power structure in Russia. Fish notes here that five major political actions occurred during this time that favored centralization.

First, Putin appointed new leaders to the provincial agencies which involved security and policing people who were friendly with the regime.⁴⁷ Second, he rearranged the way in which federal funds from Moscow were distributed to the provinces. Putin would make the provinces more dependent on good relationships with Moscow. Third, he increased oversight of provincial governments. "Federal inspector[s]" were sent to the provinces to watch provincial, "governors and report back to Moscow."⁴⁸ Fourth, Putin turned Russia's 88 provinces (which were autonomous) into seven administrative districts.⁴⁹ He would also choose representatives, through presidential appointments, for these seven new 'super regions.'⁵⁰ Fifth, Putin created twenty new federal agencies, tasked with varying objectives from areas like tax collection, media regulation, and pensions.⁵¹ The new agencies would be managed from Moscow but would regulate such issues within the provinces.

These five centralization strategies successfully worked for Putin.⁵² Since centralization began, most provinces' leaders have joined the political party United Russia. Rarely do any provincial governments question the decisions of Moscow, and when Moscow makes a

⁴⁷ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁴⁹ Treisman, Daniel. "Russia Renewed?" Foreign Affairs, November/December, 2002.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2002-11-01/russia-renewed> Accessed August 3, 2020.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Fish, Steven. "What Has Russia Become?". Pg. 333.

⁵² Ibid, pg. 333.

request of a provincial government, the request is quickly fulfilled. Regional governments rarely defy Moscow out of fear of political consequences. Moscow made many provinces dependent on central funds. The simple threat of decreased financial support to a province was usually enough leverage to get local governments to work with Moscow. And if this was not enough, Putin would send investigators to troublesome provinces. Fish notes that though the Russian “Constitution calls for federalism, in practice the state is unitary.”⁵³ And by unitary practice he means through Vladimir Putin.

Just as power is centralized in Moscow, it is also centralized in Putin. When looking at the institutional set-up of the Russian regime, one can see that, though there is a national legislature, the balance of power is not evenly distributed. The Constitution favors the president.⁵⁴ However, in its original writing, the 1993 Constitution did provide some autonomy for the national legislature, which consists of an upper house, the Council of the Federation, and the lower house, known as the Duma. But that autonomy created issues for Russia’s previous administration and would change under Putin.

In its early years, the national legislature had many independent, diverse, political parties who opposed Yeltsin. This created issues for Yeltsin’s administration to govern in an authoritarian way; there was a legal, loud, opposition that would derail the executive’s policies at times.⁵⁵ Putin recognized this issue and sought to avoid it when he was chosen as Yeltsin’s successor. One of Putin’s first actions as president was to rewrite the rules for elections to the upper house of the national legislature.⁵⁶ Instead of constituents directly choosing their representation in the upper house, Putin would now appoint senators. When legislators resisted, Putin threatened to send investigators to the provinces to look into corruption accusations; opposition quickly went silent. Putin then turned his sights onto the lower body

⁵³ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁵⁵ Ibid, pg. 333.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pg. 333.

of the legislature, the Duma. Unlike in the upper body, Putin did not feel he needed to change the rules to join the institution. Instead, he would “build United Russia, thereby departing from Yeltsin’s policy of eschewing party-building.”⁵⁷ The functions of the national legislature have changed because of Putin’s influence in it.

Since Putin’s success in moving power away from the legislature and into the executive branch, the national legislature has gone from a body that voiced executive opposition to one that works for it. Leadership within the national legislature are “de facto presidential appointees.”⁵⁸ The legislature does not pass a measure that is at odds with the executive. Simply, the national legislature is there to codify into legal statute what Putin wants.

What is unique about Putinism’s autocratic style is that it offers a monarchical-like perception of its leader. The president of Russia is a title; titles mean little to Putin or the regime. Putin is neither beholden nor vested with power because he is the President of Russia. The party or office he may hold does not determine his role in the system. No, the political system is built around Putin himself. As Fish argues, “During his tenures as president (2000-08 and 2012-present), supreme authority in Russia resides in the presidency. When he was prime minister (2008-12), the office of the prime minister was paramount, despite constitutional rules that subordinate it to the presidency.”⁵⁹ The concept of power shifting with one person from elected office to elected office is strange, to say the least. However, Russians do not notice or take much interest in why this happens. Fish argues that “they do not regard the ruler’s authority as flowing from their votes anyways.”⁶⁰ Putin does not seek authority from his people through democratic means. Putin’s authority comes from being Putin.

⁵⁷ Ibid, pg. 334.

⁵⁸ Ibid, pg. 334.

⁵⁹ Ibid, pg. 334.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pg. 334.

Personalized authoritarian leaders are nothing new; what's new is a regime that revolves solely around one leader. History is full of strong leaders, one example being the Soviet Union's mystifying one, Joseph Stalin. However, what is different about Putin and Stalin is that, unlike Stalin, Putin does not foment a cult around himself. Stalin, for example, built statues all over the Soviet Union of himself; the media endorsed all his actions; today, Russians even view Stalin in a positive light.⁶¹ Also, though Stalin was a strong, possibly dictatorial, his authority to govern came from the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Putin's authority is not from any party or interests; he is the one who chooses the interests that support him. This is the key difference that makes Putin sovereign and Stalin not.

Finally, Putin is sovereign and sovereignty is whatever he says it is. Putin makes the rules, as we already discussed (the national legislature simply legalizes what he wants). But the interesting characteristic of Putinism's sovereignty is that the executive chooses when to enforce and ignore the rules. Monarchs throughout history, especially Russian imperial history, were selective of who and what was to be considered rule breaking. They never faced opposition; just people who would do as they were told by the monarch.

Today the same trend is seen in the Russian Federation. Putin has no oversight monitoring from a group of elites (like oligarchs) or the law. He is allowed to choose when the law is followed and when to look the other way. Because he has this luxury, he has the "authority to feed his favorites and bind the rest."⁶² Putin selects the winners and losers in Russia, just as any sovereign monarch does.

⁶¹ U.S. News Staff. "Stalin More Popular Than Putin In Russia These Days". U.S. News, May 9, 2019. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2019-05-09/stalin-is-more-popular-than-ever-in-russia-survey-shows>. Accessed August 3, 2020.

⁶² Fish, Steven. "What Has Russia Become?". Pg. 335.

Many have claimed that Russia's oligarch class controls Putin. The claim is false; Putin awards oligarchs, yes, but they do not influence or control him. One example of this is the high profile criminal trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. He was once Russia's richest man and the epitome of oligarchy. In 2003, while CEO of the oil company Yukos, Khodorkovsky claimed he had become a target of the regime. He claims this was because he urged the public to demand more financial transparency from the government and the business community. Khodorkovsky's public calls for more transparency in business, he believes, is when he became a target of the regime.⁶³

Khodorkovsky was convicted in 2010 of theft and money laundering. He was given the maximum penalty for these charges and was supposed to be in prison until 2017. Many have condemned Khodorkovsky's trial as a political stunt to make an example of the oligarch.⁶⁴ This example, though, presents the concept above that Putin is a sovereign leader who does not respect or condone those who call on the public to make political change. Some have even stated that Putin directly ordered prosecutors to bring charges against Khodorkovsky.⁶⁵ The verdict, his lawyers publicly state, was "issued under pressure from the executors of power, at the head of which stands Mr. Putin."⁶⁶ The key detail, in this case, is this: Putin's court system prosecuted an individual when that individual became a political issue. Russia is autocratic in the fullest sense because its leader selectively enforces rules, as is seen in the Khodorkovsky case. Now we must look at the roots of Putinism i.e. its philosophical inspiration.

1.2 Ivan Ilyin, the Philosopher

⁶³ Lawler, Dave. "20 Years of Putin: Mikhail Khodorkovsky on Becoming a 'Symbol of the Fight'". Axios, November 25, 2019. <https://www.axios.com/mikhail-khodorkovsky-interview-vladimir-putin-russia-18b2dfc4-8dfd-4a1e-8e22-9132da7494e4.html> Accessed August 3, 2020.

⁶⁴ Parfitt, Tom. "Mikhail Khodorkovsky Sentenced to 14 Years in Prison". The Guardian, December 30, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/30/mikhail-khodorkovsky-jail-term> Accessed August 3, 2020.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The year is 2005 and 2,500 Russians are gathered in Moscow's Donskoy Monastery to commemorate the repatriation and reburial of a man who eighty-three years earlier had been exiled from his home country.⁶⁷ President Putin was in attendance and it was reported that he was even directly involved in the retrieval of his favorite philosophical advisor. Who is this man though and why are they being given such a great ceremony? His name is Ivan Ilyin.

Born into nobility in 1883, Ilyin's aristocratic roots influenced his writings and views on the question of political regimes. He was educated at one of the best universities in Moscow, where he graduated with honors.⁶⁸ Afterwards, he enrolled in a jurisprudence program at Imperial Moscow University (present-day, Moscow State University).⁶⁹ Ilyin's early writings were supportive of a regime governed by law.⁷⁰ That would change, however, when he witnessed the Bolsheviks attempts at governance. Thus, Ilyin would become a counterrevolutionary who would advocate for violent methods that prevent revolutions from occurring.⁷¹ To Ilyin, Russia is "pure" and nothing shall replace or revolt against it.

This purity Ilyin wrote of will be what is discussed in the following paragraphs. I will present three of his essays which will show how he envisioned the Russian regime. The first essay is called *What promises the world the dismemberment of Russia*. This essay will present the idea Ilyin valued most: Russian spirituality. Next, *National leader and party leaders* will be discussed. This will discuss both his views on the political class in politics and his support for a strong national leader. Finally, *About Fascism* will provide context for why he was a supporter of extremism politics, and why no fascist regime, with exception to Franco's Spanish and Salazar's Portuguese ones, has done fascism correctly. These three essays will establish a political ideology. Ilyin's writings from the 1920s and 30s are being reborn in

⁶⁷ Bigg, Claire. "Russia: White Army General Reburied In Moscow." Radio Free Europe: Radio Liberty, October 3, 2005. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1061851.html> Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁶⁸ Barbashin, Anton, and Hannah Thoburn. "Putin's Philosopher: Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow's Rule". Foreign Affairs, September 20, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-09-20/putins-philosopher> Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. London: Vintage. Pg. 17

⁷¹ Ibid, Pg. 17.

Russia today, as seen in the rhetoric from Putin. Understanding where he gets his philosophy from is necessary for discussing the current regime. Again, this outline will establish an ideology which is the inspiration for Putinism.

What Promises the World the Dismemberment of Russia:

Russia's borders and people are different; this makes them superior, according to Ilyin. Due to this superiority, Russia has been in a constant struggle for peace and security because of foreign influences who seek to dismember it. Ilyin begins this essay with a bold statement:

“When talking with foreigners about Russia, every faithful Russian patriot should explain to them that Russia is not an accidental heap of territories and tribes or an artificially coordinated “mechanism” of “regions,” but a living, historically grown and culturally justified ORGANISM, not subject to arbitrary dismemberment.”

He begins this essay with an appeal to nationalist sentiments. Invoking nationalism was not uncommon for Ilyin, either. In a brief excerpt of his opinion on nationalism, Ilyin writes, “Nationalism is love for the historical image and creative act of its people in all its originality... faith in the instinctive and spiritual strength of its people... a system of actions arising from this love, from this faith, from this will and from this contemplation.”⁷² Russia's comfortability with nationalism, at least from Ilyin's perspective, creates misunderstandings with foreigners. Therefore, Russians must clarify all misconceptions. Ilyin concludes the sentence by establishing where the confusion for the Russian regime comes from. State's are created and governed by humans (humans are organisms). Ilyin defies this state's based logic,

⁷² Ilyin, Ivan. “What Promises the World the Dismemberment of Russia”. Russia Statehood: on the Server Russian Resurrection, July 15, 1950. <http://gosudarstvo.voskres.ru/ilin/nz/nz-101-105.htm> Accessed July 23, 2020.

however, by humanizing the Russian state. He describes Russia as an “organism,” inferring that it is a living thing.

Humanizing Russia lays the groundwork for the rest of this essay. The Russian organism is “spiritual, linguistic and a cultural unity that historically linked the Russian people with its nationally younger brothers.”⁷³ Such Russian unity, according to Ilyin, is a threat to other states. This is why foreign influences seek to dismember it.

There is a political coup by “international behind-the-scenes”⁷⁴ states who perceive Russia as a threat. Ilyin wrote that, “we know that Western people do not understand and do not tolerate Russian originality.”⁷⁵ He argues that foreigners view Russia as a “dam”⁷⁶ that limits Europe’s (Germany, specifically, in this essay) ability to expand its economic and political influence. Ilyin believed that Europe was attempting to divide-and-conquer Russia. One must not forget that he humanized a state; to divide the state was to remove its limbs from its body.

Ilyin was skeptical of any division of the Russian organism. In this essay, however, he presents an example of what could be if the regime was divided. Ilyin provides the example of Russia being divided into “at the most conservative count - up to twenty separate ‘states’”⁷⁷ He argues that when these twenty nations are tasked with creating individual state budgets, separate militaries, and political regimes, conflicts will ensue which, when unified, are avoided. Furthermore, these divided nations must protect their smaller political and economic interests. To combat their neighbors, who they now inevitably have conflicts with, nations will feel more inclined to take “foreign exchange loans... by ‘powers’”⁷⁸ who would want open markets and liberal democratic governance. Ilyin was skeptical of open markets and liberalism, arguing that it was not possible in Russia’s because of its originality. Again,

⁷³ Ibid, Section 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid, Section 1.

⁷⁵ Ibid, Section 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid, Section 2.

⁷⁷ Ibid, Section 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid, Section 10.

Russia is different; this is an issue foreigners do not understand. Dividing the unified state, then, is the only solution for foreign interests to change the Russian organism.

Similar to how he began, Ilyin concludes by appealing to nationalist sentiments. He writes, “Russia is not human dust or chaos. She is, first of all, a great people who has not squandered their strength.”⁷⁹ Ilyin infers here that other peoples have ‘squandered’ theirs. Continuing, he opines that the Russian people are “hungry for free order, peaceful labor, property and national culture.”⁸⁰ What this means, however, is not the common perception of liberation or progressive labor rights. To Ilyin, “free order” meant that Russians were ‘free’ to submit themselves to the collective organism of the state.⁸¹ However, even the state has a different meaning than is expected to western society. Ilyin outlines in the next essay presented, the mysticism surrounding the leader of the Russian regime. The state is the soul of the national leader; the leader is a spirit that is absolute.

National Leader and Party Leaders:

Ilyin’s views on executive leadership for the perfect regime resemble near absolutism. Now that we have established that Russia has a spirit and is an organism, what now follows is the question of who governs it. Because the Russian state is like that of a human, it has a body (its state borders) and a spirit. The executive, as seen in Ilyin’s writings, is that spirit. His opinions on this are strong and Ilyin makes a powerful division of the political class in his regime's form, outlined in the essay *National Leader and Party Leader*.

There are two classes in political society: the National leader and the party leaders. The first one we will review is the position of party leader. First, there is no limit to the quantity of party leaders, according to Ilyin. Party leaders are the political class, which is only concerned

⁷⁹ Ibid, Section 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid, Section 12.

⁸¹ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 47.

with itself. They are not representative of the Russian spirit but only representative of their personal interests. Party leaders sit by idly and feel as though their “best years’ are leaving [them].”⁸² They are naturally cynical because they are self-interested. The cynicism and self-interests, now established in this essay, turn party leaders into politically motivated individuals.

Motivated by personal desires, party leaders will use their political platform to generate collective action. Leaders will, “get [themselves] an adjutant or even two, begin to speak imperatively, ‘point out’, dictate.” This portion of the essay turns into a critique on party leaders' actions, especially on the means they take to succeed in their political objectives. Party leaders are, again, self-interested. They are not going to stand for the spirit of the Russian soul; they will compromise and “figure”⁸³ it. They are unaware of the soul of the Russian people or the lands it is on. This is why party leaders “invite ‘ideologists,’ who come up with a program”⁸⁴ for the country; they do not think of the Russian soul, but only how to increase their political influence. They invoke ideologies that unite supporters behind them.

Finally, party leaders will sell the Russian soul to the highest bidder. The only way to increase their own personal wealth and stature in the political regime is with their personal currency.⁸⁵ Party leaders' currency of choice is their promise. Ilyin’s critique is most vividly seen here. He argues that party leaders will sacrifice the soul of the Russian regime by promising false ideologies, policy changes, and pragmatism. All of these actions compromise the soul of the Russian state. Ilyin’s critique is concluded by comparing party leaders to “a heap of political litter.”⁸⁶ For these reasons, he was preferential towards the empowerment of a national leader.

⁸² Ilyin, Ivan. “National Leader and Party Leader”. *Russia Statehood: on the Server Russian Resurrection*, July, 1948.
<http://gosudarstvo.voskres.ru/ilin/nz/nz-20.html> Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

To begin with, there is only one national leader in the regime style Ilyin envisioned. The national leader is absolute; the hierarchy he oversees is one which does not allow for contestation or political mobility.⁸⁷ This hierarchical political structure resembles that of a corporatist system.⁸⁸ The national leader is “tempered in business service, strong-willed, courageous, nationally faithful.”⁸⁹ He is in touch with the Russian spirit; his actions and himself are the spirit of Russia. The national leader is politically far-sighted. Unlike his inferior party leaders, ideological concerns are irrelevant, because the leader knows what must be done. And no one will question the leader's motives or policies. The national leader is an institution; “completely alone, he starts a big business, not creating a party for himself, but acting personally in the name of the superpersonal.”⁹⁰ The only person who can correctly guide the Russian spirit is the national leader, who is guided by “conscience, service, and quality.”⁹¹

This figure is an institution which oversees all facets of political society. They are responsible for all executive, legislative, and judiciary functions, and command the armed forces.⁹² Ilyin’s preference for this all-powerful, near dictatorial, figure was because of his endorsement for the spiritual purity of the national leader, as opposed to self-motivated party leaders. Ilyin writes, “The leader serves; rather than making a career; fights, does not figure; hits the enemy, and does not gossip; leads, not hires, to foreigners.”⁹³ As was outlined previously, party leaders are self-interested. They make careers out of politics. They compromise. They are subject to manipulation from foreign powers, because they need to expand their political influence. The national leader, however, is the spirit of the state. They are chosen not by political elections or democratic means, but by fate. Ilyin envisioned the national leader

⁸⁷ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 28.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, Pg. 27.

⁸⁹ Ilyin, Ivan. “National Leader and Party Leader”.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

⁹² Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 27.

⁹³ Ilyin, Ivan. “National Leader and Party Leader”.

emerging from some mystical place. In Russia, then, the national leader will just appear, and the people will know and acquiesce to them. Russians will “accept [the] freedom and... laws from the Russian patriot who leads Russia to salvation.”⁹⁴

About Fascism:

Fascism is a reactionary and healthy political phenomenon that seeks to balance the scales against left totalitarianism; this is the opinion of Ilyin. He begins this essay, *About Fascism*, by first stating that the idea of fascism is, like the Russian state, misunderstood. Fascism is complex, it is many-sided, and it is not going anywhere.⁹⁵ Its reputation has an extremely negative perception though. Simply, when one hears fascism they tend to think about national-socialism in Germany, which killed many people, or Italy’s left-totalitarianism and its charismatic leader, the Duce (Mussolini). Ilyin argues though that fascism is just misunderstood because of the people who have used its name to justify their negative actions. Basically, the perception is worse than the reality.

According to Ilyin, fascism first appeared in Russia as a reaction to Bolshevism.⁹⁶ Fascism arose here as a concentrated effort to combat and defend against the left-totalitarianism of the Bolsheviks. However, this phenomenon was not unusual or unexpected. Fascism is, “healthy, necessary and inevitable... [when]... left chaos and left totalitarianism”⁹⁷ ensues. Continuing, Ilyin writes, “fascism was... right, since it was looking for just social and political reforms.”⁹⁸ This is why in times of, “national dangers, the healthy forces of the people will always be concentrated in a protective-dictatorial direction.”⁹⁹ Historically, though, fascist regimes have made errors which make them inadequate fascist ones.

⁹⁴ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 25.

⁹⁵ Ilyin, Ivan. “About Fascism”. *Russia Statehood: on the Server Russian Resurrection*, December 6, 1948. <http://gosudarstvo.voskres.ru/ilin/nz/nz-37.html> Accessed July 23, 2020.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Ilyin provides six “gaps and errors” for why fascism has failed and why only two regimes have been truly fascists. The first issue all major fascist regimes have done which has led to their demise is taking hostile positions to religion. Ilyin believed that religion was necessary for the nation's soul. Hostility to religion is hostility to a nation's soul. And if you recall from the first essay, the country's soul is like that of a human; attempts at division are as though one is dividing the human body into parts.

Next, fascism was never intended to be a permanent form of governance. Ilyin argues that fascism may have been content with the executive leadership of an authoritarian dictatorship. However, it was only necessary in two instances. The first purpose of fascism was to counteract communism and bolshevism. The next purpose of fascism was to “provide religion, the press, science, art, economy, and non-communist parties with freedom of judgement and creativity to the extent of their political loyalty.”¹⁰⁰ Essentially, fascism was a counterweight to a political ideology which Ilyin despised. But it was also intended to provide protections in the form of rights. Note, however, that Ilyin is specific in who gets rights and what is protected. For example, he does not support the idea of rights being universal (within a country) when it comes to political ideology. Also, parties within Ilyin's fascist regime style may only have the freedom to be ‘creative’ and use ‘judgement’ when it is loyal to the national leader. This is why Ilyin believed in the idea of political parties only to the extent that they ritualize elections; not that they serve a true representative purpose.¹⁰¹

Party monopoly was Ilyin's third critique, and one that all fascist regimes historically have incorporated into their regimes. Two issues Ilyin had with party monopoly were that they disregarded those who thought differently from the party leadership and that parties must think alike to stay united, which disregards any form of independent thought. He argued that

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 27.

it is inevitable that the wisest people will remove themselves from the party and make way for less competent people to replace them. Ilyin justifies this idea by writing, “the best think independently and freely, and the worst are ready to adapt to everything in order to make a career.”¹⁰² This leads to his second argument. In party politics, because the wisest never remain in it, one finds mediocrity at its best, and “hypocrites, crooks and careerists”¹⁰³ at its worst.

Fourth, fascism’s reputation faltered and its image is so controversial because of the historical trend of its ideology being one that revolves around conquering and “eradicat[ing]” neighbors.¹⁰⁴ This was never the intention of fascism, according to Ilyin. One does not need to liberate their own people by imprisoning their neighbor. Historically, fascist regimes gave incentive for other non-fascist ones to contain and combat them. Non-fascist regimes were not tolerant of the eradication efforts by such regimes. Fascist regimes indirectly created alliances against themselves because of bad internal policies. This, to Ilyin, is another reason why the regime style has historically failed.

Next, “social justice and social liberation do not tolerate either socialism or communism.”¹⁰⁵ What this means is, fascist regimes have historically nationalized economies and industries, provided social welfare, and attempted to make a more just social environment. Fascism does not allow for this. Once a fascist regime ‘crosses’ the line of socialism and social reform, the regime is un-fascists and bound to fail.

Finally, fascist regimes historically have failed because they turn “caesaristic.” Caesarism is “the exact opposite of monarchism.” Caesarism is godless, which makes it impure. Furthermore, the leader is immoral, demagogic, and acts in the interest of himself, not the

¹⁰² Ilyin, Ivan. “About Fascism”.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

people. However, the Caesaristic leader uses the passions of his people to his advantage, posing as a savior. Citizens will follow because they view the Caesaristic leadership as their only option for prosperity. In turn, the leader will consolidate the regime and limit individual freedoms. Fascists leaders of the past have turned “Caesaristic” and because of this, have historically failed.

At the end of this essay, Ilyin provides some guidance for the future Russian regime, which he believes will be a fascist one. The recommendation is simple: do not label the regime fascist. He endorsed the governments in Spain and Portugal at the time (Franco’s and Salazar’s fascist regimes) because they did just this. They did not call themselves fascists and they did not commit the six sins which were discussed above. Salazar and Franco may have faltered in the end, and this is not the point. The point is really that fascism, since the Bolshevik revolution, which Ilyin argues first appeared, has been around in some form ever since. One can see the influence of Ilyin’s works reemerging back in the country which exiled him.

In his 2014 annual address given to the Federal Assembly, President Putin lamented the need to do what Ilyin called for in his writings seventy years previously. In his speech, Putin quoted Ilyin, who wrote:

“He who loves Russia should wish freedom for it; above all, freedom for Russia as such, for its international independence and self-sufficiency; freedom for Russia as a unity of Russian and all other ethnic cultures; and finally, freedom for the Russian people, freedom for all of us: freedom of faith, of the search for truth, creativity, work, and property.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Putin, Vladimir. “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”. Kremlin website, December 4, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173> Accessed July 23, 2020.

The Federal Assembly's members rose to their feet after this quote, praising Putin's selection of words. Strangely though, neither Ilyin's writings, nor Putin's speech, was calling for the liberalization of the Russian people; it called for the liberalization of the state. This is why Ilyin put the people as the last priority in this portion of text. However, even this freedom he is calling for is not liberty. The only liberty Ilyin wrote of and Putin called for is the freedom to be entertained by the political class and the duty to not resist the national leader.

1.3 Eternity Politics and the Victim Mentality of the Putin Regime

Having now presented the philosophical roots of the Russian regime, what now follows is the contemporary strategy for implementing Ilyin's writings into reality. The two strategies for doing this are called the politics of inevitability and the politics of eternity. Inspiration for these two concepts comes from Dr. Timothy Snyder. After presenting these two ideas, we will look at how victimhood is used to assist Putin's regime. Victimhood will be presented through two articles written by Putin.

The politics of Inevitability:

The politics of inevitability is first and foremost an idea that says there are no ideas.¹⁰⁷ Those who practice this form of politics will tell their followers that what they preach is all that matters. And their followers will believe them. Inevitability politics is like that of a "self induced intellectual coma."¹⁰⁸ Also, inevitability is the first step in a two-part process. Most importantly, those exposed to inevitability ignore the actual reality of life. The politics of inevitability does not just appear; it arises from comfortability.

Ideological contestation forced regimes and people to work on the internal effects of their political systems. Sometimes these ideologies were even exported to other regimes. In the

¹⁰⁷ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. London: Bodley Head. Pg. 66.

United States, one finds liberal democracy. The United States has traditionally been a proponent of other states practicing this regime style. They have also exported democracy to countries, sometimes with support of the local populations and sometimes without. Similarly, the predecessor to the Russian Federation, the Soviet Union, also sought to expand their communist ideology to other states. However, when communism disappeared, so too did ideological competition between the two regime styles. The common perception in the 1990s was that “history could move in only one direction: towards liberal democracy.”¹⁰⁹ Some even argued that because the ideological race was over and Western liberal democracy had proven to be the most resilient and reliable form of governance, history had ended.¹¹⁰

The world witnessed the falling of the Berlin Wall and subsequent Soviet collapse. Everyone saw that the socialist utopia the Soviet Union was trying to attain was in fact unattainable under the ideological structure they were attempting to do so with. With a lack of ideological competition between regimes and the ceased existence of one altogether, the world “learned to say there was ‘no alternative.’”¹¹¹ Critiquing democracy or liberalism was not accepted as it was the regime form that survived. But there is a need for debate, at least along ideological lines, so any regime can self-reflect and improve. But in inevitability politics, those who critique the accepted regime form become pariahs or are ignored. Snyder argues that, “once inevitably was taken for granted, criticism indeed became slippery.”¹¹² It must be noted here that inevitability (and eternity) politics is not an ideology but a strategy politicians will use to usurp power and increase their influence in politics.

Inevitability infers that we know the outcome before it happens. Because of this preconceived notion, questioning a political decision is essentially useless; why question something when

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, Pg. 66.

¹¹⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interests* (2018): https://www.embl.de/aboutus/science_society/discussion/discussion_2006/ref1-22june06.pdf Pg. 1. Accessed July 29, 2020.

¹¹¹ Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Pg. 66.

¹¹² Ibid, pg. 66.

you know the outcome already. The cliché of inevitability politics is that there may be alternatives, but their outcomes seem inevitably known with or without citizen participation. In politics, though, there are always alternatives, especially in liberal democratic regimes. This is where inevitability and politics intertwine. Individuals under the influence of an inevitability politician believe that they are not responsible nor able to make political change. If a politician can get their constituency to think this way, they have succeeded in the inevitable objective. At this stage, constituents will relinquish voluntarily, without even realizing they are doing so, their individual political power.

One of the most important aspects in inevitability politics is that it disregards or ignores history. The leadership that governs via this strategy presents what could be, as any politician does. They do not present their constituencies with historical events or the effects of their policies though. Inevitable politicians do this for one major reason. History is comforting, and when presented with historical facts, one is able to recognize issues that arise. George Santayana said it best when he wrote, “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” If one is unaware of their history all together, they will willfully repeat past mistakes unaware that they could have prevented them. Because of this conundrum, inevitably politicians are selective in their choice of history, and they tend to rewrite or present it in their own personal, beneficial way.

The Soviet Union was not the first to practice this governance strategy, but they presented history partially which assisted the regime. Introduced first by Stalin during the Second World War was the unifying idea of destroying the fascists. Snyder writes, “according to Soviet ideology, fascism arose from capitalism.”¹¹³ Stalin made capitalists the enemy; Soviets were taught to think any capitalist was a fascist. The definition of fascist would change though under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev. Instead of arguing that it was capitalists

¹¹³ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 146.

who were fascists, Brezhnev would change the meaning of fascism. Fascism was now viewed as an existential threat from the West.¹¹⁴ Brezhnev changed the whole concept of a word for the regime's benefit. He knew Soviets would unite against any western influence, as they did when Stalin told them capitalists were fascists.

Politicians of inevitability tend to be successful in their objective because they use teleology. Teleology is a concept where the political regime 'narrates' a story of society being, "lead towards a certain, usually desirable, goal."¹¹⁵ During the Soviet era, this desirable goal was socialist utopia. Today, Russia is restoring its image to the world as a world power. The only way Putinism can do this, however, is by transitioning to the next form of politics, which is the politics of eternity. Brezhnev began the race from inevitability to eternity; Putin has crossed the finish line.

The Politics of Eternity:

As was just presented, inevitability is the first step and lays the groundwork for future politicians to move into the politics of eternity. Snyder outlines the politics of eternity in vivid detail. He describes it as "eternity arisi[ing] from inevitability like a ghost from a corpse."¹¹⁶ Hence, this form of politics can only appear when its predecessor dies. Similar to inevitability politics, eternity politics, too, says there are no ideas.

Again, in inevitability politics, the outcomes seem predictable and the individual does not feel as though they can make political change. Essentially, "life becomes a sleepwalk to a pre-marked grave in a pre-purchased plot."¹¹⁷ Within a politically eternal regime, though, life is not some slow progression that predictability ends with one walking to their grave. Alternatively, you and your eternal leader run to the grave sight gleefully to choose your plot

¹¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 146.

¹¹⁵ Snyder, T. (2017). *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. London: Bodley Head. Pg. 66.

¹¹⁶ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 15.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 15.

where you will lay, and only when the leader says you can finally rest can you do so. Where “the politics of inevitably is like a coma, the politics of eternity is like a hypnosis: we stare at the spinning vortex of cyclical myth until we fall into a trance - and then we do something shocking at someone else’s orders.”¹¹⁸

This begs the question, what kind of leader leads their country to this hypnotizing state? Snyder outlines that at least in a market-based, capitalistic society (which nearly every state in the world is with the collapse of the Soviet Union), when markets replace institutions, eternity ensues. Markets without equitable policies in place (or institutions to monitor them) will generate economic inequality within society. Many will feel left behind and unheard by the newly created economic and political elite. When “social mobility halts, inevitably gives way to eternity, and democracy gives way to oligarchy.”¹¹⁹ The people within these societies feel economic pain. They see wealth disparity growing as they struggle to feed their families or pay for adequate housing.

A member of the elite oligarchy must step in, then, to eternally govern and hypnotize society. They present themselves as one of the oligarchs, yes, but one who knows their struggles and is the only antidote to combat the other oligarchs from inflicting greater pain on society. This charismatic leader will “spin... a tale of an innocent past... and offer fake protection”¹²⁰ to those in need. All this oligarch asks for in return is society's trust and political submission. Finally, eternal politicians are also anti-historical like their inevitable counterparts. However, they are not selective in their presentation of history. Eternity politicians will present the past, “but in a self absorbed way, free of any real concern with the facts.”¹²¹ They may even rewrite history, making times which were, in reality, disastrous, appealing moments to return

¹¹⁸ Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Pg. 68.

¹¹⁹ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 15.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 15.

¹²¹ Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Pg. 67.

to.¹²² When they talk of the past, it is to remind their constituencies of the purity of their nation and the attacks on it by foreign enemies.¹²³

Snyder argues that the first country to move from inevitability to eternity is the Russian Federation. And this is a possibility considering the socioeconomic environment and political regime structure of it. Its leader has posed as the protector against an oligarch class. He has even usurped power in multiple ways, which Snyder argues is typical of an eternal politician.

Putin was not a politician who was selected by democratic means; democratic means only legitimized his pathway to eternal leadership. Putin worked as an assistant to the Mayor of St. Petersburg throughout the 1990s. During his tenure in the role, he made many political connections and enriched himself in the process.¹²⁴ In August 1999, President Yeltsin selected Putin to be his prime minister. This came as a shock to many people within the political class and throughout Russian society.¹²⁵ People were not asking what Putin had on his political agenda for Russia, but more simply, who he was.¹²⁶ Two months later, Russia would see in Putin the leadership they thought they wanted: a man who was their savior.

In September 1999, a major domestic event occurred in Russia. Bombs exploded in multiple cities, killing hundreds of Russian citizens. As its new prime minister, and formerly the head of the FSB (the KGB successor), Putin took hold of this event and told Russian that they were righteous and were being attacked by those who sought to harm and dismember the newly created state. Who was trying to dismantle the Russian state, though? Putin would claim the attacks were conducted by the small republic of Chechnya. The Chechen Republic of southwestern Russia, who had declared independence in 1993, and fought the Russians to a standstill during the first Chechan war, has not been in military conflict since. This was

¹²² Ibid, pg. 67.

¹²³ Ibid, pg. 67.

¹²⁴ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 45.

¹²⁵ Hill, Fiona. "Putin and the Kremlin are Experts at Reading the Popular Mood. And they Were Watching America".

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Putin's first political event that he would handle. Russians seemed to think his decision to make war with the Chechens was the correct thing to do. Putin would five months later win an overwhelming majority in the 2000 presidential election, elevating him to the top spot in the Russian government.

It must be stated that Putin's decision to go to war with Chechnya was based not on facts but on passions. There was no evidence that Chechen forces bombed or were involved in carrying out any of the city's bombings. Evidence suggests that FSB officers had been involved in these incidents, though.¹²⁷ For instance, "in the city of Ryazan... FSB officers were apprehended by their local colleagues as suspects in the bombings."¹²⁸ Finally, Putin's approval rating when Yeltsin announced him as prime minister did not even reach double digits. After the Second Chechen War, "unequal television coverage... and the atmospherics of terrorism and war,"¹²⁹ he would go from barely known to being the president of Russia. The victimhood mentality Putin framed during the Chechen terrorist incident inflated his popularity.

Putin and Victimhood:

This portion of the section will present two articles authored by Putin. The first article is called *Russia and the Changing World*. This article presents the opportunities and pathway forward Putin sees for Russia. However, in the article there are caveats, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The second article presented is titled *A Plea for Caution From Russia*, which is a New York Times Op-Ed regarding the Syrian conflict. Both articles share a similar message: Russia is a victim of foreign countries who are keeping it contained and weak.

¹²⁷ Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Pg. 45.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 45.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 45.

Russia and the Changing World:

Written in 2012, two months before his third, successful, presidential election, Putin outlined where the Russian state is and where it seeks to go. He begins with some optimism: "We expect our openness will bring the people of Russia more prosperity and culture and will promote trust, an item that has been in short supply lately."¹³⁰ He recognizes that isolation has not benefited the Russian people or the state. Putin wants to reverse this and build trust between Russia and other states.

His tone then transitions into a nationalistic victimhood. He writes, "everything we do will be based on our own interests and goals, not on decisions other countries impose on us."¹³¹ He presents to readers the idea that the only time Russia has ever been respected has been when it was strong. Any attempt to contain it is a fool's errand that creates more issues than benefits. Putin states that the only way to ensure global security is to work with the Russian regime, not against it. And if any foreign power attempts to 'demote' it, they are only creating a more unstable security environment for the world.¹³²

Paraphrasing briefly, Putin argues that in recent years, trust among nations has decreased. He provides three reasons for this:

"I think that indivisible security for all nations, unacceptability of the disproportionate use of force, and unconditional compliance with the fundamental principles of international law are indispensable postulates. Any neglect of these norms destabilizes the world situation."¹³³

¹³⁰ Putin, Vladimir. "Russia and the Changing World". Russkiy Mir Foundation, February 27, 2012. <https://russkiymir.ru/en/publications/139698/> Accessed July 29, 2020.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

All three characteristics are motivated by Putin's skepticism towards the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), which he explicitly identifies in this essay.

NATO is a security organization that has slowly grown into a collective of "indivisible" countries that protect each other. Putin is critical in this essay of NATO's expansion into countries that border Russia, and even more critical of the desire for European countries to set up a missile defense system that he believes threatens the regime. He argues that this desire by Europe to build up a missile defense system is because of U.S. interests in keeping Russia contained. Again, attempting to influence or demote Russia, in the words of Putin, is only creating an unsafe security environment for the world.

Next, NATO is "creating facts on the ground,"¹³⁴ which only foments mistrust between Russia and other NATO countries. He writes that because NATO is doing this, Russia is being prevented from conducting its 'positive agenda' in international affairs. He does not define what his 'positive agenda' is in this essay. Having roadblocks to conducting foreign policy, though, whatever he deems positive, is the major contention here. And this is what Putin means by disproportionate use of force, as seen in the quote above. NATO is naturally more influential and far-reaching because of its collective membership. Russia is singular; NATO is many.

Finally, Putin makes the argument that recently there has been a trend of national sovereignty being undermined under the pretext of humanitarian concerns. He points to the need for nations to look to the United Nations Security Council (U.N.S.C) to determine where human rights issues are a concern. Putin argues that human rights have become a simple excuse for foreign nations to selectively violate a nation's sovereignty. A nation cannot 'protect' the rights of some people while violating "the rights of many other people, including the most

¹³⁴ Ibid.

fundamental and sacred right, the right to life.”¹³⁵ He concludes this point by saying simply, foreign states who selectively choose which sovereignty to violate, and which people to protect, “is merely demagoguery.”¹³⁶

A Plea for Caution From Russia:

This essay shows Putin’s perspective that Russia (and those it works with) is a victim. In this essay, victimhood is at the hands of those who do not follow the internationally accepted rules unless it suits their agenda. This article focuses on the Syrian conflict. Putin began by telling his audience that Russia and the United States are not that different, and “were also allies once.”¹³⁷ But the relationship has broken down, at least in this conflict, because the U.S. and the West have embroiled themselves in Syria, directly delegitimizing an international institution that was set up to deal with this very issue.

Putin pleads in his article for the United States to stop fighting in this conflict, arguing that their involvement violates Syrian sovereignty. He argues that the only time a state can attack another is in self defense or with approval from the U.N.S.C. The United States' involvement in Syria, essentially, “could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance.”¹³⁸ This is why Putin, and Russia, have such a great stake in Syrian stability. They “are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law.”¹³⁹ Putin presents himself as a savior because he is the only person in this situation who cares about following international rules.

He concludes his critique by doing what is common of an eternity politician. Putin created a narrative for rebel fighters who Russia was fighting against, without providing evidence. He

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Putin, Vladimir. “A Plea for Caution From Russia”. The New York Times, September 11, 2013. <https://nyti.ms/15lcB4C> Accessed July 29, 2020.

¹³⁸ Ibid, pg. 1.

¹³⁹ Ibid, pg. 2.

claims that chemical weapons were not used by the government but by opposition forces against Syrian citizens. He argued that the motive for opposition forces to use chemical weapons against their own people was “to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists.”¹⁴⁰ The United States does not have an interest in Syria, in Putin’s opinion, and they would not join if not for the ‘humanitarian’ issue. Also, in his view, the United States regime style is not “a model of democracy” Syrians want, because it relies “solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan ‘you’re either with us or against us.’”¹⁴¹

There are some important takeaways from these two articles which Lilia Shevtsova, a Russian politics expert at the Brookings Institute, emphasizes in her 2015 article, *The Authoritarian Resurgence: Forward to the Past in Russia*. A general point she makes in this essay is that Russia may say one thing, but will then do what they are critiquing others of doing. She provides two examples for this. First, as was presented in Putin’s *Russia and the Changing World* essay, coalitions like NATO who collectively work together are a threat to Russia's security. However, Russia has been working on strengthening, since at least 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁴² This is a collective security organization which works in tandem with the two most powerful Asian nations, Russia and China, and includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This organization may be a reaction to NATO’s expansion in the early 2000s. But Putin’s criticism of one collective security organization, while building up one of his own, seems like a violation of trust or at the least hypocritical.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, Pg. 2.

¹⁴² Shevtsova, Lilia. “The Authoritarian Resurgence: Forward to the Past in Russia”. *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, Issue 2, (April, 2015): 22-36. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-authoritarian-resurgence-forward-to-the-past-in-russia/> Pg. 28. Accessed July 29, 2020.

Next, she argues that Putin's regime, though it claims to feel threatened and constantly contained by foreign enemies, is trying to "contain and influence the West."¹⁴³ Putin's strategy consists of preventing the West from expanding its footprint (security related and economically), "induce[ing] it to endorse 'spheres of influence,'" and controlling any facet which the West can use to influence domestic politics within Russia (NGO's, internet access, private media).¹⁴⁴ Putin may be critical of the West for its collective security organizations and political influence around the world, which he believes attempts to contain and keep Russia down. However, what he is criticizing is exactly what he is doing with other states.

Finally, throughout Putin's presented essays, one can see a tendency for the leader to appeal to national victimhood. Whether this be nationalist pride that emphasizes Russia being different, the world needing to accept it, and if not problems arising, or his claim that he is the only one who wants to protect international law and institutions, it is tough to miss his belief in Russia's purity. Putin is Russia's national leader; only he can protect and defend the Russian organism. He has created a regime style which is inspired by Ilyin's writing and taken control politically by moving its politics from inevitability to eternity. We have established what the regime style is and how it strategically governs. Now we must look at Putinism's most powerful weapon against democratic liberalism: its propaganda machine.

¹⁴³ Ibid, Pg. 28.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, Pg. 28.

Chapter 2:

Propaganda and Social Manipulation

Propaganda is Putinism's greatest weapon against democratic liberalism. The two ways in which propaganda is helpful and necessary for regime longevity are the content it creates and its high level of distribution. Analyzing the content and distribution of propaganda will be the focus of chapter two, consisting of three sections. Section 2.1 will present the concept of information warfare and propaganda creation, and its influence on individuals' perception. Section 2.2 will discuss the impacts of the broadcast channel RT on “branding” the Russian regime. Finally, section 2.3 will present arguments that Russia uses the traditionally open social media platform, Twitter, to expand and propagate the regime's message. Understanding Putin’s most influential tool, his propaganda machine, will help in answering the question: has Putinism replaced democratic liberalism in Russia?

2.1 Information Production and Public Opinion Manipulation

Russia is in a state of warfare, but not in the classical sense. Generally, classical warfare has been viewed as state’s conducting military operations against other states as a means for settling political disputes and expanding one's territory and, in turn, political influence.¹⁴⁵ Conflicts were Clausewitzian; states fought other states; borders were redrawn when conflicts were finished. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in how states conduct warfare. In her PhD dissertation, Dr. Dominika Kosarova presents how warfare has seen a modernization in recent years. She argues that today, we have hybrid warfare, where, yes, states may fight with other states in the traditional sense. But state military operations also include “striv[ing] to... influence people’s mind and perception of a particular situation often by means of propaganda.”¹⁴⁶ Information warfare, then, is a new form of battle that works in tandem with the traditional military operations of the state.

¹⁴⁵ Clausewitz, Carl von, Michael Howard, Peter Paret, and Bernard Brodie. *On War*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984.

¹⁴⁶ Kosarova, Dominika. “Information Warfare and the Contemporary Security Environment”. *Security Horizons (Horyzonty Bezpieczeństw)*, 8 (3), 17-33 (2018): 17-29. Pg. 18. (See works cited for direct link). Accessed September 5, 2020.

Information warfare is a means to an end in military strategy. Troops in the information warfare scope are sitting behind a screen or propagating a message for the state they work for. Essentially, there are platoons of soldiers, however, they are not going into a battle with a gun. We are past the days of soldiers with weapons going into battles for states, against states. Information warfare targets a new enemy (or victim). The enemy are normal people who regimes seek to influence in a certain way. Information warfare is not warfare in a strict sense, then. States do not declare their intent to battle another state (or whoever the enemy may be). Russia is considered one of the most influential states conducting this form of warfare.¹⁴⁷

A major strategy in information warfare is **reflexive control**. This concept is defined as a strategy that “causes a stronger adversary voluntarily to choose the actions most advantageous to Russian objectives by shaping the adversary’s perceptions of the situation decisively.”¹⁴⁸ Reflexive control is a term that was coined by the Russian regime and has its roots in the Soviet era.¹⁴⁹ Critics argue that Russia’s current strategy of information warfare is unimaginative and, though a significant challenge to the West, “is not a particularly novel or insuperable one.”¹⁵⁰

The Russian Federation has been outspoken about their use of information as a tool of warfare. Dr. Kosarova notes two instances where the regime's leadership has been vocally open about its operations in the information sphere. The term **hybrid warfare** was first seen in public statements by the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces for the Russian Federation, Valerij Gerasimov, in 2013.¹⁵¹ His inclusion of this term would be found the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, pg. 18.

¹⁴⁸ Snegovaya, Maria. “Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare”. Institute for the Study of Warfare, Washington, D.C., September, 2015.
<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf> Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, pg. 7.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, pg. 7.

¹⁵¹ Kosarova, Dominika. “Information Warfare and the Contemporary Security Environment”. Pg. 20.

following year in Russia's contemporary military doctrine document. Also in 2015, the Kremlin would publish its National Security Strategy policy paper, which "claim[s] that beside political and economic tools, information instruments have been set in motion in the struggle for influence in the international arena."¹⁵² This is the first public sign that Putin views the information sphere as a battlefield.¹⁵³

Second, one can see that Putin, and his deputies, also views information as a strategic tool for politics. Dr. Kosarova argues that, as seen in a 2016 speech at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Krutskikhhe stated that Russia was "preparing a new strategy for [the] information area."¹⁵⁴ He argued that this new strategy for information warfare was comparable to that of the discovery of nuclear weapons. Krutskikh's claim was bold, yes, however, it is not unwarranted. A new capability of Putin's, seen in this speech, is the regime's ability to communicate to foreign and domestic audiences at a "peer to peer" level.¹⁵⁵

The Russian information warfare strategy depends on people to make choices, yes. But the regime will frame facts and information strategically, leading individuals to choose outcomes that are beneficial to Putin. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews concisely outline this idea in their essay *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter it*.

Paul and Matthews establish a timeline of the regime's "evolution" in propaganda.¹⁵⁶ Remember, the model has its roots in the Soviet era. They argue, however, that there is a push to modernize the propaganda machine which the Soviets lacked the capability due to technology related issues. With the rise in innovative technology has come propandic

¹⁵² Russian National Security Strategy. "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy". Federal National Security Strategy Paper signed by President Putin, December 31, 2015. <http://www.iece.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf> Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁵³ Kosarova, Dominika. "Information Warfare and the Contemporary Security Environment". Pg. 20.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, pg. 20.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, pg. 20.

¹⁵⁶ Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter it". Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> Accessed September 5, 2020.

opportunity. Paul and Matthew argue that “Russia has taken advantage of technology and available media in ways that would have been inconceivable during the Cold War.”¹⁵⁷ Technological advancement has given Putin the ability to distribute his message across multiple platforms.

Their argument labels the Russian propaganda machine a “firehose of falsehood.” They give it this name for two of its “distinctive features: high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fiction.”¹⁵⁸ These two features focus on the creation and distribution of propaganda. There are two other elements which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, also. The two other features focus on the impacts of propaganda at an individual level. Furthermore, they consist of being “rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and... lack[ing a] commitment to consistency.” These four features make up the “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model, and is how Putin’s propaganda machine operates.

High Volume:

Russian propaganda is in great supply and on multiple platforms. Propaganda can be found in “text, video, audio, and still imagery propagated via the internet, social media, satellite, television, and traditional radio and television broadcasting.”¹⁵⁹ Russian propaganda has crossover, meaning, there are multiple sources producing content on different platforms

Multiple formats of propaganda are not enough to disseminate and convince targeted audiences of the regime's message, though. This is why “the producers and disseminators [of propaganda] include a substantial force of paid Internet ‘trolls.’”¹⁶⁰ Trolls are individual actors who go online with the objective of “trolling,” or “bullying [others]... aimed at

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, pg. 1.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, pg. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pg. 2.

provoking anger in targets for the amusement of the perpetrators.”¹⁶¹ Trolls act in the interests of the regime without working directly for it. Paul and Matthew argue that trolls are on guard twenty-four hours a day working indirectly for the regime, propagating and spreading its message.¹⁶² Essentially, trolls will undermine others' views that disagree with the regime's message on online chat rooms, discussion forums, social media, or even the comments section of news sites.¹⁶³ Trolls will even use Russian state media sources when targeting anti-regime individuals as a way to counter and provoke.

RT is the most pronounced form of targeted propaganda in Russia. RT is a Russian state media company. Its budget is \$300 million per year and broadcasts in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and multiple Eastern European languages.¹⁶⁴ Note here that it is not produced specifically for Russian audiences, but foreign viewers. RT is popular online and boasts having more than a billion page views; this would make it the most watched news source in the world.¹⁶⁵ RT will be the focus of section 2.2 though. This description of the news sources is to provide an example of the propaganda machines creation of information. More important, though, is that RT is an outright hand of the regime; there are multiple sources that are more covert that repeat Putin-friendly messaging.¹⁶⁶ Multiple sources who consistently share the regime's message is essential to the model's success.

Psychological experimental research shows a common trend. Having multiple sources is more persuasive than one conglomerate and even more effective if those multiple sources make different arguments that end with the same conclusion.¹⁶⁷ Trust in a news source is

¹⁶¹ Hwang, Tim. “Digital Disinformation: A Primer”. Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, September, 2017. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Digital_Disinformation_Primer_web_0925.pdf Pg. 6. Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁶² Paul, Christopher, and Mirriam Matthews. “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter it”. Pg. 2.

¹⁶³ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, pg. 3.

often greater when large quantities of professionals and consumers endorse it.¹⁶⁸ Also, the views of others, especially the views of those who are similar to the targeted audience, is highly influential in the propaganda being effective.¹⁶⁹ These three things are influential in the effectiveness of high volume propaganda on the targetted audience. RT and other state media follow these three psychology backed principles.

Paul and Matthew argue here that “high volume can consume the attention and other available bandwidth of potential audiences, drowning out competing messages.”¹⁷⁰ Essentially, high quantities of news sources could drown out opposing views thereby indirectly assisting the regime's goal of high volume, consistent, supportive messaging.¹⁷¹ Finally, because there are multiple sources within Russia which provide different arguments but produce the same conclusion, credibility for the regime is enhanced. This creates a sense of homogeneity in people’s perception of the regime.¹⁷²

Rapid, Continuous, and Repetitive:

Putin’s regime has modernized the propaganda machine enough that it is constantly producing information and is very responsive to events. Propagandists do not care much for facts or objectivity in Russian media and it has been shown that fact-checking is not a priority.¹⁷³ The “news” they provide is based on whispers and rumors; this is why they are so quick to cover news worthy events.¹⁷⁴ There are also issues associated with this lack of commitment to objectivity or fact-checking.

Russian state media is commonly the first to report news stories that are happening. Yes, both propagandists and state media are commonly the first to report on newsworthy events. The

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, pg. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, pg. 3.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, pg. 3.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, pg. 3.

¹⁷² Ibid, pg. 3.

¹⁷³ Ibid, pg. 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, pg. 4.

priority of a propagandist is to present a favorable message for the regime. Because of this objective, they, and state media, will at times present misleading or false stories that most Russian society will see.¹⁷⁵ As discussed previously, high volume messaging is influential in propaganda's effectiveness. Research would support the claim, then, that rapid, continuous, repetitive messaging would be effective in the distribution of propaganda to a targeted audience.¹⁷⁶

Directly, state media chooses what to present and can do so in favorable ways to the regime. State media helps in the repetition of a message because of their ability to choose what to present. Their budget is from the state; they are not dependent on private funds or selling advertisement space. State media sources, like RT, do not have to worry about having a stable flow of viewers. Thus, they have the ability to show whatever they want without consideration for maintaining viewer circulation. As is noted in Paul and Matthew's article, "repeated exposure to a statement has been shown to increase its acceptance as true."¹⁷⁷ Known as the mere exposure effect, if an individual is exposed to a consistent message they are more likely to believe it, even if they know the message is false.¹⁷⁸

Indirectly, the propaganda machine is repetitive because it has private propagandists and organizations always distributing its messages. One example of this is seen with trolls and their repetitive, positive, messaging for the regime. According to a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report, "'there are thousands of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LiveJournal, and eKontakte' maintained by Russian Propagandists,"¹⁷⁹ used for posting propaganda. There are also internet trolls who manage these accounts and are working 24/7.¹⁸⁰ Accounts of former

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, pg. 4.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, pg. 4.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, pg. 4.

¹⁷⁸ Zajonc, Robert. "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure". Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Monograph Supplement, Vol. 9, No. 2, (June, 1968): 1-25. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1183/c8ce721ae7f38ede324f435e9d34eea4669d.pdf> Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Paul, Christopher, and Mirriam Matthews. "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter it". Pg. 2.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, pg. 2.

“troll” workers for the Internet Research Agency (IRA) report that, “Trolls are on duty 24 hours a day, in 12-hour-shifts, and each has a daily quota of 135 posted comments of at least 200 characters.”¹⁸¹ Trolls at the IRA are supportive of the regime; they repeat pro-Putin messages, which are pro-regime ones. Finally, though trolls are intended to provoke negative reactions, research shows that “angry messages are more persuasive to angry audiences.”¹⁸²

No Commitment to Objective Reality:

Mentioned previously, Russian propagandists do not care for objectivity or facts in their production of information. This does not mean all information produced by propagandists is false; the opposite, actually. A significant proportion of the information that the media distributes “contains a significant fraction of the truth.”¹⁸³ However, that does not mean the information is credible or objective; especially when facts and stories are wholly created.

Let us look at what happened on September 11, 2014, in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana as an example of propagandist messaging. That morning, hazardous toxic fumes wreaked havoc on the small Louisiana town. At 8:30 a.m., a chemicals company, Columbia Chemicals, reported a major chemical spill. Employees at the plant sent an emergency response text out to residents. The message urged residents to take shelter, attaching a link to a website recipients could go to for more information on the chemical spill. Twitter was inundated with hundreds of users interested in the event; the hashtag #ColumbianChemicals was a top trend. Thankfully, hundreds of users were tweeting the facts of this incident, keeping the world updated on what U.S. national and local media were not covering. The media did not cover this story, and rightfully so; the whole thing is fake.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Ibid, pg. 4.

¹⁸² Ibid, pg. 6.

¹⁸³ Ibid, pg. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Chen, Adrien. “The Agency”. New York Times, June 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>⁸⁹
Accessed September 5, 2020.

Adrien Chen's coverage of this incident (or lack thereof) has linked a private group, the IRA, to this attack. The major objective of this agency, it seems, is to work as a proxy for Russian propagandists. It is a private organization owned by Russian businessman, Yevgeniy Prigozhin.¹⁸⁵ Ex-employees at the agency have told reporters that staff members are directed on what content to comment on when they begin work shifts.¹⁸⁶ A former employee of the IRA told Chen that when they were working at the "'foreign desk' he received Excel files from the organization's 'analytics desk' containing links to stories he was directed to comment on, and brief instructions on how to comment on these."¹⁸⁷ Again, at least based on public information and journalist coverage, staff at the IRA assisted in an information warfare campaign against American public opinion. St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, was the strategy for influencing American public opinion.

Another technique propagandists and media practice is manufacturing sources. Russian state media does not much concern itself with objectivity, similar to how private groups like the IRA function. But Russian state media is not journalistic, at least in the western sense. Major state media broadcasters like RT may be perceived, and look, like their competitors. However, RT, unlike the BBC and CNN, is more "infotainment and disinformation than fact-checked journalism."¹⁸⁸ RT is a prime example of what psychologists call the **sleeper effect**; "with the passage of time... low credibility sources manifest greater persuasive impact."¹⁸⁹ RT has been around since 2005 and has created an image that looks like its more credible competitors. Because of its success in branding and appearing as a legitimate news source, viewers are more susceptible to ascribing to misinformation on Russian state media outlets.

¹⁸⁵ Mazarr, Michael J., Abigail Casey, Alyssa Demus, Scott W. Harold, Luke J. Matthews, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and James Sladden. "Hostile Social Manipulation: Present Realities and Emerging Trends". Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2019. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2713/RAND_RR2713.pdf Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, pg. 75.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pg. 76.

¹⁸⁸ Paul, Christopher, and Mirriam Matthews. 2016. Pg. 6

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, pg. 6.

No Commitment to Consistency:

The final feature of the regime's propaganda operation is its dismissiveness towards consistency. State media sources may not produce the same coverage, but they produce content that arrives at a similar conclusion. As is argued in Paul and Matthew's essay, the propaganda machine is tolerant of changing a story's narrative. If a story is exposed as false by the public, the source will just change the story's angle. Or propagandists and the political regime will make unsubstantiated statements which sound like conspiracy theories rather than evidence based questions and conclusions. The shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) will be the example presented here.

On July 17, 2014, commercial airliner MH17, carrying 298 individuals, crashed, killing everyone on board. Evidence from multiple independent organizations and governments suggests that the plane was shot down with a Russian-supplied Buk missile system.¹⁹⁰ Days later, the Russian propaganda machine and government leadership began spinning the story. Russia's Defense Minister claimed they had not supplied the high-tech missile system "or any other weapons" to Russian-supported Ukrainian separatists.¹⁹¹ U.S. intelligence asserted, however, that it had "detected an increasing amount of heavy weaponry to separatist fighters crossing the border from Russia into Ukraine" and "providing training to separatist fighters at a facility in southwest Russia."¹⁹² The included training provided education in air defense systems, a necessity in using the weapons believed to have shot down MH17.¹⁹³

The response from the government was to spread conspiracy theories about the incident. The Spokesman for the Russian military asked, "is it a coincidence that the time of the MH17 crash is the same as a U.S. satellite flew over Ukraine?"¹⁹⁴ Russia's Defense Minister

¹⁹⁰ Kelley, Michael, and Brett LoGiurato. "Russia's Military Tells a Very Different Story About What happened to MH17", Business Insider, July 21, 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russias-story-about-mh17-2014-7> Accessed September 5, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Ibid

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

demanding to know why there was a Ukrainian warplane “flying within two to three miles of MH17.”¹⁹⁵ The minister continued, asserting that Ukraine had surface-to-air missiles near separatist-controlled areas at the time of the crash.¹⁹⁶ Ukraine did not have missile technology like this in the region.

When these events were discussed in Russian media, the facts did not matter and objectivity was not a priority. Russian media offered theory after theory, creating confusion for viewers. Contradictions can be forgiven, though, at least from evidence found in experimental psychology. Evidence suggests that when contradictions occur in media, viewers will have a greater interest in understanding why the change in message occurred.¹⁹⁷ They will follow the new argument or opinion voiced by commentators or “journalists” more closely; when they follow the new argument, the new message can have greater persuasive impact.¹⁹⁸ Viewers may be more persuaded for multiple reasons.

When viewers see a source consider critically multiple different perspectives, credibility is enhanced.¹⁹⁹ Even greater is when a source changes their own opinions. When this occurs, it shows viewers that the source is able to both recognize and admit they are wrong when more information is considered. Therefore, viewers will be more trusting in the new opinions of journalists and television commentators.²⁰⁰ MH17 is an example of this idea of starting a news narrative with an outlandish narrative which then moves more towards reality. Though Russian media never presented details that were critical of the regime, they did move away from conspiracy theorists' stories and towards more realistic (though still unproven) conclusions. Journalists and commentators could move from one story to another without losing credibility. This is because, at least from a psychological standpoint, when journalists

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

¹⁹⁷ Paul, Christopher, and Mirriam Matthews. 2016. Pg. 8.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, pg. 8.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, pg. 8.

and commentators admit they were misinformed and their new opinion is more rooted in fact, their credibility, and the new message, is more likely to be accepted.²⁰¹ Viewers will be more inclined to both follow the new opinion; journalists/commentators maintain credibility because of humility. The propaganda machine does not care if news is objective or correct. All it must do is help produce a community of passive onlookers who do not question the regime.

2.2 Media Assistance in Branding Russia:

We will now delve into how one Russian media platform, RT²⁰², influences the public's perception of Putin's regime. RT maintains that it is autonomous from the Russian regime. However, academic literature on the news broadcast channel shows that there is a pattern of RT positively "branding" Russia. This section will analyze the concept nation branding and RT's impacts on foreign audience's perception of the regime. In doing so, we will look at the four techniques RT has used in its presentation of news to frame the Russian regime favorably.

Nation Branding:

Nation branding is a new concept in political science. It takes its inspiration from Joseph Nye's soft power argument, expanding further the idea that regime perception is influential to a state's political interests. Nye's soft power concept goes like this: "soft power -- getting others to want the outcomes that you want -- co-opts people rather than coerces them."²⁰³ Nye argues that governments do not always need to coerce other states with a physical threat or financial payoff to have them act in their interests.²⁰⁴ The image of a nation, then, is essential

²⁰¹ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁰² I emphasize here that "RT" is not an acronym.

²⁰³ Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004. Pg. 18.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, pg. 17.

for a political regime to be successful in the realm of soft power. How, then, do political regimes make their image more appealing to other states?

First, it is important to define a few terms, the first of which is a brand. Norman Stone defines a brand as “a stand-in for experience, a promise you expect to be fulfilled, a strategic image statement, a proxy for reputation.”²⁰⁵ Brands, generally speaking, are a perception an individual has of something. Questions like how the consumer (or citizen) thinks of a product (or state), or characteristic features they have when hearing the product's name, are what make a brand. Stone's definition of a brand is associated with the commercial/business sector; this does not mean there is no cross-over into politics.

Nation branding, then, takes its inspiration from business branding, morphing it into the political contexts. Jaffe and Nebenzahl define nation branding as “the aim... to create a clear, simple, differentiating idea built around emotional qualities which can be symbolised both verbally and visually and understood by diverse audiences in a variety of situations.”²⁰⁶ Thus, nation branding attempts to create a brand for a state that can be presented to a diverse audience. The branding strategy should invoke some sense of positive emotional attachment, using symbolism and speech to increase the favorability of the nation's brand. Jaffee and Nebenzahl argue that for national branding to be effective, it must “embrace political, cultural, business and sports activities.”²⁰⁷ This begs the question, though, in nation branding, is one branding the nation as a state, or a nation as a people?

The priority of nation branding is to brand the nation. The people will only be used in a branding strategy if those people offer an advantage in the branding strategy. Stahlberg and Bolin argue this point extensively in their essay *Having a Soul or Choosing a Face? Nation*

²⁰⁵ Simons, Greg. “Attempting to Re-Brand the Branded: Russia's international Image in the 21st Century.”. *Russian Journal of Communications*, Vol. 4, (2011): 322-350.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271758858_Attempting_to_Re-brand_the_Brande_Russia%27s_International_Image_in_the_21st_Century Pg. 324. Accessed September 9, 2020.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, pg. 324.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, pg. 324.

Branding, Identity and Cosmopolitan Imagination. They first establish the difference between nation building and nation branding (the first is not the focus of this thesis). Stahlberg and Bolin make this differentiation in two ways. The audience and its perception of the nation's brand are the two features that differentiate these concepts. Focusing here on nation branding, the audience is external (foreign).²⁰⁸ Furthermore, this foreign audience will have a perception, but this perception is probably wrong.²⁰⁹ Hence, the objective is to influence and “correct” false perceptions. And in nation branding, “the face of a... state... is the brand.”²¹⁰

Diplomacy and the brand of a nation go hand-in-hand. A nation's brand is not directly beneficial for the regime and its relationships with other regimes though. Governments have their perceptions of other regimes based on whatever is important to their interests. Relationships between nations can change if a regime believes there is an opportunity presented with another one. Nation branding, though, talks to foreign citizens via a Government to People communication approach.²¹¹ Governments involved in nation branding are concerned with influencing the opinions of foreign individuals, not foreign governments.²¹² Russia is a participant in nation branding.²¹³ The regime conducts its branding campaign through its influential state media (propaganda) apparatus, RT. Putin is the leader, and in turn, the brand of Russia. We will now look at how RT presents Putin and the regime.

History of RT:

²⁰⁸ Stahlber, Per, and Goran Bolin. “Having a Soul of Choosing a Face? Nation Branding, Identity and Cosmopolitan Imagination”. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2015.1128812. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290175574_Having_a_soul_or_choosing_a_face_Nation_branding_identity_and_cosmopolitan_imagination Pg. 13. Accessed September 9, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, pg. 13.

²¹⁰ Stahlber, Per, and Goran Bolin. “Having a Soul of Choosing a Face? Nation Branding, Identity and Cosmopolitan Imagination”. Pg. 329.

²¹¹ Ibid, pg 323.

²¹² Ibid, pg. 327.

²¹³ Miazhevich, Galina. “Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcast Era: The Case of RT”. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(5), (2018): 575-593. <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/111411/1/Nation%20branding%20in%20the%20post-broadcast%20era.pdf> Pg. 3. Accessed September 9, 2020.

RT was founded in 2005 with direct financial support from the Russian regime and is a media source owned by the state. The broadcaster is a subsidiary of the media conglomerate TV-Novosti, “which is strategically important for Russia.”²¹⁴ RT has seen a great transformation in its broadcast techniques and viewership since its inception. Originally, the media source was created to present Russian news to foreign audiences. It began by producing news in English. Both the content coverage and language would see an evolution.

In 2007 RT would begin broadcasting in Arabic. Two years later, they would join the Spanish news broadcasting market. Today, RT broadcasts news in six different languages, including German, French, and Russian (though only in Russian for RT Doc, a documentary channel).²¹⁵ Generally, RT’s targeted audience is foreign. The broadcast network has also seen a major change in how it covers news worthy events. Originally, RT would provide Russian-centered news to foreign audiences. The initial intent of the broadcast channel was to provide “‘a more balanced picture’ of Russia.”²¹⁶ However, RT suffered two major setbacks in its early years. First, the platform was “rigid and lacked broader appeal.”²¹⁷ Essentially, foreign audiences were not interested in a media source that’s focus was Russia’s opinion of Russian news.²¹⁸ Next, because it was specifically “Russia’s opinion of the world,”²¹⁹ viewers viewed the broadcaster as a direct mouthpiece for the regime.

In 2009, RT was rebranded in multiple ways. First, its name was changed from **Russia Today** to just RT.²²⁰ This made the source seem more ‘universal’²²¹ and removed any direct show of support for the Russian regime. In 2010, RT’s slogan was changed to “Question More,” and its mission statement evolved, moving away from providing the Russian opinion, to now,

²¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 3.

²¹⁵ RT. “About RT”. rt.com (2020). <https://www.rt.com/about-us/> Accessed September 9, 2020.

²¹⁶ Miazhevich, Galina. “Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcast Era: The Case of RT”. Pg. 3.

²¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 3.

²¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 3.

²¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 3.

²²⁰ Ibid, pg. 4.

²²¹ Ibid, pg. 4.

“provide an alternative point of view.”²²² RT did not appear to be an outright supporter of the Russian regime after its rebranding. Viewership showed this, too. For viewers, RT provided a different type of news platform, which varied heavily from major news sources like CNN and the BBC.

RT has established an image of being anti-western and its news content shows this; its viewers like this. The broadcaster subscribes to the belief that “while Russia is far from perfect, the West as a whole is just as bad, and the U.S. a great deal worse.”²²³ Content RT produces focuses on controversial issues, yes, but only controversies that help the regime’s branding strategy. As is stated in an article on RT’s branding of Russia, “RT’s counter-flow remit is linked to the nation's brand. RT signals its exceptionalism, echoing Russia’s ‘special’ stance as bearer of the ‘conservative values’ that uphold purity and tradition, as well as links to the idea of Russia’s unique mission and ‘messianic vision.’”²²⁴ There is a need to understand how RT overtly and covertly brands the regime.

Dr. Galina Miazhevich’s article *Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcasts Era: The Case of RT*, presents four techniques. Her article reviews one year of RT’s coverage, which occurred during the Crimean ‘reunification’ with Russia in 2016.²²⁵ Her study categorizes and labels how RT presents news stories. She saw a trend in how they would present news. What follows are Miazhevich’s four techniques for how RT positively brands Russia.

Positive direct and indirect branding strategies:

RT directly brands Russia, meaning they present stories that are overtly positive of the regime. Miazhevich provides “an obvious occasion to boost Russia’s profile via direct positive branding,” which is the celebration of the second anniversary of the Crimean

²²² Ibid, pg. 4.

²²³ Ibid, pg. 4.

²²⁴ Ibid, pg. 4.

²²⁵ For understanding further her methodology in this article, consult Miazhevich in the bibliography for a link to the full article.

‘reunification.’²²⁶ There are many ways in which this is directly positive for the brand of the regime. RT’s report presented the event “with a photo of the Russian flag and a man in Cossack clothing,” establishing a visual sign of support for reunification. RT’s reporters highlight the “massive” crowds who showed up to the celebration and the “gorgeous firework display,” Putin provided for the festivities.²²⁷ RT also used the “occasion to reassert the democratic nature of Crimea’s unification (via a referendum), quoting Putin, as the embodiment of Russia: ‘this historical justice had been long awaited and dreamed of without exaggeration by millions of people.’”²²⁸ Miazhevich notes that RT ignores important facts in its coverage, like that only 5,000 people showed up to the event. She argues that RT attempted in this report to show that there was mass support across Russia for reunification.²²⁹

Another example provided of direct branding is the way in which RT presents Putin. RT has not been critical of Putin, ever.²³⁰ Conversely, they have a tendency to present him as “the embodiment of Russia.”²³¹ For viewers, the headline for a report regarding Russia-Ukrainian relations presents Putin as the only important voice on the issue, one example being: “his image [and name] under headlines such as ‘Putin: Russia is not going to cut off relations with Ukraine over Kiev’s plot in Crimea.’”²³² Provided in this report is no mention of Ukraine’s perspective, but only what Putin thinks of Ukraine. He states in the report, “it’s obvious that Kiev’s current authorities are not seeking ways to solve problems through negotiations, but have turned to terrorism.”²³³ This frames Putin as the only person who can protect Russia from Ukrainian terrorism, and also that he controls the dynamic between the two states.

²²⁶ Ibid, pg. 6.

²²⁷ Ibid, pg. 6.

²²⁸ Ibid, pg. 6.

²²⁹ Ibid, pg. 6.

²³⁰ Ibid, pg. 6.

²³¹ Ibid, pg. 6.

²³² Ibid, pg. 6.

²³³ RT. “Putin: Russia not going to cut off relations with Ukraine over Kiev’s plot in Crimea”. RT, August 19, 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/356483-putin-ukraine-relations-crimea/> Accessed September 9, 2020.

Indirectly, RT maintains a consistent theme that covertly presents a message they (and Putin) want viewers to think. Miazhevich uses a few instances to show this. For example, throughout her one year period, there were twenty-one reports that discussed the Minsk agreement. Miazhevich concludes from her study that eleven of the twenty-one reports “assert that Russia is fulfilling the agreements,” and that Ukraine is not adhering to it, so Russia should not be under economic sanctions.²³⁴ The report mixes two different political situations, creating one unified message. The Minsk agreement and financial sanctions are two separate issues. Covertly linking two separate issues into one, making Russia appear as a victim, is a common strategy of RT. Direct and indirect branding follows a framing strategy that supports Putin, presents Russia as a world player, and protectors of the Hinterlands region.²³⁵

Constructing a brand by directly or indirectly attacking an opponent:

This form of nation branding is similar to defense being the best offense.²³⁶ RT has produced multiple reports directly criticizing states and actors who enforce policies that are negative to Russia’s interests. One notable example Miazhevich presents is “Russia is planning to respond with ‘counter-measures’.”²³⁷ Another headline writes, “Russia ‘blasts’ the EU due to Crimeans’ visa status.”²³⁸ It is easy to see that these reporting headlines are inflammatory and have an agenda. At the time of the counter-measures article, Russia was dealing with economic sanctions (something RT has never produced a report on²³⁹) from the United States, Europe, and others.

Miazhevich argues here that the regime directly attacks its opponents by using a mirroring technique. Mirroring is when you show those who look at you what they see in themselves.

²³⁴ Miazhevich, Galina. “Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcast Era: The Case of RT”. Pg. 6.

²³⁵ Ibid, pg. 7

²³⁶ Ibid, pg. 7.

²³⁷ Ibid, pg. 7.

²³⁸ Ibid, pg. 8.

²³⁹ Ibid, pg. 8.

You present the facts in a way that your enemy views them. This creates confusion for the enemy and a positive narrative for those who believe in the messenger. There are a few examples Miazhevich conveys. For example, “at the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2013-2014), RT often reversed perceptions by implying that pro-Maidan supporters belonged to a far-right movement and depicting Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine as peace-minded forces.”²⁴⁰ What is known today though is that Ukrainian protestors were not a part of some far-right movement or that Russian soldiers in Ukraine wanted to make peace. Another report on the Ukrainian conflict following the Euromaidan protests supports the initial mirroring technique practiced by RT. RT reported heavily on the “attacks of Russian banks” or “radicals commemorating the anniversary of Euromaidan.”²⁴¹ Labeling Ukrainians as radicals or extremists simply mirrors the enemy; Russia’s selection of government officials in the new Crimean government was just this.²⁴²

Next, RT indirectly attacks individuals, organizations, and states it views as troublesome for the Russian regime. Continuing with the example of Ukraine, the broadcast station skillfully framed its southern neighbor in a negative light with great effect. Miazhevich recorded 14 stories with varying topics regarding Ukraine. She categorizes them as follows: “3 on politics, 4 on law, 3 on human rights issues, and 4 on energy.”²⁴³ She notes that all the reports on Ukraine present it in a negative light. This ranges from the Ukrainian government's repression of its citizens, Ukraine destabilizing the relationship between the two states, “looting” resources after the fall of the USSR, and even “masterminding an energy blockade.”²⁴⁴ RT even framed Russia as being the pro-democratic influence in Crimea. One RT report argues that there was a need for a referendum because Ukraine “oust[ed]... the democratically elected president of Ukraine and installed a nationalist-backed regime, which

²⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁴¹ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁴² Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America..* Pg. 140.

²⁴³ Miazhevich, Galina. “Nation Branding in the Post-Broadcast Era: The Case of RT”. Pg. 8.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 8.

almost immediately declared war on the pro-Russian regions in the Southeast.”²⁴⁵ Here, RT framed Russia’s actions in Crimea as pro-democratic and legitimate.

Omissions and silences:

This technique is more straightforward than the previous two. Think of this technique like fire; when it burns, do not give it oxygen. RT invokes this strategy when there is little way to avoid an issue. For Russia, this commonly revolves around economic related issues. Since the collapse of oil prices in 2015, Russia has struggled to have a stable financial plan. The state is heavily dependent on oil revenues for public funds; oil has not been a stable resource since 2015. RT has a trend of downplaying or omitting stories which would be unfavourable for the regime.²⁴⁶ They have not reported on the economic impact of western sanctions on Russia; this is a major issue in other news broadcaster stations.

RT also omits facts, as Miazhevich shows in the Crimean Tatar controversy. This is an instance where RT factually reports a historical event instead of ignoring it. The issue of the Tatars arose from the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest, where Ukraine won the competition with a politically motivated song about Stalin’s deportation of Crimean Tatars.²⁴⁷ RT chose to report on this topic instead of ignoring it. In doing so, they would display their ability to produce a sense of objectivity and unbiased coverage. The event would allow RT to create a facade that it was not scared or muzzled from reporting on controversial issues.²⁴⁸

Reporting on the Tatars’ follows in framing the situation advantageously for the regime. Miazhevich argues that the framing strategy in this instance is one that employs incoherence, ambivalence, and contradiction.²⁴⁹ The report on the Tatars’ constructs an accurate portrayal of the treatment of Tatars’ by Stalin i.e. deportation. It does not, however, discuss the

²⁴⁵ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, pg. 8.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, pg. 9.

connection Tatars' had to Nazi Germany.²⁵⁰ RT's articles also claim that "other media coverage 'of the situation' as 'still wildly inaccurate, selective, and misinformed.'"²⁵¹ This critique of other media sources resembles the previous techniques discussed, mirroring, as well as direct attack.

Proactively tackling controversies instead of ignoring them:

Finally, we will look at two internal scandals regarding RT staff, and how, when properly managed, they can frame the Russian regime as tolerant and sympathetic. The scandal revolves around the resignations of two journalists in 2014, Liz Wahl and reporter Sara Firth, and Abby Martin in 2017. Both Wahl and Firth resigned on-air "in the wake of the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict amplified by the annexation of Crimea."²⁵² It is believed that these two journalists resigned in protest at the broadcast station's production and amplification of propaganda.²⁵³

Miazhevich argues that though these resignations were unexpected, the channel "skillfully managed on both its broadcast and social media platforms" the controversy.²⁵⁴ RT's handling of the event boosted its popularity and they used it to appeal to a wider audience.²⁵⁵ They also wished the journalists luck in their future careers, appearing sympathetic towards "opportunistic" journalists.²⁵⁶ Similarly, three years later, journalist Abby Martin would also have a public resignation which allowed RT to manage and brand the situation to their benefit.

Martin faced accusations by the New York Times of producing propaganda for the Kremlin. She denied the accusations, claiming that the NYT falsely reported on her resignation. Her

²⁵⁰ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵¹ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵² Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵³ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, pg. 9.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, pg. 9.

resignation was not linked to those of Wahl and Firth, however, she did “voice her opinion” on RT about her disapproval of Russia’s actions in Crimea.²⁵⁷ Martin contends and defends RT’s journalistic independence from the Russian regime. She argues that if the regime controlled editorial content at RT, why then was she allowed to present her critical opinions of Putin’s actions in Crimea for “primetime television on RT for an entire year after what happened?”²⁵⁸ Martin and RT framed the incident as the regime being tolerant of critical political views. The defense she presents conveys that RT is independent of the state and that they are tolerant of criticism. RT and the regime are branded as both tolerant and sympathetic in these public resignation incidents.

2.3 Twitter as a Tool for Social Manipulation

Twitter is a U.S. social media company whose mission is to “create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers.”²⁵⁹ The selection of Twitter as the platform to analyze for this thesis is intentional. Arguably, it is the most open social media platform for users; anyone with an internet connection can see “tweets.” The following paragraphs will outline possible issues associated with this openness.

The New Battlefield:

Created in 2006, Twitter is a social network which anyone with an internet connection can access. First, we will define what a social network is. There is a two-pronged approach to defining this. A network is any grouping of individuals who can interact with each other, for this instance, on an online platform. The classic sense that Bieta Bialy presents is Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). These were platforms where individuals, through the internet, could

²⁵⁷ Ibid, pg. 10.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, pg. 10.

²⁵⁹ “FAQ”. Twitter, Inc. - contact. <https://investor.twitterinc.com/contact/faq/default.aspx> Accessed September 13, 2020.

communicate and talk about a varying range of ideas.²⁶⁰ BBS platforms have a social aspect, too. Social here is defined as individuals having the ability to communicate with others, in this instance, again, through an online platform. One can see that individuals have the ability to communicate through their networks easily on Twitter.

Twitter's mission is to facilitate a barrier-free environment for user discussions. The platform has multiple features which make it unique compared to its competitors. First, it introduced the concept of "hashtagging."²⁶¹ Hashtags are this: #. When a user places a hashtag in front of a word or phrase, the hashtagged tweet is immediately grouped with similar tweets involving that hashtag. Anyone on Twitter can view the hashtag category; this streamlines users' ability to find content on issues they are interested in.

Another feature that is key to Twitter's user platform is that it limits the amount of characters someone can use in a 'tweet.' Currently, users can post tweets with up to 280 characters.²⁶² Characters consist of letters, numbers, symbols (including #s), punctuation, and quotation marks.²⁶³ There is an intention behind this limitation of characters for users. Users are supposed to partake in discussions; just quick, simple ones. Tweets are also 'retweet'able, like the "share" button on other platforms. This makes it so messages are constantly being tweeted and retweeted on the platform. Bialy estimates that there are around 6,000 tweets per second, and 200 billion tweets per year.²⁶⁴

Twitter is used throughout the world. There are more than 300 million active users and over 1.3 billion accounts on the platform. Studies estimate that around 83% of the world leaders

²⁶⁰ Bialy, Beata. "Social Media: From Social Exchange to Battlefield". The Cyber Defense Review, 2(2), 69-90 (2017): https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26267344.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_expensive%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3Adf64dfbf811ac70e3712da4f4a845f1 Pg. 69. Accessed September 13, 2020.

²⁶¹ Ibid, pg. 70.

²⁶² "Counting Characters." Twitter, Inc. - Developer, Definition of Character. Accessed September 15, 2020 at <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/counting-characters#:~:text=In%20most%20cases%2C%20the%20text,as%20more%20than%20one%20character> Accessed September 13, 2020.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Bialy, Beata. "Social Media: From Social Exchange to Battlefield". Pg. 70.

have a Twitter account.²⁶⁵ Journalists, too, are on the platform; the profession records for 24% of all accounts on Twitter.²⁶⁶ It's clear: politicians, journalists, and individuals interact here. As Twitter attempts to provide an environment for discussion, users are able to debate political issues whenever and wherever there is internet access. Twitter's openness has shown flaws, though, leading Bialy to argue that it has become a social battlefield.

In 2016 the Pew Research Center published a study highlighting why people use social media. One of their findings showed that 62% of U.S. adults received news from such platforms.²⁶⁷ Another organization, SWOCC, a research organization with ties to the University of Amsterdam, conducted a study on people's perception of social media platforms. The study's conclusions emphasized that users perceived Twitter as an "informative" platform, as opposed to the "social" type, like Facebook or Instagram. According to research, people use Twitter to be informed about world events. This opens the gates for authoritarian states to use users' trust in Twitter's informative aspects to their advantage.

Russia has used Twitter to conduct warfare against 'enemies' without the adversaries' knowledge. Social media has incentivized Russia to do this, too. Bialy argues that "low access costs, various target audiences, global reach, and the unprecedented speed of information flow" are such incentives for conducting warfare through Twitter. Basically, psychological warfare targeted at people's feeds through the platform is now possible. Governments can talk directly to foreign audiences, similar to the Government To People concept discussed in section 2.2. Bialy provides some examples for how Russia uses Twitter to influence public opinion of foreign (and domestic) audiences. Some "covert methods involve creating false accounts, using social media trolls or bots, [and] addressing closed social networks."²⁶⁸

Russia's accountability in this new form of warfare (informative and psychological) is

²⁶⁵ Ibid, pg. 70.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, pg. 70.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, pg. 74.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, pg. 79.

complicated; “the boundaries between war and peace are often blurred, and covert influence activities are used even if no war has been officially declared.”²⁶⁹ Basically, there is a war, but nobody knows how to hold the attacker accountable, because victims are unaware that they are being targeted (attacked).

Bialy concludes her essay emphasizing that social media has changed since early 2000s. What began as a “social” environment for good has evolved into a platform for states and private interests to influence and coerce. She argues that platforms like Twitter have become a means to an end; “it seems highly justifiable to call social media a battlefield on which an intense fight for hearts and minds is taking place.”²⁷⁰ Bialy also argues that liberal democratic states are currently losing this battle. She states, “the adversary is cunning, fast, flexible and adaptive, due to the particular character of its organization—authoritarian (Kremlin).”²⁷¹ Russia, an authoritarian state, may follow the rules, yes, but in a Machiavellian way. Democratic liberal states, conversely, have rules and institutions that limit their ability to combat states like Russia on social media. Because of this, the battlefield is authoritarian influenced, and its “troops” are constantly fighting the battle, and currently winning it.

For Putin’s regime, the IRA are the troops who fight for “heart and minds.” The IRA is a “troll farm.”²⁷² As was outlined in Section 2.1, people work at the IRA as “trolls” whose job is to comment and share content on politics that positively frames the regime. As Chen writes, “trolling has become a key tool in a comprehensive effort by Russian authorities to rein in a previously freewheeling Internet culture.”²⁷³ Russians “trolls” are on watch all day every day; “wherever politics are discussed online, one can expect a flood of comments from paid

²⁶⁹ Ibid, pg. 79.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, pg. 86.

²⁷¹ Ibid, pg. 86.

²⁷² Chen, Adrien. “The Real Paranoia-Inducing Purpose of Russian Hacks”. The New Yorker, July 27, 2016.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-real-paranoia-inducing-purpose-of-russian-hacks> Accessed September 13, 2020.

²⁷³ Ibid.

trolls.”²⁷⁴ But what are the motivations behind the Putin-friendly oligarch, Prigozhin, or his business, the IRA?

The agency acts as a facade that resembles support for the regime. The trolls are supposed to propagate positively framed messages about the regime, which they do. This allows for the IRA “to create the illusion of a rabid grass-roots movement.”²⁷⁵ Essentially, the IRA creates a democratic looking online presence for the regime that legitimizes and defends its actions. The intentions and goals for perception may be met, but does this work on its targets?

Chen's report includes many perspectives from Russian activists, opposition politicians, and citizens opinions on this question. His findings present a similar opinion of these people; it is working, but not in the ways they expected. One activist described the IRA’s goals as simply to overwhelm social media with fake content.²⁷⁶ Succeeding in this goal would have multiple benefits, including “seeding doubt and paranoia, and destroying the possibility of using the Internet as a democratic space.”²⁷⁷ Russian activists are aware of the prevalence of trolls on social media. Also, since its inception, the IRA has learned both from its past and the methods of its enemies.

One activist reported in Chen’s article told him that the IRA stole a technique of the opposition, making their strategy obsolete. The technique involved making anti-Putin hashtags trend on Twitter.²⁷⁸ However, the “Kremlin trolls discover[ed]... how to make pro-Putin hashtags trend on Twitter.”²⁷⁹ Because Russian trolls are fake accounts that can be created in higher quantities than real opposition individuals, high volume pro-Putin online presence could simply overtake the opposition’s. Basically, “the point [of the trolls] is to spoil it, to create the atmosphere of hate, to make it so stinky that normal people won’t want to

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

touch it.”²⁸⁰ IRA trolls seek to drive real people away from Twitter while propagating the regime’s message. This is why it is important to understand both the quantitative presence of regime trolls and bots, and how they operate on Twitter.

Social Bots All Around Us:

Schuchard, Crooks, Stefanidis, and Croitoru, co-authors of the article *Bot Stamina: Examining the Influence and Staying Power of Bots in Online Social Networks*, show the presence of bots on Twitter. Their essay follows three major events throughout 2016: the U.S. presidential election, Ukraine Conflict, and Turkish censorship. For this section, we will only look at one of the recorded events, which is the Ukraine conflict.

The process by which these authors conducted this study consists of analysing key words associated with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, on Twitter. Timing is important to the study's findings. The dates on which this article focuses are August 1-28. The authors note multiple reasons for why this period was chosen. They emphasized that it was “fewer than three years since the anti-Russian Euromaidan protests and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia.”²⁸¹ Also, “military bravado and political rhetoric between these nations increased dramatically as the 25th anniversary of Ukrainian independence from Russia approaches.”²⁸² The authors noted that because of these two events, social bot presence on Twitter is easy to see.

There are multiple aspects of these authors' findings which are important for discussing social media as a means for information warfare. The term bots must be defined first. Here, social bot is defined as a computer algorithm system that is intended to mimic human behavior and amplify the message of those who write the algorithm. Social bots, at least in this study,

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Schuchard, Ross, Andrew T. Crooks, Anthony Stefanidis, and Arie Croitoru. “Bot Stamina: Examining the Influence and Staying Power of Bots in Online Social Networks”. *Applied Network Science*, August, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3eHhlsZ> [Fig. 6. Accessed September 13, 2020.

²⁸² Ibid, pg. 7.

showed multiple patterns, the first of which is the communication participation between bots and humans.²⁸³ Their findings are surprising: bots tweet and retweet content at an extremely high rate compared to humans.²⁸⁴ On average, a human will tweet at a rate of 3.4 posts per account. Bots, however, will on average tweet 21.4 posts per account. The trend holds when looking at the median rate of tweets too: for every 1 tweet by a human there are four tweets by a bot.

Corpus	User Type	Average User Tweet Volume	Median User Tweet Volume	Min/Max User Tweet Volume (# of users)	Average User Retweet Volume	Median User Retweet Volume	Min/Max User Retweet Volume (# of users)
Ukraine Conflict	Humans	3.4	1	Min: 1 (231,623 users)	2.8	1	Min: 1 (146,879 users)
				Max: 28,072 (1 user)			Max: 1,265 (1 user)
	Bots	21.4	4	Min: 1 (569 users)	16.8	3	Min: 1 (523 users)
				Max: 2,623 (1 user)			Max: 2,508 (1 user)

Figure 1

Retweeting is an effective way of cycling a message, and bots recognize this. Similar to the volume of content bots tweet themselves, they also partake in high volume retweeting. On average, human users will retweet 2.8 times per account. Social bots, on the other hand will retweet 16.8 times. This leads to the next point; what content is being retweeted by both humans and social bots?

Evidence from this study suggests multiple trends in users, both human and social bots, selection of retweetable content. The authors note that, “in terms of total retweet volume percentage for each conversation, humans dominantly retweet other human accounts at a total volume rate of... 92.12%.”²⁸⁵ On the contrary, for bots, “in-group retweet rates occur at relatively low rates of 1.38%.”²⁸⁶ Note here that these statistics are considering the total tweet

²⁸³ For more information on bot identification techniques, resort to the “Bot Enrichment” section directly in the article.

²⁸⁴ Resort to figure 1 for more concise data collection.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, pg. 13.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, pg. 13.

content of the data for Russia-Ukraine related tweets from August 1-28. The authors define in-group communication as the interaction rate between like typed users (human to human and bot to bot interaction).²⁸⁷ In this instance, bots do not communicate with other bot accounts. Also, data shows that humans communicate with other humans at very high rates; this is good. What is not good though is that bots are more outgoing in cross-group communication. One could say bots have ulterior social motives.

Another pattern emerged in this study that showed interesting characteristics for social bots on Twitter. Seen in figure two is a diagram showing the resulting averaged weighted edges of all inter-group and cross-group communication pairs (not total, proportional communication rates).²⁸⁸ Two major takeaways from the data showed that bots tweeted and retweeted other bots at high rates when looking at the data proportionally, but also that cross-group communication from social bots into human accounts occurred. Essentially, bots interact with themselves first. This establishes a concise and managed message. They produce high volumes of content, which then hopefully moves into human users' Twitter feeds. This happens when humans share bot content. If this happens, social bots' messaging is humanized, legitimizing the content it produces. This leads to the final aspect of social bots, which looks at how they push framed messages into mainstream dialogue.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, pg. 13.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, pg. 13.

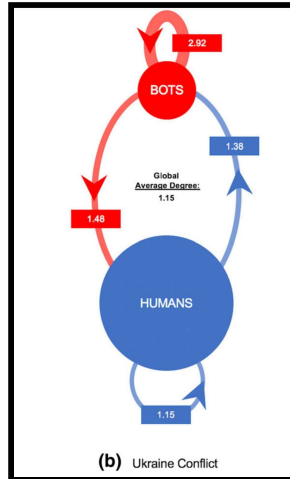


Figure 2

Trend Setters:

Twitter, like other large social media platforms, uses algorithms to organize and show content to users. Algorithms “analyze words, phrases, or hashtags”²⁸⁹ which then show users content they should like. In the instance of Twitter, algorithms also organize into user feeds popular topics trending on the platform. This is what is called the “trends list.”²⁹⁰ A trends list, in theory, helps Twitter users to have conversations about popular trending topics. Users can simply see what is popular on Twitter through the interface’s trends list. The list is created via what algorithms designate are trending on the platform; anything can be put on the trends list as long as it is popular.

Researchers have shown that the trends list feature on Twitter, a key function for users that makes the platform unique, is subject to manipulation by authoritarian states, however. According to a 2011 study, “the fact that a small set of topics become part of the trending set means that they will capture the attention of a large audience for a short time, thus contributing in some measure to the public agenda.”²⁹¹ Agenda setting through Twitter’s algorithms, then, provides an indirect opportunity to influence the political conversation of

²⁸⁹ Prier, Jarred. “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”. Pg. 52.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, pg. 52.

²⁹¹ Asur, Sitaram, Bernardo A. Huberman, Gabor Szabo, and Chunyan Wang. “Trends in Social Media: Persistence and Decay”. Pg. 1.

states. Furthermore, the data shows that “31% of tweets of trending topics are retweets.”²⁹² Thus, influencing the trends list can set the public agenda, but more importantly, establishing a trend on the list requires high volume retweeting.

How then can private actors and groups influence the trends list on Twitter? Jarred Prier’s article on social media influence via Twitter, *Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare*, offers thoughts on this question. He states, “for malicious actors seeking to influence a population through trends on social media, the best way to establish trends is to build a network of bot accounts programmed to tweet at various intervals, response to certain words, or retweet when directed by a master account.”²⁹³ The strategy he outlines is simple: design a system of around-the-clock ‘Tweeters’ that constantly tweet. However, having an organized network or ‘Tweeters’ is only the first step. Remember, algorithms are designed to show users what it believes human users want to see.

Prier presents two other actors who assist, without their explicit knowledge, the trend-setting campaigns of bots. The first actor to assist bots is what Prier calls the “true believer.”²⁹⁴ True believers are human users who retweet bot messages from their accounts, acting as the gateway for bots to influence true believers networks. Essentially, true believers are the mules who push propaganda to human accounts. This is why the narrative bots create, and true believers reshare, must be somewhat realistic. The objective for social bots is to “penetrate the network of true believers.”²⁹⁵ There are also ‘lone-wolf’ actors who may follow social bots or true believers. They may not tweet or retweet content at as high of a rate as either bots or true believers, lowering the opportunity for bots to move produced content from fake accounts to real ones, but there is the fact that ‘lone wolf’ accounts are interested in the content bots create. Yes, “lone wolf” accounts can move bot content to human feeds. The likelihood is not

²⁹² Ibid, pg. 10.

²⁹³ Prier, Jarred. “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”. Pg. 54.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, pg. 54.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, pg. 52.

as high as a true believer's account, however. Figure three shows the relationship between social bots, true believers, and 'lone-wolf' accounts. As one can see from figure three, there is a capability to influence the Twitter trends list when the networks and bots work in tandem to push a certain narrative. Mizzou, Missouri, is one example of narration creation that leads to trend setting.

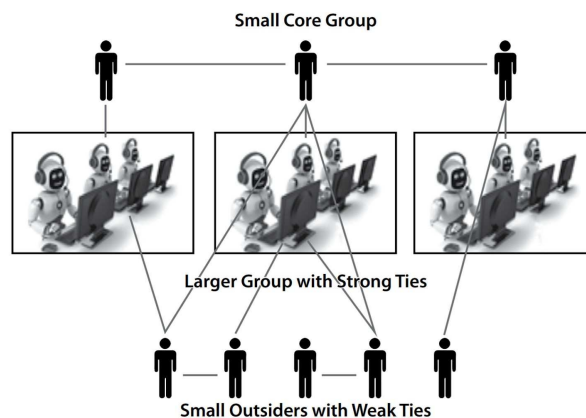


Figure 3

#PrayForMizzou

November 11, 2015, is a great example of Twitter users creating a trending topic. On this day, in Mizzou, Missouri, a protest took place at the University of Missouri regarding racial issues.²⁹⁶ Race-related protests were not uncommon during this time in the United States. What was uncommon, though, were the events that transpired on Twitter from the university campus.

When looking at #PrayforMizzou, one can see a startling image of events transcending at the university town in Missouri. 'News' began being posted on Twitter that "the KKK was marching through Columbia and the Mizzou campus."²⁹⁷ This development, invoking the KKK, grabbed users' attention; #PrayforMizzou quickly found itself on the trends lists. Users

²⁹⁶ Ibid, pg. 68.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, pg. 68.

began tweeting content that validated this developing Twitter trend. For example, Jermaine (@fanfan1911) tweeted “the cops are marching with the KKK! They beat up my little brother! Watch out!”²⁹⁸ Attached to his tweet was a visual image of a black child who had severe bruises on his face.²⁹⁹ Jermaine’s tweet would be retweeted hundreds of times.

The development of this trending topic did not end with Jermaine’s viral tweet, however. Along with a sympathetic group of users, Jermaine (@fanfan1911) and others would tweet and retweet images and stories regarding race relations in Columbia and Mizzou.³⁰⁰ Stories would include coverage of the KKK and neo-Nazis, two topics in the United States that could invoke both reaction and discussion.³⁰¹ Finally, Jermaine and those who would tweet and retweet these stories began criticizing the media. They asked why the media was “not covering the racists creating havoc on [the Mizzou] campus.”³⁰² Except, in reality, there was no havoc; the whole thing was engineered by social bot accounts.³⁰³

First, Jermaine (@fanfan1911), and those who initially retweeted his posts, are social bots. Prier argues that, first, “looking at Jermaine’s followers, and the followers of his followers, one can observe that the original tweeters all followed and retweeted each other.”³⁰⁴ Next, the image attached to Jermaine’s tweet which went viral is not a factually correct one. Prier points out that a simple Google search at the time for “bruised black child” could show the image which was attached. If this is not sufficient justification, though, the image is from a separate, unrelated, police incident in Ohio a year prior to the Mizzou protests.

Finally, this incident is an example of trend manipulation. The Mizzou protests were being covered on Twitter by real people, not just bots. This is why the bot campaign was so

²⁹⁸ Richardson, Bradford. “Russian bots stoked racial tension during 2015 Mizzou protests: Report”. The Washington Times, February 14, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/feb/14/russian-bots-stoked-racial-tensions-during-univers/> Accessed October 9, 2020.

²⁹⁹ Prier, Jarred. “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”. Pg. 68.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰¹ Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰² Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰³ Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, pg. 68.

successful, actually. Human accounts set the agenda; social bots hijacked it.³⁰⁵ Bots used what Prier calls the trend-distribution technique to hijack the discussion (and get on the trends list). The bots were organized in that they “used all of the trending hashtags at the time within their tweets, not just #PrayforMizzou.”³⁰⁶ They grouped their tweets involving Mizzou with other trending topics; this is a common strategy of the IRA.³⁰⁷ There was no connection between Mizzou and other trending topics at the time, however. The objective of this strategy is maximizing potential bot-to-human cross-over interaction. Concluding, bots were successful with the Mizzou campaign because #PrayforMizzou was being used by outsiders. Human users who were sympathetic to what they were seeing on Twitter (KKK and police violence) outside of Mizzou could use the hashtag to show their support. This assisted #PrayforMizzou in going viral and finding a spot on the trends list.

The trends list is a way of setting the agenda on Twitter. Agenda setting allows for those setting it to indirectly guide conversations and politics of states. The Internet Research Agency and the Russian regime have shown multiple instances of commanding the trend and guiding the social conversations. This has benefitted the regime. Twitter has offered a cheap, effective platform for propagandists to directly target individuals. Simply put, those “who control the trend will control the narrative -- and, ultimately, the narrative controls the will of the people.”³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, pg. 68.

³⁰⁷ Chen, Adrien. “The Agency”. New York Times, June 2, 2015.

³⁰⁸ Prier, Jarred. “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare”. pg. 81.

Conclusion

Conclusion:

I have now reached the conclusion of this dissertation. Discussed throughout this thesis were an array of topics revolving around the questions of what the Russian political regime is and how it governs. It is easy to see that Russia's regime is unique in many facets of politics. Its personalized authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin, has designed a political regime around himself. I have given this political regime style the name Putinism.

Putinism's ideology is conservative, populist, and autocratic.³⁰⁹ The major goals of Putinism are to create a community of passive onlookers and to limit any challenge to authoritarian regimes wherever they may be. It is conservative in the sense that the regime must be conserved and continued. I present this in two ways, the first being Putin's appeal to religious leaders who are directed to control their followers. Second, it appeals to international legitimacy. Putin is a personalized authoritarian leader; he must support similar leaders then, or possibly question his own legitimacy. Thus, seen in Syria, Russia propped up al-Assad's regime, showing that Putinism's conservative roots could work in foreign states, too.

Putinism is populist in the fullest sense. Putin invokes this populist approach by appealing to Russian nationalism. Russian culture and people are superior; so too are their traditions. Putin, in turn, has created laws which popularly support the idea that frame a minority group in Russia as non-Russian western forces who want to dismember the state's purity. I provided the example of the regime's hostile policies towards the LGBTQ+ community. The 'gay propaganda' laws implemented are nationalistically driven populism. Putin is the defender of 'traditional values,'; LGBTQ+ people are anything but traditional in Russia. The overwhelming majority of Russian people are, unsurprisingly, heterosexual. In turn, they do not oppose laws that infringe on LGBTQ+ people's rights. Putin uses this to his advantage,

³⁰⁹ Recall, conservative here is not used in the political policy or ideological sense. Putinist conservatism is intended "to conserve, to prevent change." The only priority of Putinism's conservatism is to maintain stability and regime continuity.

rallying a supportive base around his message of being the heterosexual people's defender against an attacking 'gay' foreign enemy. Putin's policies are driven by nationalism and they are populist because they focus on what popular opinion is, even if they infringe on a minority group's liberties.

Third, the regime is autocratic because it has centralized authority around its charismatic leader.³¹⁰ In Putin's first year as president, he replaced police chiefs who opposed him; made the provinces more dependent on federal funds; increased provincial oversight; created seven federally managed 'super regions'; and created twenty federal agencies that regulated issues from pensions to media. Nearly all of the Russian government goes through Moscow and requires Putin's approval. The leader is also sovereign and determines without contest what is and is not legal, making it the second way the regime is autocratic. The example presented in this thesis is the criminal case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Khodorkovsky was convicted of theft and money laundering and given the maximum prison sentence for his crimes. Khodorkovsky and his lawyers claim he was only prosecuted because he called on Russians to demand greater financial transparency from the private sector and government. He became an issue when he called on the people to do a political task. Putin would remove Khodorkovsky, as would any autocrat, from political society. This is because any collective action in Russia would pose a threat to the conservation of the regime.

Putinism is inspired by the writings of Ivan Ilyin, Putin's favorite philosopher. Ilyin was skeptical of international influence and wrote frequently on the matter. Russia has a soul and is misunderstood; this makes it superior. Foreign states will attempt to divide-and-conquer Russia because it is different. Thus, a fascist national leader who is the embodiment of the state's soul is the only way to protect the Russian people. The national leader is never

³¹⁰ Weber, Max. *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

questioned; knows what must be done; governs over all facets of politics. Usurping this power, though, is difficult. Moving the population from an inevitable political mindset to an eternal one is necessary for Ilyin's writings to move into real world governance.

The contemporary philosophical strategy for implementing Ilyin's writings into reality requires, first, an inevitable political state. What this means is that the people must feel lost, unheard, and see that politics is being run for the benefit of a small group of oligarchs. Outcomes are inevitable, so there is no point in questioning the regime. An eternal politician will arise from nowhere in particular (an Ilyinian idea), as an oligarch, yes, but one who knows the peoples' struggles. The people willingly relinquish their freedoms to the eternal politician who promises in return to protect them from the enemies the leader creates. Putin is an eternal politician. He faces no real opposition; just those he creates. Many Russians question if their votes influence political decisions, and may even wonder if they have political rights independent of what their national leader grants them. I argue that really, the only guaranteed right Russians have is to be entertained, and their only duty is to not question the leader.

This outline of chapter one reviews what Putinism is and where it comes from. Now we must look at Putin's most influential tool in his toolkit; the propaganda machine.

Information warfare is one concept I use in this thesis to present how Putin goes about influencing individuals' perceptions. Information warfare is a strategy that has the aim of influencing people's views. This makes it a different and new kind of warfare. Instead of attacking a state or political regime, Russia now attacks, without their knowledge, civilians. And the means for doing this is through a large propaganda machine that peddles a favorable message.

Putin has a strong propaganda apparatus that is conducting battle 24/7. The state media broadcast channel, RT, is the overt weapon of the state. RT produces news in five different non-Russian languages. Their priority is to present facts in a way that benefits Putin's regime and targets foreign audiences. RT's slogan is "Question More," and they have a tendency to disregard objectivity or fact-based reporting. They present Putin as the soul of Russia; he is the defender against western attacks. The broadcaster is an effective propaganda outlet for a few reasons and their strategies for individual psychological manipulation are effective. The ways they present news consist of being high volume, rapid, continuous, repetitive, and lacking either objectivity or consistency. Psychological research shows that these strategies for 'reporting' on events are effective to targeted audiences.

The final arm of the propaganda machine is its covert influence on the social media platform, Twitter. Putin's regime has proxies who conduct battles for the regime. The Internet Research Agency is a privately managed, oligarchically owned, entity that provides the troops for Putin's information warfare campaign. Whether this is seen in the agency's ability to influence and create trends on Twitter, through its Bot campaigns (St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, and Mizzou, Missouri, being two examples), or its extensive trolling operations, the agency has shown its ability to manipulate reality on Twitter. This leads me now to answer the question of this thesis: will Putinism replace Russian liberal democracy?

Putin's regime revolves solely around himself; many are already asking what Russian politics will look like once he dies. Putinism may have an ideology that is found in Ilyin's writings, and it may have moved Russian society from inevitability to eternity. But the regime is personalized, the root word being personal. Even if he is an eternal politician, he himself is not an eternal being. When Putin dies, so too will his personality. The Soviet Union also had this issue when Stalin died (this is why his death was not immediately announced). Stalin was

a personality that the Soviets glorified. He was their protector and defender. Maybe this is why succession was a problem Ilyin never had an answer to.

Ilyin wrote of the national leader just arising from some mystical place. Some would argue that Putin arose from nowhere to become Russia's leader. This is false. Putin had been involved in government affairs since before the Soviet Union collapsed. He was framed as an outsider, though, and posed as the defender of the Russian people against Chechen terrorism shortly after Yeltsin chose him as his successor. Putin did not arise from some mystical place; he came from the St. Petersburg mayor's office. To insiders, he was a known variable. To Russian's, he was unknown but soon branded as the face of Russian innocence.

Next, when there is a successor to Putin — because there will be one at some point — will they want to continue Putin's personalized style of governance? This asks, will Putin's successor want to govern how Putin does? I argue that no, the next Russian leader will not want to govern by asking, "What would Putin do?" whenever an issue comes up. Putinism may currently work in Russia. However, it is not that outlandish to think the next leader may just create their own regime-‘ism’; Navalnism or Medvedism, being just two possibilities. If the next leader wants to continue governing via Putinism, they must emulate Putin's personality; this is the flaw in personalized authoritarianism.

Think of the Russian regime like that of our solar system. Putin is the Sun; the oligarchs the revolving planets; the citizens being the small moons that revolve around those planets. If the sun were to die, would the planets and moons keep revolving as they had previously to death? No, their pull by the sun would stop; they would all sputter off into space. Can the Sun then be replaced by, say, Jupiter, in an attempt to continue the system's orbital rotation like everything is what it was? We know that the planets need the all powerful Sun; there is no replacing this central, necessary piece of the solar system. Our solar system is a

representation of the political system in Russia, of course, at a much smaller proportion. In Russia, Putin has centralized politics around himself, controlling the political scene like the Sun does the planet's orbit. Replacing the sun is impossible; so too is replacing a human once they die.

The major strong point of Putinism is that unlike previous authoritarian regimes, technological advancements have made social control and manipulation quite easy to do. Putin's modernized propaganda machine is what the Soviet Union lacked. Furthermore, unlike during the Soviet era, Putin has social media. In 2020, nearly everyone has access to these platforms. For example, the joke among my peers is, "Are you a real person if you're not on social media?" Authoritarian states and their private actors are jumping onto these platforms because of the common use among people around the world. We can see that private groups like the IRA have moved onto Twitter with great success. Users are unaware that they may see content that Russian propagandists have created, or may even question if what they see is real. This makes users doubtful of facts, even when the content comes from legitimate accounts. Doubt is beneficial for Putinism; people will be more inclined to listen to what political leaders like him say; Russian propagandists can frame information in ways that benefit Putin. Simply put, doubt leads to eternity.

When I began my research for this thesis, I came to the conclusion that Putinism was just a moment in Russian politics. My quick conclusion that Putinism could not replace liberalism or democracy in Russia was because of my strong support for it. Liberalism triumphed over communism; it was the regime form that was implemented after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I am telling you this preconceived conclusion I had previously to writing this thesis for one reason: I did not think there was a debate on regime forms anymore. I do not think I am the only liberal who immediately assumes liberal democracy cannot be replaced because of its historical success. There have been many challenges to liberal democracy, even in

Russia. That is why the question of this thesis is can something replace Russian liberal democracy, not simply if there is a new challenger. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that there are many connections between czarist Russia and Putinism. Word restraints have limited my ability to investigate this historical comparison. I plan to investigate the connection briefly discussed here in future research.³¹¹

The question of this thesis presupposes that there is/was liberal democracy in Russia to begin with. I would argue that there was. However, in just twenty years, Putinism, and Putin, have broken down every major facet of liberalism and found a way to manage the democratic elements. For the moment, Putinism has replaced liberal democracy in Russia. Continuing, Russian liberal democracy had never faced a personalized style of governance and was not prepared to, as it was a new, weak, regime. Conversely, Putinism's only priority is regime continuity. He uses international law and customs when it suits his regime's interests, and ignores them when it does not. Therefore, Russian liberal democracy struggled to check Putin, and Putinism, when they began their regime restructure in 2000. Liberal democracy respects customs and institutions, which is great. But expecting your competitor, who is trying to replace you, to respect agreed-upon norms in domestic politics is just naive.

If liberal democracy wants to reestablish its influence in Russia, it must first recognize that Putinism has for the moment replaced it, but that there is still an opportunity. This is the first step. The next is to start fighting back. Liberal democracy was comfortable when Putin came to power. It sat idly by thinking it was superior because it won the Cold War and rolled its eyes when nationalists and populists loudly critiqued it. Putinism has worn down liberal democracy in Russia while showing its ability to maintain stability. Putin has succeeded at

³¹¹ Steven Lee Myer's *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* or Peter Reddaway's *National Interest* article "Two-Part Czar" are just two possible sources to assist in future research.

setting up the regime form dominos and putting his personalized authoritarianism at the helm. But he has not figured out the major issue of his regime: a succession principle.

Putin has shown that his regime can influence other states' political affairs. Arguably, the regime's influencing campaign on social media even helped elect Donald Trump to the most influential liberal democracy in the world.³¹² They did this because Trump was more beneficial to Putin's interests than the alternative (Hillary Clinton).³¹³ If Russia can influence national elections in the United States, what is stopping Putin from doing so in liberal democratic European ones? Nothing, they are already doing this!³¹⁴ There is no doubt that Russia is a thorn that keeps pricking liberal democracies, both in Russia and abroad. Liberal democracies have grown content, and liberals are comfortable assuming that Putinism's challenge will come and go. Remember, though, political contentness is the gateway for inevitability to creep in. And once inevitability begins, the only inevitable thing is that eternity will follow.

Putinism has been tinkered with and perfected at home for twenty years; no more will it sit in the shadows. If Putin can design a successor principle that can guarantee a peaceful transition of power after his death, he may have figured out the key problem Ilyin lacked an answer to. Simply put, a succession principle would remove the nail in the coffin which will limit liberal democracy's odds of reestablishing itself in Russia. If there is a successor principle, Putinism and eternity will ensue, albeit on a much grander scale. Putin has set up the regime style dominoes. A succession principle will provide the necessary nudge to topple opposing regimes that stand in Putinism's way.

³¹² Mueller, Special Counsel Robert S. III. "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election Volume I of II". U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., March, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf> pg 1. Accessed October 9, 2020.

³¹³ Sander, David E.. "Putin Ordered 'Influence Campaign' Aimed at U.S. Election. Report Says". The New York Times, January 6, 2017. <https://nyti.ms/2i1pX2C> Accessed October 9, 2020.

³¹⁴ Crosby, Alan. "Putin May End Up The Winner In French Presidential Vote". Radio Free Europe, April 22, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/france-election-macron-le-pen-fillon-melenchon-putin-russia/28445679.html> Accessed October 9, 2020.

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