



# Russophobia

Propaganda in International Politics

Glenn Diesen

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“This courageous piece of work proposes a deep and comprehensive approach of an upmost problem of contemporary international politics at a pivotal moment of our history. It shows, in a fresh and invigorating analysis based on facts, how the anti-Russian propaganda has shaped the mind of the Western countries during decades until to heat up the military clash in Ukraine. An indispensable book for understanding the present state of the world.”

—Guy Mettan, *journalist and author of Creating Russophobia*

“These days one needs a lot of intellectual and even personal courage to address the notion of Russophobia, which has become so common in the ongoing information war between Russia and the West. To Professor Diesen’s credit, his book presents an academically rigorous and well documented attempt to analyze the origins, evolution and modern manifestations of this complex phenomenon. The book is a valuable source for those trying to comprehend the nature of Russia’s uneasy relations with the outside world.”

—Andrey Kortunov, *Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council*

“Glenn Diesen continues the tradition of studying Western presentations of Russia as the inferior and aggressive Other. He sheds important light on ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ strategies exploited by Western political and media circles in cases of RussiaGate, Ukraine, and Syria.”

—Andrei P. Tsygankov, *San Francisco State University*

“An incisive takedown of the neo-McCarthyite chauvinism that has consumed Western political culture, to the great detriment of honest journalism and global peace.”

—Aaron Maté, *journalist at the Grayzone and former producer of Democracy Now*

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ISBN 978-981-19-1467-6      ISBN 978-981-19-1468-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1468-3>

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The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

*For the West, the demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy:  
it is an alibi for the absence of one*

*—Henry Kissinger*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

Propaganda entails convincing an audience without appealing to reason. Propaganda has its scientific origin in sociology and psychology to explore how human beings intuitively organise in groups for security and meaning, and then rationalise what are inherently irrational instincts. The individual engages in rational reflection, although much of the beliefs and opinions of human beings are formed by the irrationality of group psychology.

Propaganda acquired a more prominent role in society as the world became more complex, which increases the reliance on stereotypes and mental shortcuts to interpret and filter information. Propaganda exploits the human desire for simplicity by manipulating the heuristics to hand people easy answers and relying on group psychology rather than winning them over with rational arguments. Unconsciously, the human brain divides people into the in-group of “Us” or the out-group of the “Other”. A threat from the out-group instigates an impulsive need for in-group loyalty and solidarity to enhance security. Political propaganda exploits this proclivity in human nature by developing stereotypes that contrast the in-group and out-group to frame all political questions within a demagogic division of “Us” versus the “Other”.

Stereotypes present a predictable, familiar and comfortable view of our place in the world. Any facts that disturb these comfortable stereotypes are experienced as cognitive dissonance and instinctively rejected



by the masses as an attack on the fundament of their worldview. Simplifying the world along a binary divide between good and evil results in facts and reason having little if any bearing on the conclusion. In a great binary struggle, the influence and actions of the “Other” are inherently a threat, while any atrocious actions “We” may undertake are in the service of a higher good. Propaganda can thus fuel ideological fundamentalism in which adversaries are assessed by an assigned negative political identity rather than their actual international behaviour, while one’s own assigned political identity is held to be irrefutably positive and thus non-threatening irrespective of actions.

Source credibility is also linked directly with the stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them”, to heighten the legitimacy of “Our” communicators and delegitimise the communicator of the “Other”. The ability to shape the group depends to a great extent on credible sources—trustworthy and likeable experts. Propagandists therefore work towards manipulating or constructing sources to disseminate their information.

Complex ideas are reduced into simple and familiar language and symbols that are continuously repeated since the human mind conflates familiarity with reality. Dichotomous stereotypes are used to change the language and diminish the ability to make comparisons. Manipulation of the language aims to make the white whiter, the black blacker, and eliminate the grey. The words to describe “Us” versus “Them” is decoupled as, for example, government versus regime, determined versus aggressive, tough versus bullying, intervention versus invasion, democratic revolution versus regime change, a ring of friendly states versus spheres of influence, liquidation versus assassination, principled versus inflexible, enlargement versus expansion, etc. If human beings can be taught to speak in slogans, then they are likely to collectively think in slogans. While language conveys meaning, propaganda distorts meaning.

## RUSSOPHOBIA

Russophobia is largely a result of propaganda. There are ample rational reasons to fear Russia, although Russophobia refers solely to the irrational fear of Russia and Russians. Fyodor Tyutchev coined the term Russophobia in 1867 as a reference to an irrational fear or aversion to Russia’s Otherness.

Russophobia should be a key theme in the study of propaganda. The development of propaganda in the West as a discipline of sociology, psychology and political science in the twentieth century was to a great extent directed towards Russia. On an even longer time scale, Russia has for centuries been depicted as the civilisational “Other” of Western Europe and then the wider West. Russia is the West’s perfect out-group as an eastern or even Asian power in Europe.

Russophobia has both a purpose and consequences that go well beyond Russia. The identity assigned to Russia as the “Other” is instrumental to constructing an opposing identity of the West. One only identify as Western if there is Eastern, as civilised if there are barbarians, and as liberal if there is authoritarian. Changing the identity of the “Other” inevitably alters the identity of “Us”.

The West’s shared liberal identity and consolidation of internal cohesion have largely originated with and been maintained in contrast to Russia as the “Other”. The civilising mission or socialising role of the West towards a barbaric Russia infers benign and charitable policies that actualise the West’s positive self-identification. All competing power interests are concealed in the benign language of liberalism, democracy and human rights. The implied morality and righteousness imply that criticism can easily be dismissed as irrelevant and merely reflect the inability of the barbarian “Other” to embrace universal principles.

Over the past 500 years, Russia has had a central role in juxtaposing the West and East, European and Asian, civilized and barbaric, modern and backward, freedom and slavery, democracy and authoritarianism, and even good and evil. Initially, the dichotomisation was largely about ethnicity and customs, although the divisions were incrementally recast through ideology. During the Cold War, ideological dividing lines fell naturally by contrasting capitalism versus communism, democracy versus authoritarianism, and Christianity versus atheism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new divide was created along a more artificial liberal-authoritarian divide that provides little heuristic value. While the Soviet Union promoted communism to replace capitalism, the Russian Federation is not on a crusade against democracy to advance authoritarianism as an ideology. The new East–West binary divide was further extended as post-modern versus modern, advanced versus backward, free trade versus autarchy, sovereign versus post-sovereign, values-based versus *realpolitik*, decentralised versus centralised, soft power

versus hard power and other simplistic binaries purporting a progressive view of human history that places the West at a higher level of civilisation.

The implication of this binary divide between “Us” and “Them” has justified the monopolisation of the concept of Europe, where Russia does not belong and is responsible for its own exclusion. In past centuries, cultural superiority legitimised the authority of domestic and international elites. Liberalism is also the source of legitimacy for a new elite, in which their authority derives from moral superiority. Russia is demoted to a political object in which it is presented with a dilemma: Russia can either accept the role as a student aspiring to join Western civilisation or reject this role and thus be contained and confronted. Either way, the civilizational inferiority denies Russia the status as a political subject with a seat at the table as an equal. By filtering all information through the teacher-student role assigned to the West and Russia, facts only play a minor role in shaping perceptions and narratives.

Yet, as Russia transitioned to a capitalist democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former comfortable ideological divide was gone. The more similar the West and Russia are, the greater the need for propaganda to create binary identities and stereotypes. These simple binaries eviscerate the various shades of grey to dichotomise the “Other”. Russophobia is instrumental to exacerbate the blackness of Russia and the whiteness of the West. Anything the public hears about Russia is consistently bad and framed as the opposite of the West.

Russophobia is not a transitory phenomenon but has proven itself to be incredibly enduring due to its geopolitical function. Unlike the transitory Germanophobia or Francophobia that have been linked to particular wars, Russophobia has an endurance comparable to anti-Semitism. From the efforts of Peter the Great to Europeanise Russia in the early eighteenth century to the similar efforts of Yeltsin to “return to Europe” in the 1990s, Russia has not been able to escape the role of the “Other”. The West’s rejection of an inclusive European security architecture after the Cold War, in favour of creating a new Europe without Russia, was largely legitimised by the supposed lasting dichotomy between the West and Russia.

## “WHOM THE GODS WOULD DESTROY, THEY FIRST MAKE MAD”

Propaganda in its excess can erode the foundational order. Once a society becomes heavily propagandised by binary stereotypes, the imperative role of reason and truth diminishes as politicians, intelligence agencies and journalists are demoted to mere soldiers in an information war.

Former US President Donald Trump, on the advice of Henry Kissinger, sought to adjust to the new international distribution of power by “getting along with Russia” and instead focus US resources towards countering the rise of China. Trump was for several years presented as a Russian agent, a suspicion that lingers on even after the allegations and evidence were proven to be fraudulent. During the US Presidential election in 2020 Russia was blamed for placing bounties on the life of US troops in Afghanistan, another evidence-free allegation that was retracted after the election. The Hunter Biden laptop scandal proving Joe Biden’s corruption in Ukraine and China was then denounced as another Russian disinformation campaign before it was proven that the emails were authentic and Moscow had no involvement.

Russia was accused of hacking the French election system until the French authorities disclosed there were no traces of a Russian hack. Moscow’s manipulation purportedly has a crucial impact on almost all elections and referendums across the West, although the accusations tend to either lack evidence or are proven to be wrong. The Russians allegedly hacked into the Vermont electric grid, which was revealed to be another false story that had to be retracted. Russia purportedly used a secret energy weapon against US troops in Syria and the US Embassy in Havana, although it was exposed to have been food poisoning and crickets. Sweden routinely discovers threatening Russian submarines when there are debates about increasing defence spending or joining NATO, which has been proven to be minks, vessels, broken buoys, and even the detection of farts from various animals.

Russia was accused of preparing for an invasion of Ukraine by placing its troops on the Ukrainian borders, sending blood to the coming front-line, and planning a false-flag operation. The Russian forces were actually at their barracks and not in the field, there was never any blood sent to the Ukrainian border, and there was no evidence presented of a planned false-flag operation. Kiev confirmed that the amount and placement of Russian troops did not indicate a planned invasion, and asked Washington

to calm down the rhetoric. Thereafter, the US media suggested that the US had deterred the Russian invasion and probably prevented the Russian false-flag operation by exposing it.

When an airline flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on 8 March 2014 suddenly disappeared from the map and probably crashed into the sea, the conspiracy theories emerged with Russia as the usual manifestation of evil. Aviation expert and CNN analyst Jeff Wise wrote a book in which he presents a theory that President Putin stole the plane and took it to Kazakhstan as a demonstration of prowess to the West, with the implicit message being: “don’t sleep too soundly at night, because we can hurt you in ways that you can’t even imagine” (Wise, 2015). The theory, substantiated only by the alleged nefariousness of Russia, made its way through the media.

Caught up in the Russiagate hysteria, several British newspapers reported that “half of the Russians in London are spies”. Out of 150,000 Russians living in London, approximately 75,000 of them are Russian spies according to a report by the Henry Jackson Society, a think tank with an anti-Russian bent, which was then repeated as an “expert report” by various British media outlets (Hope, 2018). The British Daily Star reported that experts claim “Vladimir Putin’s war threats are why aliens haven’t made first contact”, as the barbarism and “primitive behaviour” of Russia reflect poorly on the ability of human beings to join any advanced Galactic Federation (Jameson, 2022).

When there are no allegations, the polemics against Russia often manifest themselves by imagining possible Russian mischiefs in the future, such as shutting off the heat in American homes, cutting undersea internet cables or nefarious plans to control the weather. Russian political, social and economic influence is criminalised as components of a wider “hybrid warfare”. Leading US publications have accused Russia of “weaponizing” social media, humour, Eurovision, protests, corruption, racism, tradition, sports, Black Lives Matter, Charlie Sheen, law, postmodernism, the economy, history, its population, migration, finance, environmentalism, culture, gaming, metaphors and other broad themes.

Conformity is coerced by using real or imagined connections to Russia as a reason to delegitimise domestic political actors. In a neo-McCarthyite fashion, political leaders such as Bernie Sanders, Jill Stein, Tulsi Gabbard, Mitch McConnell, Jeremy Corbyn, Rex Tillerson, Michael Flynn and others are casually accused of being agents of Russia and thus traitors. Similarly, whistle-blowers such as Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and

Chelsea Manning have had their credibility attacked with accusations of working for the principal out-group, the Kremlin.

The success of propaganda does not depend primarily on selling specific accusations, but on selling the binary stereotypes through constant repetition. Once allegations against Russia are exposed as fraudulent it does not appear to vindicate Moscow, it does not result in the removal of sanctions imposed based on false information, and it does not alter the overall narrative about Russia. Instead, the stereotype of a meddling and intrusive Russia seeking to undermine democracy remains after the accusations and evidence have collapsed.

While the debunking of these stories should give way to a rational debate that reconsiders and recalibrates the threat perception from Russia, the narratives about Russia remain convincing as they do not merely appeal to reason. A Pavlovian reflex of contempt for Russia informs and strengthens the overarching narrative. There is little accountability for false stories about Russia, rather journalists and politicians are often propelled up the hierarchy of their profession. Instead of serving as a caution for future accusations, the false stories open the door for more accusations as the false stories are cited as a “pattern of behaviour” that strengthens the narrative of a belligerent Russia.

## BETWEEN THE RATIONAL AND THE IRRATIONAL

Propaganda has the positive function of creating unity and mobilising people and resources towards a rational and strategic objective. However, propaganda can also have the negative consequence of diminishing rational decision-making. A world divided between good and evil makes confrontation moral and compromise immoral. As Walter Lipmann discovered, propaganda is an essential tool to mobilise the public towards the confrontation of an adversary, although it often thwarts a workable peace.

Propaganda undermines the ability to mitigate the security dilemma, the situation in which actions were taken by one state to enhance its security cause insecurity and thus counter-actions by other states. It is imperative to understand the security challenges of an adversary to aptly analyse their security policies and formulate the ideal policy in response. The West’s policies towards Russia are primarily informed by the security challenges from Russia, and Russia’s policies towards the West are

similarly shaped principally by the security threats from the West. Recognising that the actions taken by one state to increase its security can decrease the security of the rival state is imperative to enhance mutual security. This should not be controversial as the security dilemma is one of the most central concepts in political science and international relations, which infers that power maximisation does not equate to security maximisation.

However, propaganda can make the mere existence of the security dilemma controversial as the polarisation of the international system undermines the ability to discuss how the in-group may threaten the security of the out-group. Propaganda deliberately undermines the ability to compare the superior and benign in-group, “Us”, with the inferior and belligerent out-group, the “Other”. The scope and accuracy of analyses are severely limited if propaganda demands conformity around the notion that the West cannot be a threat but solely a source of democracy and human rights as the source of perpetual peace.

The analyses of all Russian security policies is then limited and presented as being driven solely by internal characteristics of the state, such as the personal characteristics of the president and the political leadership, contempt and fear of democracy, or dreams of restoring a former empire. The flawed analyses then produce a flawed foreign policy. In a world of conflicting economic and security interests, security can be maximised with mutual understanding and compromise. However, when the world is seen as a struggle between good and evil, understanding and compromise are tantamount to treason.

The ability to resolve conflicts diminishes as peace cannot depend on civilised peoples compromising with barbarians, or liberal democracies compromising with authoritarian states. Instead, in a world dichotomised between a benign “Us” and a belligerent “Other”, peace is achieved through containment, conversion or victory—thus security maximisation is equated to power maximisation.

## EXPLORING ANTI-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Propaganda and information warfare have become a growing feature of great power politics and are utilised by all the major actors. Exploring Russophobia does not entail exonerating Russia from wrongdoing or inoculating it from criticism, rather it studies the construction of fear and

disdain that goes beyond the rational. The study of anti-Russian propaganda has both academic and societal values in terms of understanding its implications for foreign policy and security.

In recent years, propaganda has been commonly studied as a country-dependent phenomenon. The overwhelming literature on propaganda in the conflict between the West and Russia focuses overwhelmingly on Russian propaganda against the West. Propaganda is undoubtedly a tool in Moscow's foreign policy, although propaganda is used by all major powers and the minimal study of anti-Russian propaganda represents a gap in the literature. It was initially argued that democracies are more dependent on propaganda as sovereignty resides with the people, although in more recent times the term propaganda has largely been excluded from debates about the formation of public opinion in liberal democracies.

Propaganda itself tends to be presented as an instrument of authoritarian states as opposed to democracies, which may contribute to skewing the research focus towards Russian propaganda. However, the initial literature on propaganda as a science that emerged in the 1920s had an interesting consensus—that democracies relied more on propaganda. When sovereignty resides with the people, there is a greater need to influence their beliefs and opinions in the pursuit of a desired foreign policy. Propaganda was initially a morally neutral concept until negative connotations arose due to the German use of propaganda. One of the leading scholars of propaganda, Edward Bernays, subsequently rebranded the concept of propaganda by rebranding it as “public relations” to describe what “We” do, while the negative connotations of propaganda are used to delegitimise the communication of the “Other”. In the current era defined by an ideological divide between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, the efforts to conceptually decouple “Our” propaganda from “Their” propaganda has contributed to a popular sentiment that propaganda is primarily an instrument of authoritarian states.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The book aims to explore the consequences of anti-Russian propaganda. The second chapter theorises propaganda and in the following four chapters explore the foundational stereotypes of the anti-Russian propaganda; the construction of credible sources; the development of language and strategic narratives; and the role of ideology to construct an international



hierarchy between the superior and inferior. The last three chapters are case studies of the main sources of conflict between the West and Russia: the Russiagate scandal as a case study of anti-Russian propaganda being used against the domestic political opposition; the conflict in Ukraine as a case study of a conflict over where to draw the new dividing lines of Europe; and the proxy war in Syria as a case study of the propaganda used in “democratic wars” or humanitarian interventionism.

**The second chapter theorises propaganda.** Propaganda is most efficient when it is concealed, which subsequently results in the concept itself becoming propagandised and obscured as meaning merely disinformation by the adversary. Propaganda must be conceptualised and theorised clearly as the ambiguity of the concept impedes the ability to analyse how it is used and its impact. Propaganda is defined as the science of convincing an audience without reason by employing group psychology. Liberal democracies embrace propaganda like any other state, and the liberal ideology produces a distinctive strand of propaganda.

**The three chapter explores the foundational stereotype of anti-Russian propaganda.** The dichotomous stereotypes assigned to Russia have been instrumental in the development of the West’s own identity. Russia’s civilizational Otherness to the West has throughout history evolved from ethnic inferiority as a barbaric Asiatic power in Europe, to an authoritarian east that challenges Western liberal democracy. The styles of language concerning the inferior tend to be similar towards the Jews under Nazi Germany as the Russians over the past 500 years: Either scornful derision of their inferiority or panic-stricken fear of their threat to civilisation. The Russians have consistently been derided as feeble and backward in contrast with Western modernity, and simultaneously feared as an overwhelming threat as barbarians who stand at the gates of civilised Europe. The depiction of an inferior Russia translates into a foreign policy dilemma in the relationship with the superior West: Russia can either accept the role as an apprentice of Western civilisation as done by Peter the Great or Boris Yeltsin and thus accept sovereign inequality, or be castigated as a threat to civilisation that must be contained or defeated.

**Chapter 4 analyses the central concept of source credibility.** Propaganda entails “herding” the group, which requires the establishment of authority figures and institutions to move the group in the desired direction. The persuasiveness of communication largely depends on a credible source. Propaganda is commonly portrayed as deriving primarily from state media, although efficient propaganda must be laundered through

intermediaries that are perceived as experts, impartial and altruistic. The West had more efficient propaganda during the Cold War as private industries and organisations were recruited to conceal the manipulation. Since the 1980s, this was further advanced as intelligence agencies transferred much of their responsibilities and budgets to think tanks and government-funded NGOs. Societies need experts and institutions to collect, analyse and disseminate information as the world is too complex for any individual to comprehend.

**Chapter 5 assesses the development of language and strategic narratives in anti-Russian propaganda.** The process of dichotomising “Us” and the “Other” entails restructuring language by decoupling meaning as, for example, “We” liberate and “They” conquer. Propagandistic language undermines the ability to compare to the extent any comparisons can be denounced as “false equivalence” or “whataboutism”. Orwell famously wrote that language is designed to convey meaning, although propaganda distorts meaning to the extent it becomes impossible to express dissent. The language to describe the West bestows legitimacy as expansionism is European integration, election meddling is democracy promotion, war is intervention, and coups are democratic revolutions. In contrast, the language to describe Russia denies any conceptual space for legitimacy as Russian influence is referred to as attempting to restore an empire, re-sovietize its neighbours, undermine democracy and establish spheres of influence. Propaganda relies on simplified and repetitive messaging as the human mind confuses familiarity with truth. Subsequently, people who can be taught to speak in clichés often think in clichés.

**Chapter 6 explores how propaganda develops a hierarchy between the superior and inferior.** Universal norms and values of shared humanity represent mostly genuine ideals, although they subsequently become a source of legitimacy to establish an international system based on sovereign inequality. Propagandists link universal values to entities competing for power, which enables selling liberal democracy as a hegemonic norm or an international system where “all states are equal, but some are more equal than others”. By using liberal democracy to decouple legitimacy from legality, international law is incrementally replaced with the Orwellian “rules-based international order” in which there are no common or explicit rules. The demand for propaganda subsequently increases as international law is replaced by a tribunal of public opinion to determine legitimacy.

**Chapter 7 assesses Russiagate as an instance of using Russophobia against the political opposition.** The precedent of the Red Scare of the 1920s and McCarthyism during the 1950s demonstrated how the exaggerated threat of communist infiltration was used to purge the political opposition by artificially linking people and policies to either the in-group or the out-group. The first Russiagate was the alleged conspiracy between Russia and Trump to steal the election in 2016, the second Russiagate was the so-called Russian bounties on US troops in Afghanistan, and the third Russiagate entailed denouncing and censoring the Hunter Biden laptop scandal as Russian disinformation. In all three instances the political class, intelligence agencies and media deceived the public in a manner that was only possible by linking domestic political issues to Russia.

**Chapter 8 explores the conflict in Ukraine as a civilizational choice.** A key source of conflicts between the West and Russia derives from the failure to reach a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement. In the absence of common European security architecture, the new Europe has been facilitated by expanding NATO and the EU. Delineating new borders between East and West in Europe destabilises deeply divided states in the shared neighbourhood, and fuels a power struggle between the West and Russia. The subsequent conflicts are filtered through the stereotype of liberal democracy versus authoritarianism, in which a compromise is denounced as appeasement and a betrayal of values required for perpetual peace.

**Chapter 9 analyses the Syrian war as a case of humanitarian interventionism.** Another key source of conflicts between the West and Russia has been NATO's "out-of-area missions" after the Cold War. NATO regime change wars in Yugoslavia, Libya and Syria have been sold as humanitarian interventions. The concept of human security suggests that the protection of the individual can be elevated above sovereignty as a state-centric concept of security. Has the focus on human security been elevated above power politics or is human security used as an instrument of power politics by deliberately diminishing the sovereignty of rival powers? The case study on the war in Syria demonstrates that significant propaganda has been used to bridge the means and ends of the Western intervention with the humanitarian narrative.

**It is concluded** that anti-Russian propaganda will need to undergo significant change to adapt to new realities. The unipolar moment has come to an end, economic interests and political loyalties are becoming

more divergent, liberalism fails to provide a unifying ideology, and Russia has abandoned its 300-year-long Western-centric foreign policy since Peter the Great. Subsequently, the foundational stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them” must be reformed.

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# Theorising Propaganda and Obscuring Its Meaning

## INTRODUCTION

Propaganda is incorrectly, yet commonly, used as a synonym for deception, lies, bias, misleading information, disinformation, selective history and other means of providing false information to influence the rational faculties of individuals. The misunderstandings and lack of conceptual clarity about propaganda make people more susceptible as the efficiency of propaganda declines when the public is aware.

Propaganda is the science of persuasion that bypasses reason by exploiting group psychology. Russophobia is defined as irrational fear and disdain of Russia, which is the logical consequence of anti-Russian propaganda. The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualise propaganda as science and operationalise it as an observable and measurable instrument of power. A clear and objective definition of propaganda is imperative as the word propaganda has to a great extent been propagandised to conceal its use by “our” side and to discredit the arguments of opponents.

Propaganda circumvents the rational reflection of the individual by instead appealing to the unconscious group psychology that relies on primordial instincts and emotions. The conscious mind tends to be rational, but human behaviour, attitude and actions are largely shaped by the unconscious. The rational individual has strong impulses to adapt to the group, thus propaganda aims to influence the irrational group psychology. The natural sciences demonstrate that the human brain is

overwhelmed by information and therefore depends on heuristic mechanisms to concentrate on what is important. Propaganda manipulates these mechanisms by creating filters that create mental shortcuts and simplify the complexities of the world. Propaganda organises around dichotomous stereotypes of group identities to demote the significance of objective facts and reason. Efficient propaganda appeals to virtuous ideals such as reason, freedom and civilisation, which is characteristically juxtaposed to diametrically opposite values assigned to the rival.

This chapter first explores the definition and theory of political propaganda. Propaganda is an instrument of convincing an audience by manipulating unconscious biases to mobilise the population around a common position. Second, the relevance of propaganda for democracies is analysed. Democracy, which entails transferring sovereignty to the people, makes the state more reliant on propaganda to engineer consent, as the public is the sovereign where power resides. Yet, the concept of propaganda has itself been propagandised and attributed as an instrument of authoritarian states. Last, propaganda is conducive to mobilising the public for confrontation, although propaganda has historically had the negative side-effect of undermining workable peace.

### *The Birth of Political Propaganda*

Propaganda has been a component in most conflicts throughout world history. Although, it was only after the First World War that propaganda developed as a concise science, which builds on a robust intellectual platform of psychology and sociology.

The First World War became a watershed moment for the science of propaganda due to the phenomenon in which millions of people conformed in their way of thinking according to the wishes of their leaders (Strong, 1922). Propaganda could be conceptualised as a positive instrument of power by convincing people to make self-sacrifices voluntarily as opposed to relying on coercion. It was also discovered that “it was a condition of success on the military and economic fronts that the ‘morale’ of one’s own side should be maintained, and that of the other side sapped and destroyed” (Carr, 1985: 123).

It became evident that human beings are not solely influenced by rational reflection over objective facts. The US population was not convinced by rational arguments to join the war, although the emotional outburst after Germany torpedoed the civilian ship, *Lusitania*,

contributed to swaying public opinion. The incident was also exploited by British propaganda efforts aiming to convince the Americans to break with isolationism and join the war on the side of Britain (Peterson, 1939; Taylor, 2019: 35). In Germany, the propaganda efforts left a profound impact on the population. German soldiers returning from the First World War with severe physical and mental stress met a civilian population at home more belligerent as a result of the sustained war propaganda that had been unleashed to ensure public support for the war.

After the killing on an industrial scale, it was also necessary to convince war-weary populations to volunteer for future wars. Horrific associations created an aversion to war, which propaganda aimed to replace with positive associations such as the glory of war symbolised by medals, monuments, bravery, and love for the nation and higher ideals. Former wars are romanticised to prepare for future wars. Furthermore, both the demand and supply of propaganda increased as the war had made people more interested in foreign affairs, ideology became more important to address the challenges of rising industrial societies, and technological developments in mass communication enabled governments to promote conformity (Taylor, 1983).

Propaganda is a common tool for the integration of society as “propaganda is understood as a device to manufacture social coherence, which can both be systematically operated by central agencies of the society” (Bussemer, 2008: 34). Large and complex societies therefore become more dependent on propaganda for cohesion. In complex societies, professions become increasingly segregated into specialised and routinised tasks and society is atomised, which reduced the ability of individuals to shape norms, values and belief systems. The expansion and centralisation of bureaucracy thus shift the power of disseminating information and creating stereotypes from people to institutions. In the idealised public there are as many opinions expressed as opinions received, although in a centralised system the public becomes a mass as far fewer people express opinions than receive them (Mills, 1956).

Mills (1958) identified three forms of power: “Coercion” is the use of physical force, “authority” attached to a position is justified and upheld by the beliefs of the obedient, and “manipulation” without the conscious knowledge of those affected. Democracies have limited ability to use coercion against their own population and therefore rely on authority and manipulation. Authority declines in increasingly complex societies as it becomes more centralised and distant, which makes the authorities more

reliant on manipulation and propaganda (Mills, 1958). Hence, “most of that which formerly could be done by violence and intimidation must now be done by argument and persuasion” (Lasswell, 1927: 631).

## THE MARKETING OF POLITICS

The main scientific literature on propaganda originated from the US. Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays both worked for the administration of President Woodrow Wilson and became the founders of the key literature on propaganda. Edward Bernays had assisted in convincing the American public to join the First World War under slogans that conveyed a greater meaning such as joining “*the war to end all wars*” and to “make the world safe for democracy”.

After the First World War, Bernays used his expertise to manipulate public opinion for commercial purposes with marketing campaigns. For example, Bernays led a marketing campaign convincing women it was feminine and emancipating to smoke cigarettes with the “torches of freedom” campaign. Bernays paid women to smoke in the Eastern Sunday Parade of 1929, which follows the principle of source credibility, as propaganda is more efficient when people trust the source and are unaware that it is propaganda.

Bernays used the same marketing principles for politics as he was also hired by *United Fruit Company* when the government of Guatemala introduced new labour laws to protect workers, which reduced profitability. Bernays convinced the American public that Jacobo Árbenz, the president of Guatemala who was a liberal capitalist, was instead a communist threatening fundamental freedoms. After Bernays shifted the American public opinion with deception, President Eisenhower intervened and toppled the government under the auspices of fighting communism and defending freedom. Until the late 1950s, the Advertising Council in the US, a public service to the advertisement industry, had a Committee on Overseas Propaganda to counter communism in other countries (Lykins, 2003).

Marketing is based on the science of propaganda as advertisement rarely sells the rational utility of a product, but the emotions or status associated with a product. Cars or jeans are commonly sold as sex or status, and wars are usually sold as advancing human freedoms and justice. The propagandist creates symbols and language to link the product or policy to an unconscious desire, normalise the policy or behaviour, and



continuously push the narrative to cement a position in the mental space (Chomsky & Herman, 1994). In the modern age, advertisement agencies are increasingly involved in developing political messaging and branding for states. Much like with marketing, political propaganda is based on the recognition that “emotion instead of reason continually governs our thinking in relation to foreign affairs” (Peterson, 1939).

Conditioning links two stimuli together to produce a new learned response. Pavlov famously rang a bell each time before he fed his dog, and the dog learned to associate the sound of the bell with food to the extent that the dog would salivate with the mere ring of a bell. Conditioning is a key instrument in the marketing of politics. Human beings tend to conceal from themselves their true motivations, such as elevated status in the social group, which makes advertisement powerful as the audience has reduced unawareness of being manipulated. By the same methods, politicians commonly sell political ideas and ideologies that appeal to unconscious motivations rather than rational arguments intended for rational reflection.

Pavlovian conditioning was applied to human beings in studies by Watson and Rayner (1920), who demonstrated that they could create phobias in human beings by merely linking two stimuli. These findings are relevant to propaganda as manipulating the unconscious by linking stimuli can fuel irrational fear about states and people. Case in point, once the US and China were embroiled in an economic war under the Trump administration, the reference to “China” was replaced with “the Chinese Communist Party” to evoke familiar and negative connotations. Similarly, efficient anti-Russian propaganda entails creating stimuli of threats to the most sacred values and principles of “Us” in the in-group, which creates a Pavlovian reflex of contempt and fear of Russia.

### *Group Psychology and Herd Mentality*

The scientific work on propaganda by Lippmann and Bernays had its roots in psychology and sociology. Sigmund Freud, the uncle of Edward Bernays, explored the irrationality of “group psychology” that overrides the rational aptitudes of the individual. Freud (1921: 13) recognised that “a group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty”. The need to conform to the ideas of the group is powerful exactly because it is unconscious and it limits the ability of the individual

to be rational. Freud (1921: 7) defined group psychology as being: “concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, of a caste, of a profession, of an institution, or as a component part of a crowd of people”, which form a collective group consciousness, social instinct, herd instinct or tribal mentality.

Assessing the power of authority over groups, Sigmund Freud famously stated that the need to obey should not be underestimated. Henry David Thoreau (1993) similarly observed in 1849 that people were more capable of immorality and atrocities when acting as a group under the guidance of their authorities. In the private sphere, individuals rely more on reason and their consciousness to act morally. In contrast, when acting as a group under the guidance of authority, people can commit atrocities that they would otherwise view as deeply immoral. The vast amount of crimes against humanity are committed as an act of loyalty to one’s own group under the guise of patriotism and duty—often at the prize of great self-sacrifice. Furthermore, people have a tendency not to recognise the crimes committed by one’s own government while exaggerating the crimes of adversarial groups.

Group psychology is preoccupied with how the opinions, beliefs and behaviour of the rational individual change with its group membership. Social psychology largely emerged from efforts by psychologists in the US and UK to provide their governments with instruments of manipulation and propaganda during the Second World War (Burr, 2015: 14). Bernays’ interest in Freud’s work was to manipulate the collective consciousness and identity of the group to control the hearts and minds of the masses without their awareness of being manipulated:

The group has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individual, and is motivated by impulses and emotions which cannot be explained on the basis of what we know of individual psychology. So the question naturally arose: If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it? (Bernays, 1928: 47)

Carl Jung (1969), the renowned Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, identified unconscious mechanisms and motives: “All the most powerful ideas in history go back to archetypes”, which are universal knowledge, patterns and images are passed down from our ancestors with an enduring

influence on the unconscious. The propagandist merely needs to manipulate the associations with these archetypes. Karl Marx also recognised that the socially conditioned nature of mankind overrides the autonomous reason of the individual.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) explored the concept of “herd mentality” and revered the ability of great thinkers to rise above the herd and chart an autonomous path. Yet, Nietzsche acknowledged that the resentful herd would instinctively seek to uphold the internal cohesion by punishing dissent for the immorality of challenging the core beliefs and ideas of the group. Alexander Hamilton’s reference to the public as a “great beast” and Lippmann’s similar reference to the “bewildered herd” suggested that the people had to be led or herded in the correct direction, which becomes increasingly challenging as the world becomes ever-more multi-faceted. Propaganda aims to establish the initial and dominant narrative to set the framing, and the herd mentality includes mechanisms to limit dissent.

The concept of herd mentality is applied to a variety of disciplines ranging from marketing to finance as an explanation of human behaviour deviating from rational decision-making (Shiller, 2020). The instinct of adapting to the group is especially powerful in regard to politics as the issues are usually complex and distant, which creates greater space between reality and perception. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty and conflict, people are more afraid, and a frightened public is more inclined to seek security by aligning with the group. Propaganda in politics is therefore designed to incite fear as it restrains the reason of individuals and enhances conformity to the narrative and solutions provided by the propagandist.

Herd mentality reveals an important paradox of the Enlightenment—a society that organises based on reason must also take into account that human beings are not always rational. For example, a student stressed about an important exam may experience that the legs shake, as the sense of stress and danger causes the body to send blood to the legs to outrun a predator that causes the stress. Similarly, the mind still acts on immutable instincts that developed over thousands of years to survive. What we perceive as “reason” is often the mere rationalisation of instinctive behaviour to justify the predetermined inference (Haidt, 2012). Propaganda therefore manipulates the unconscious faculties shaping opinions and beliefs that will be rationalised by the individual.

*Stereotypes and Heuristics to Interpret the World*

Propaganda almost always manipulates and exploits group identities in terms of civilisation, nationality, ethnicity, religion or ideology. Stereotypes are aimed to be impervious to evidence, which makes them indispensable for propaganda as a reason-bypassing instrument of influence. The political world is complex and is rarely experienced directly, thus the population relies almost completely on imagining the political world. Experiments in social thinking reveal that when people are asked to define societal problems that do not affect them directly, people rely heavily on generalisations that are applied uncritically to unfamiliar cases (Bartlett, 1940: 57–58). Lippmann (1922: 7) argued:

Under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond. Let him cast the first stone who did not believe in the Russian army that passed through England in August, 1914, did not accept any tale of atrocities without direct proof, and never saw a plot, a traitor, or a spy where there was none.

Human beings rely on stereotypes to interpret and filter the complexities of the world. Stereotypes present a simplified picture of the world that anchors our belonging, morality and values. Stereotypes enable the public to impose some structure on the “great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world” (Lippmann, 1922: 63). Propaganda appeals to social identities because “what matters is the character of the stereotypes” rather than actual behaviour (Lippmann, 1922: 70). Propaganda aims to shape and construct stereotypes that are unconscious and function as a lens to interpret reality, as opposed to simply relying on presenting false information assessed by rational individuals.

The processing of politics is especially reliant on heuristics, which are cognitive shortcuts that often rely on assigned identities to process complex questions. People have to make hundreds or thousands of interpretations and decisions daily, and completely rational choices depend on an extensive assessment of alternatives and knowledge of relevant variables. Heuristics are manipulated by constructing stereotypes based on real or fictitious experiences and patterns of behaviour. Heuristics can therefore create prejudices and biases as former events shape future expectations and interpretations. The ability to manipulate these shortcuts by manufacturing patterns and stereotypes is a central component of

propaganda as it assists in convincing the audience without appealing to reason. Goffman's (1974) concept of frame analysis entails the construction of culturally determined definitions of reality. Framing builds on an assortment of stereotypes and anecdotes to make sense of the world.

The concept of "suggestion" derives from psychology, which entails convincing the target audience to accept a proposition uncritically without rational reflection. The effectiveness of suggestion relies on the arousal of attitudes that already exist among people (Doob & Robinson, 1935: 91). If democracy or human rights are strongly held values in a society, then propaganda is organised to frame all issues in international affairs through this lens. "We" represent freedom and virtue, and the adversary is assigned the role of an existential threat to these ideals. Thus, "suggestion" can reduce individual reasoning and incentivise group-think and collective behaviour. "Suggestion" inoculates a narrative from reason as any dissent from predetermined conclusions, empathy for an adversary or even critical analysis that deviates this framing can then be denounced as a betrayal of revered ideals. Propaganda deliberately distracts from rational reflection and "to prevent thought" by establishing ready-made conclusions that are impervious to the evidence (Lumley, 1933: 149).

Human beings are by nature "cognitive misers" because they enhance efficiency by taking as many cognitive shortcuts as possible (Fiske & Taylor, 2016: 15). The inclination to simplify or automate reasoning due to cognitive limitations makes human beings vulnerable to propaganda. The propagandist aims to rally the masses around a set of simple ideas that must avoid critical analysis, thus propaganda "strives continually to paralyse critical analysis and to stimulate all tendencies to thoughtless and slavish acceptance" (Bartlett, 1940: 66).

By teaching the public to speak in clichés and stereotypes, the public also thinks in clichés and stereotypes. Lasswell (1936) defined propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols". Those who can manipulate these stereotypes and symbols are "the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of" (Bernays, 1928: 9). Propaganda optimally avoids the conscious and rational enquiry of the individual and instead targets suppressed emotions without their awareness (Bernays, 1928). By identifying with the group, the individual can subordinate rational considerations in favour of preserving group interests and cohesion (Bernays, 1928). Lasswell (1927: 630) opined:

The strategy of propaganda, which has been phrased in cultural terms, can readily be described in the language of stimulus-response. Translated into this vocabulary, which is especially intelligible to some, the propagandist may be said to be concerned with the multiplication of those stimuli which are best calculated to evoke the desired responses.

Stereotypes are therefore at the centre of propaganda to herd the masses by offering rewards for conformity and punishment for dissent. Lippmann (1922: 52) argued:

The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society. They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them... No wonder then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe.

Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation when core beliefs and attitudes are challenged by reality, causing a profound mental discomfort resulting in reality being rejected in favour of the comfort of the core beliefs. The individuals reinterpret the facts to the extent necessary to fit the stereotypes and socially constructed world they know.

### *A World of “Us” Versus “Them”*

Evolutionary biology has imprinted human beings with the instinct of organising in groups such as families, tribes, nations or civilisations for a sense of meaning, security and even a sense of immortality by reproducing the group. Neuroscience demonstrates that evolutionary biology has made the prefrontal cortex react instantly to politics that is framed as “Us” versus “Them” as a survival instinct (Al-Rodhan, 2016). Threat from a distinctive out-group instantly intensifies solidarity within the in-group and mobilises vicious opposition to the out-group. The findings in neuroscience therefore provide evidence as to why ideologies that create

in-groups and out-groups are immensely appealing to human beings (Al-Rodhan, 2016).

While the in-group is defined as a group in which the individual feels belonging, the out-group is conversely a group with no belonging and commonly associated with disdain and a rival to the in-group (Sumner, 1906). The favourable predisposition toward the group manifests itself in a phenomenon known as in-group bias. The subsequent collective consciousness enhances its relative influence over the decision of the rational individual. Conformity to the group is driven by powerful instincts to organise around common beliefs, ideas and morality, while the group also punish the individual for failing to conform. Group conformity is a survival instinct. Anomie, the breakdown of shared social bonds, standards, values and belief in the continuity of a group causes a sense of meaninglessness and despair (Durkheim, 1952).

The in-group largely identifies itself as the opposite of the out-group. A key purpose of in-group loyalty is to collectively counter threats from out-groups, thus the human brain is wired to instinctively retreat under the authority of the in-group in the presence of an external threat. Durkheim (1952), studying the condition and consequences of societal unity, noted how for example Jews naturally became a strongly integrated group because of the external hostilities from anti-Semitic sentiments. The point of departure in propaganda tends to be that the stereotype of the out-group threatens the existence of the in-group (Bartlett, 1940: 80). The out-group is delegitimised by assigning malign intent in opposition to what is the most sacred to society: “Out of the opposition we make villains and conspiracies” (Lippmann, 1922: 70).

The “Othering” of a people or state is instrumental to exaggerate the homogeneity of the in-group and thus strengthen the collective identity and solidarity, while the out-group is depicted and delegitimised as the diametrically opposite. Stereotypes are used to mask reason and reality, such as the humanity of the adversary. The stereotype of the enemy implies a crusade against humanity and freedom as opposed to an effort of enhancing security in response to threats. “Othering” can exist on a spectrum from at the higher end as inferior and an existential threat, while at the lower end a violator of universal norms that is not entitled to full sovereignty (Linklater, 2005). It has been purported that “Western philosophy is in essence the attempt to domesticate Otherness, since what we understand by thought is nothing but such a project” (Gasche, 1986: 101).

The struggle against the “Other” to assert one’s own identity is central in how political propaganda frames the international system. European colonial power asserted their elevated civilisational status in opposition to barbaric and uncivilised peoples, thus making it a responsibility for the political subject to impose influence over the primitive peoples in civilising missions over inferior races. The liberal identity asserted itself in the struggle against fascism and communism. After the Cold War, the US defined its role in the world as the opposite of authoritarian governments, and after the September 11 attacks, the US defined the struggle of civilisation and freedom in opposition to terrorism.

Propaganda commonly appeals to morality as it is rarely the result of rational and personal reflection but mostly positions socialised by the group. Case in point, Western societies transitioned from considering abortion a deeply immoral act to becoming immoral to oppose the right to abortion. The complete reversal of profound sentiments and concepts of morality in society is noteworthy as very few individuals have devoted significant time to reflect deeply on complex moral issues such as when life originates. Similarly, American isolationists initially asserted the moral high ground in avoiding foreign entanglements, yet after the entry into the Second World War, those supporting neutrality were demonised as Nazi sympathisers. By limiting political positions along a binary “Us” versus “Them” framing, the virtuous patriot takes a confrontational approach, while anti-war movements are commonly denounced as apologists of the adversary—thus avoiding the rational debate about what actions enhance security.

Propagandists have great incentives to exacerbate external threats to limit internal dissent. The greater the perception of an external threat, the more fierce punishment of dissent within the in-group:

Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd. So it was in the French Revolution, when dread of foreign armies produced the reign of terror. The Soviet Government would have been less fierce if it had met with less hostility in its first years. Fear generates impulses of cruelty, and therefore promotes superstitious beliefs as seem to justify cruelty. (Russell, 1961: 70)

General Douglas MacArthur recognised the excessive use of fear by the US government:



Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear—kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor—with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exorbitant funds demanded. Yet, in retrospect, these disasters seem never to have happened, seem never to have been quite real. (Griffith, 2011: 104)

## THE HIERARCHY OF THE SUPERIOR AND INFERIOR

Political propaganda uses the psychological concept of suggestion to construct authority based on a relationship between superiors and inferiors (Bartlett, 1940: 51). Dividing the world into “Us” versus “Them” is not an effort to point to civilisational or cultural distinctiveness, rather it is to present as hierarchy due to the inferiority or immorality of the “Other”. The implied hierarchy between the superior and inferior suggests that the Other does not deserve the social status, humanity, rights and power of the in-group. The out-group is presented as inherently different and incompatible with the in-group as loyalty to the in-group should supersede any uncomfortable facts. Propaganda most commonly take the form of suggestion “based upon a relationship of superiors and inferiors” (Bartlett, 1940: 52). Propaganda bestows legitimacy to “Us” and deprives legitimacy of “Them”:

All propaganda directed against an opposing group has but one aim: to substitute diabolical abstractions for concrete persons. The propagandist’s purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human. By robbing them of their personality, he puts them outside the pale of moral obligation. Mere symbols can have no rights – particularly when that of which they are symbolical is, by definition, evil. (Huxley, 1937: 4–5)

The superior is the political subject who makes decisions and recommendations, and the inferior political object implements these decisions. Political propaganda towards the adversary aims for the political object to internalise the inferiority to not challenge the subject-object structure. Ultimate power, defined as the ability to make someone do something they would otherwise not have done, is ideally wielded by controlling ideas to rely less on coercion. There is less need for coercion against a slave that accepts his inferiority and believes that slavery is his natural place in

the world, and similarly, hegemony and dominance can be normalised in the international system if a relationship is internalised as a higher civilisation versus barbarians (Gramsci, 1971).

Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic similarly observed that consciousness for our place in the world can only be established by seeing ourselves in the relation to other people in the society. In defeat, the position as a slave and an object are internalised for the slave to find his place in the world. Dominant states similarly use propaganda for weaker states to accept their inferiority and status as civilisational apprentices without political subjectivity.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) defined hegemony as the dominance of the ruling elites by a combination of coercion (dominance) and consent (leadership). Hegemony can "manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (Gramsci, 1971: 57). Hegemons promote strategic narratives and a language that differentiates between the superior and the inferior, the civilised and the savage, and the political subject and the political object. Hegemonic discourse normalises hegemonic power relations between the master and the slave, or the enlightened state and the uncivilised state (Gramsci, 1971). Defining reality is important to shift from the reliance on coercion to consent as, for example, when the slave internalises and accepts his subordinate role in society. The hegemon achieves both dominance and consensus by maximising its own power and expansion, but depicting it as being in the service of all peoples and universal ideals:

It is true that the state is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favorable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion. (Gramsci, 1971: 181–182)

Stuart Hall (2018) similarly recognised that hegemony is constructed by the dominant class when it

succeed in framing all competing definitions of reality within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought. They set the limits – mental and structural – within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.

Hegemony usually relies on ideology referring to universalism to ensure that the subordinated classes accept and perpetuate their own subordination. In such a system, the inferior state must either accept a subject-object relationship as a civilisational student without a seat at the table, or be acknowledged as a barbaric threat to civilisation that must be contained or defeated.

### *Guiding the Herd: Authority, Ideology and Language*

Propaganda can be conceptualised as herding, in which experts and authority figures are influenced or constructed to shape public opinion. The experts and gatekeepers of information must also be trained to embrace a favourable language, narratives and ideology. Consent is manufactured by establishing and controlling hierarchies of information flows, and establishing mechanisms to reward conformity to the main narratives and punish dissent.

Propaganda conceals itself as arguments based on reason, although communicated through stereotypes, symbols, loaded language, innuendoes and other means of enhancing persuasion that appeals to the unconscious. Social prestige and unchallenged authority are imperative to assert the position of the superior. Institutional authority weighs heavy to the extent the masses trust the media. The legitimacy of experts and herd administrators can be enhanced with a contribution to knowledge and practical results, by borrowing legitimacy and authority from an organisation, or achieved by formal recognition from for example a university degree (Gerver & Bensman, 1995: 65).

In both domestic and international society, the competition for public opinion can result in culture wars and the proliferation of polarised think tanks and media. Efforts to establish authority within a foreign population is achieved by infiltrating civil society. For example, human rights organisations enjoy significant authority and influence within sovereign states, and the ability to claim monopolisation on the representation of human rights, democracy and justice is an important source of influence.

## IDEOLOGY

Propaganda has a proclivity towards ideology as it organises the world into a system of ideas and ideals where the “in-group” represents virtue and the “out-group” act as the villain. Carr (1985: 130) argued that propaganda tends to conceal itself as ideology:

The fact that national propaganda everywhere so eagerly cloaks itself in ideologies of a professedly international character proves the existence of an international stock of common ideas, however limited and however weakly held, to which appeal can be made, and of a belief that these common ideas stand somehow in the scale of values above national interests. This stock of common ideas is what we mean by international morality.

Ideologies are important for propaganda as they present a system of ideas and ideals that forms the centre of politics and society. Ideologies set the frames and inform the interpretation of reality and truth, which is instrumental to unify a people by advocating conformity and mobilising the people against a common enemy. Hannah Arendt (1968: 159) defines ideologies as “systems based upon a single opinion that proved strong enough to attract and persuade a majority of people and broad enough to lead them through the various experiences and situations of an average modern life”. By conveying a truth that is elevated above legitimate dissent, ideologies can mask manipulation and present certain actors and policies as being inherently objective. A foundation of ideology is the polarisation of virtue and belligerence by organising the world along a positive-self-representation and negative other-presentation (Van Dijk, 1998: 69). Ideologies thus dichotomise between the superior and the inferior, between good and evil, which implies that the superior is endowed with special privileges and should be insulated from the corrupted inferior (Van Dijk, 1998: 68). Ideologies are potent vehicles for propaganda to the extent the rationalisation of unwarranted privileges becomes an impediment to rational thought.

## LANGUAGE

Social psychologists explore how language can be used to construct social realities to manipulate the beliefs and behaviour of the recipients (Berger & Luckmann, 1971). Unsubstantiated claims that do not appeal to reason can be communicated by relying to stereotypes. Propaganda therefore commonly use emotional language, loaded language, high-inference language and euphemisms to reduce reliance on reason.

Language is influenced by the political atmosphere and the ability to convey meaning degenerates during ideological conflicts. The language aims to convey meaning and Orwell thus identified insincerity as the great enemy of language. The attempt to mask the truth and mislead the public

demands the manipulation of language. Politics has a strong influence over language as “politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer” (Orwell, 1956: 363).

The political-media class make oblique moral judgements by manipulating the language. John Hume defined political leadership as a pedagogic discipline in which the teacher works towards “changing the language of others” (Gormley-Heenan, 2006: 152). Once the student or audience internalises the new language, their ability to express dissent will be diminished. In a politically polarised world, propagandists develop and embrace a new language to obscure the gap between the real and declared aims. The manipulation of language is a deliberate effort to prevent rational thought and impose conformity: “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.... In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible” (Orwell, 1946).

Propagandistic language conceals reality and meaning with abstract words. The language of war becomes especially misleading due to the need of suppressing reality. Huxley (1937: 3) referred to simple and common phrases to sideline reason, such as “Peace-loving countries must unite to use force against aggressive dictatorships. Democratic institutions must be protected, if need be, by force”. What it actually means, according to Huxley, is that peace-loving countries must engage in extreme violence and destruction to assert their will, although in the ensuing conflict and chaos the democratic institutions would likely falter.

Public opinion can be altered by changing the language as opposed to appealing to rational arguments. Dehumanising words such as parasites and cockroaches are commonly used by political leaderships in preparation for genocide. Alternatively, dehumanising words emerge organically from the soldiers on the ground as a coping mechanism to make killing more tolerable. Similarly, the use of the word *fetus* and other sterile words are instrumental to deprive a baby of its humanity, which contributes towards social acceptance for ending its life and thus favourable attitudes towards abortion as opposed to relying on rational arguments. Language can bestow or deny legitimacy is important in warfare as Our violence must be justified and Their humanity diminished:

We know that the harming or killing of men and women is wrong, and we are reluctant consciously to do what we know to be wrong. But when particular men and women are thought of merely as representatives of a class, which has previously been defined as evil and personified in the shape of a devil, then the reluctance to hurt or murder disappears. Brown, Jones and Robinson are no longer thought of as Brown, Jones and Robinson, but as heretics, gentiles, Yids, niggers, barbarians, Huns, communists, capitalists, fascists, liberals—whichever the case may be. (Huxley, 1937: 4)

The power–knowledge nexus suggests that power is used to create knowledge by influencing associations and meanings, and the control of knowledge and language is subsequently a source of power (Foucault, 2019). Efficient and enduring power and oppression is exercised by controlling knowledge as opposed to blunt coercion. Those with power constructs the knowledge that society interprets reality, and controlling the knowledge is the principal source of power.

Propagandists also develop “strategic narratives”, which are compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman, 2006: 90–91). The process of framing entails providing meaning to events and packaging information in a manner that enables people to make sense of the world (Goffman, 1974). Reframing is a path towards social change as the mere change of the frame results in changing everything (Lakoff, 2004). Orwell (1968: 256–257) wrote that “history stopped in 1936” at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War as propaganda began to completely detach narratives from reality:

I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various ‘party lines’.

Much like in marketing, a key ingredient of propaganda is the “strong belief in the virtues of sheer repetition” (Bartlett, 1940: 67). Repetition is a key feature of propaganda as the familiar is commonly confused with the known. Heuristics is a cognitive response that suggests if something can be remembered, then it must be important. Thus, the development

of stereotypes manipulates the cognitive shortcuts to trick the brain into believing something is important. Repetition also assists people in simplifying their thought and speech by communicating in clichés and slogans with obscuring vagueness. Orwell (1946) cautioned that the result is a cognitive absence during speech: “If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying”. Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Germany’s Minister for Propaganda recognised the central principle of repetition as “A lie told once remains a lie but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth”, and towards this end, he advocated that “propaganda must label events and people with distinctive phrases or slogans” (Jackall, 1995: 208).

### *Democracies’ Proclivity Towards Propaganda*

In the seventeenth century, John Locke developed the foundational idea of a democratic society, premised on the assumption that the conscious individual was the most accountable source of judgement. However, democracies do not consist solely of rational individuals negotiating peacefully towards a common good, rather they act in accordance with irrational group psychology.

Lippmann recognised that democracies were especially inclined to embrace propaganda to manufacture consent. When the public is the sovereign and the source of legitimate power, there is an even greater incentive to manipulate public opinion (Mills, 1956). Democracy relies on propaganda to organise a shared identity and opinions, which is the foundation for social cohesion in an increasingly large and complex society (Bernays, 1928; Lasswell, 1927; Mead, 1934; Merriam, 1925). Bernays (1928: 37) stipulated that “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” as it enables a few people to mould the collective consciousness of the people.

All regime types use propaganda to some extent. While authoritarian states claim to speak on the behalf of the masses, democracies purport to follow the people and therefore need to develop the “arts of moulding and directing mass opinion (Carr, 1985: 134). Propaganda is a powerful instrument for “social and ideological control”, which is especially important to engineering consent in democratic societies that are more susceptible to public opinion (Carey, 1997: 21). Democracies are constrained by the law and public opinion and are therefore more likely to

lie to their own people than their autocratic counterparts (Mearsheimer, 2013).

A paradox is evident as propaganda contradicts the democratic assumption of the rational individual. Yet, propaganda also has a central function in democracies as an “invisible, intertwining structure of groupings and associations” functions as “the mechanism by which democracy has organized its group mind and simplified its mass thinking” (Bernays, 1928: 44). Furthermore, Bernays (1928: 44) was adamant that “to deplore the existence of such a mechanism is to ask for a society such as never was and never will be. To admit that it exists, but expect that it shall not be used, is unreasonable”.

The French Revolution made the nation a central component of group identity and nationalism became “the greatest emotional-political force of the age” (Kennan, 1994: 76). Lippmann (1932: 66–67) shared this sentiment as “the fierce power of national feeling is due to the fact that it rises from the deepest sources of our being... that essence of our being which defines us against the background of the world”. Propaganda has a central role in manipulating group psychology to enhance national unity, which is a prerequisite for democracy. The construction of national unity is a fundamental requirement for democracy (Diamond, 1990; Lijphart, 1969; Rustow, 1970). National unity denotes that “the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to” (Rustow, 1970: 350). The political pluralism within a democracy must be confined within “accepted boundaries” as “cleavage must be tempered by consensus” (Diamond, 1990: 49). When cleavages are not moderated and the political culture fragments, democracy struggles as “the pressures towards moderate middle-of-the-road attitudes are absent” (Lijphart, 1969: 208–209).

The expansion of the electorate after the First World War was a response to public pressure, although it was also viewed as alarming as the electorate was deemed irrational and uninformed. Propaganda had growing relevance due to “the broadening of the basis of politics, which has vastly increased the number of those whose opinion is politically important” (Carr, 1985: 120). Neville Chamberlain opined in 1923: “the new electorate contains an immense mass of ignorant voters, of both sexes, whose intelligence is low and who have no power of weighing evidence” (Taylor, 2019: 91). “Political education” was



thus needed to guide the population to the correct and unifying political positions, a process that did not merely entail providing facts for reflection. Rather political propaganda became an important instrument to frame events, disseminate information, and punish dissent from the manufactured consensus.

Lippmann (1925) had initially embraced a favourable view of propaganda as democracy consisted of a “bewildered public and a mass of insufficiently trained officials”, which made it the state’s responsibility to educate the public about the collective beliefs and opinions. Thus, the craft of propaganda could assist the government to unify and manage the masses toward common goals and to preserve democracy (Lippmann, 1922). However, Lippmann later developed profound scepticism and concerns that the elites’ efforts to guide the public would erode democracy (Lippmann, 1955). In 1937, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis was established to educate the public about the dangers of propaganda, which was feared to threaten democracy by undermining the ability of the public to think critically.

The democracy and civil rights movement of the 1960s similarly fragmented the political culture and the middle-of-the-road attitudes. The Trilateral Commission was established in 1973 to strengthen stable cooperation between North America, Western Europe and Japan. The subsequent report on the “governability of democracies” identified that “some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy... Needed, instead, is a greater degree of moderation in democracy” (Crozier et al., 1975: 113). The report defined the excess of democracy as when enhanced political consciousness and political participation culminates in a “deficit in governability” (Crozier et al., 1975: 173). The report stipulated that democracy can be moderated by first balancing democracy with expert opinions, and second limiting participation as “the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups” (Crozier et al., 1975: 113–114).

Information dominance remains a central aspect of great power politics after the Cold War. The US aim to advance and cement the unipolar moment through “total spectrum dominance” recognised the need for information dominance. The Pentagon’s *Joint Vision 2020* outlined the objective that “US forces are able to conduct prompt, sustained and synchronized operations with combinations of forces tailored to specific

situations and with access to and freedom to operate in all domains – space, sea, land, air and information”. Paradoxically, information dominance enables the US to have an open society with the illusion of dissent in the media. Dissent can be tolerated to a greater extent when the government can control and narrow the scope of acceptable opinions. When information dominance is lost, the US becomes more reliant on crude efforts to limit speech and opposition (Miller, 2004: 9).

The rise of alternative sources of information incentivises Washington to reverse its decline of dominance in the information space. Towards this end, Hillary Clinton requested more funding for the “information war”:

During the Cold War we did a great job in getting America’s message out. After the Berlin Wall fell we said, ‘Okay, fine, enough of that, we are done,’ and unfortunately we are paying a big price for it. Our private media cannot fill that gap... we are in an information war. And we are losing that war. (US Senate, 2011: 17)

NATO’s Deputy Assistant Secretary-General for Public Diplomacy, Stephanie Babst (2010: 1), similarly emphasised the “ever-greater need for well-planned public diplomacy efforts. Strategic communications, branding and public affairs are widely seen as essential tools to win over the hearts and minds of foreign audiences”. Badsey observes that “NATO’s approach to psy-ops is to treat it as an essentially open, truthful and benign activity”, and subsequently rejects there should be a clear distinction between psy-ops and public affair (North, 2015).

### *Propagandising Propaganda as an Instrument of Authoritarian States*

The term propaganda has been around for centuries, although it originated with a more amoral and neutral meaning by denoting “which ought to be propagated” that could be used for both good and bad (Fletcher, 1939: 88). Propaganda was considered a legitimate instrument of statecraft to bring awareness to an idea that society could organise around. Until the mid-1930s, the practitioners of shaping public opinion forthrightly referred to their profession and craft as “propaganda”.

Although, the term “propaganda” became a dirty word by the 1930s, especially in terms of targeting the domestic population. The Germans’ use of lies and deception during the First World War created a stigma and negative connotations with the word propaganda. Subsequently, Edward

Bernays renamed propaganda “public relations” to distinguish between “our” good propaganda and “their” malicious propaganda. While “public relations” is aimed at a domestic audience, “public diplomacy” entails government-sponsored efforts to communicate directly with a foreign audience to obtain support for strategic objectives. Other words used to conceal propaganda entails publicity, national projection, and political education.

The word propaganda became a propagandist instrument to attribute negative connotations and delegitimise the arguments, narratives and identity of rivals. The concepts have been renamed and decoupled as public relations versus propaganda, although the methods are the same. In the 1920s, Joseph Goebbels, who would become the Nazi propaganda minister, became an ardent admirer of Bernays and emulated his propaganda techniques. As Bernays (1965: 652) later acknowledged: “They were using my books as the basis for a destructive campaign against the Jews of Germany”.

Democracies have been very successful in terms of convincing their domestic audience that propaganda is only a tool at the disposal of authoritarian states, which is of great importance as propaganda loses its efficiency once people become aware of being manipulated. As democratic societies are open it is assumed to preclude propaganda. In the post-Cold War era, the efforts to divide the world into democracies versus authoritarian states intensifies the dichotomy between “Our” information versus “Their” propaganda. Mullerson (2017) observes that “in liberal democracies propaganda is much more sophisticated and difficult to recognise as such. Therefore, it is usually more effective”.

Effective propaganda appeals to virtuous ideals such as freedom, humanity, civilisation and reason, which incentivises democracies to monopolise on such a political identity and assign the opposite political identity to adversaries. Carr recognised:

Propaganda to be successful must appeal to some universally or generally recognized values....Every country seeks to place its policy on an ethical basis, even if this can only be done by asserting that it has a historical mission to rule over inferior races for their own good. Whatever the policy the need to clothe it in some altruistic guise is universally felt. (Carr, 1939: 30)

It is a common belief that a population guided by reason and democracy would do away with war, which Immanuel Kant theorised in *Perpetual Peace* as the foundation for democratic peace theory. As demonstrated by the French Revolution, the objective of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” did not simply liberate the French, it also became powerful symbols for war propaganda and legitimisation of warfare by equating conquest with the liberation of other peoples (Speier, 1995: 38). In the present time, democracy and human rights continue to have a central role in war propaganda as freedom communicates a higher and common purpose that can be contrasted with an authoritarian Other.

### *Neoclassical Realist Theory on Propaganda*

Propaganda has a central and influential role in governance. The positive influence of propaganda is that appealing to the unconscious group psychology is effective to mobilise unity and support for a foreign policy. The negative influence is the various consequences of diminished rationality, which is defined as when states “ignore balance-of-power logic and act in non-strategic ways” to the detriment of their security (Mearsheimer, 2009: 242).

Realist theory recognises that the international distribution of power creates systemic pressures that determine how states should act to maximise their security, and the rationality of decision-makers is a reference to the ability to act according to this balance of power logic. However, political realists are adamant that realism is not a foreign policy theory as states do not always act rationally in accordance with the international distribution of power (Waltz, 1979). In other words, the assumption of the rational actor is contested as the public and political leaders are also influenced by business interests, ethnic rivalry, bureaucracies, domestic power struggles, misperceptions and other variables that are not consistent with the national interests (Herz, 1981: 189).

Neoclassical realism opens the “black box” of foreign policy by exploring why states do not act rationally, by assessing the decision-makers as an intervening variable between the international distribution of power and foreign policy. From a neoclassical realist perspective, propaganda is positive to the extent it enables a state to act rationally by unifying and mobilising the public and politicians so the state can act as a unitary actor in pursuit of national interests. However, propaganda can produce irrational behaviour when the international distribution of power

changes. Propaganda largely relies on constructing stereotypes, ideologies, narratives and language that appeals to the unconscious, and rational debate about the changing national interests is prevented as propaganda is designed to bypass reason.

Common culture and ideology can influence what states and people we consider to be part of “Us” and conversely designate the “Other” as rivals irrespective of national interest (Morgenthau, 1948). Perceptions and misperceptions thus have a great influence on decision-makers, which states have an interest to manipulate (Jervis, 1976). Power politics pre-occupies itself increasingly with image-making and “hardly anything remains in the open conduct of foreign policy that does not have a propaganda or public-relations aspect, aiming at presenting a favourable image to allies, opponents, neutrals, and last but not least, one’s own domestic audience” (Herz, 1981: 187). The ability to shape perceptions and misperceptions can therefore be as important as material power, which is why governments invest in “image-making” and “diplomatic symbolism” as an intrinsic part of power politics (Herz, 1981: 187).

However, propaganda teaching decision-makers to view the world through an artificial dichotomous lens risks pursuing irrational policies. Leading realist scholars such as Morgenthau, Carr, Butterfield, Waltz and Kennan cautioned that the belief in the inherent superiority and goodness of one’s own political system can manifest itself in self-righteousness, nationalist universalism and moral crusades that undermine strategic interests and international security (Booth & Wheeler, 2008: 98).

During the Cold War, US propaganda efforts were rational in terms of mobilising support domestically and among allies against the counter the Soviet Union as its principal allies. However, when the US was balanced and a rational policy to maximise security entailed compromise, the propaganda undermined détente and compromise. When rational actors consider competing national security interests, a US-Soviet compromise could enhance mutual security and peace. Although, when the rivalry is presented as a struggle between good and evil, a compromise is tantamount to appeasement as peace requires that the forces of light defeat the forces of darkness. Similarly, anti-Russian propaganda enhanced a rational policy to counter the Soviet Union when it was the principal rival of the US, however, the anti-Russian stereotypes and sentiment prevent a rational foreign policy when China is the main adversary and Washington has a strategic interest to mend ties with Russia and place them in the in-group of an expanded West.

## CONCLUSION

Propagandists deliberately obscure the concept of propaganda to make it more efficient. Once the Germans had besmirched the concept of propaganda, Bernays and other innovators behind the science of propaganda rebranded “Our” propaganda to public relations to distinguish between the actions of the in-group with the out-group. This approach advanced further during the Cold War as propaganda was portrayed to be mere lies and disinformation as a tool reserved for the state media of authoritarian states. While the literature suggests that democracies are more reliant on propaganda to engineer consent, the public has been successfully convinced that the openness of democracies precludes propaganda.

Liberal democratic propaganda is also very appealing as it enables the in-group to monopolise on the values of freedom, justice, democracy and equality, while the main out-group is assigned the dichotomous values and identity. Simplifying the complexities of international politics into a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism provides the public with a comforting and morally righteous prism to interpret the events of the world. At its worst, “We” may do the wrong thing for the right reasons. At its best, “They” may do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Filtering world events through dichotomous stereotypes ensures that objective facts have little influence on shaping beliefs and opinions.

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# The Foundational Stereotypes of Anti-Russian Propaganda

## INTRODUCTION

Anti-Russian propaganda has for the past 500 years been founded on contrasting the stereotype of the civilisational superior West versus the inferior Russian. Russia is paradoxically a key representative of the eastern “Other” because of its proximity—an Asiatic power in Europe. Initially, the civilised European was juxtaposed with the Asiatic Russian barbarian, a stereotype that became incrementally framed through ideology as the liberal democratic West versus authoritarian Russia.

The remarkable endurance of russophobia over the centuries is explained by the geopolitical challenges of Russia, and Russia’s central role in defining the West’s collective identity by being assigned the role as the “Other”. By exacerbating the extent to which Russia is different and inferior—the more homogenous, unified and superior the West becomes as the in-group representing the Self. Propaganda appeals to virtuous ideals such as humanity, freedom and reason, which is juxtaposed to the qualities of the “Other” that are simultaneously inferior and threatening. Narratives are largely inoculated from facts and reason when all information is filtered through a Manichean lens of a morally righteous West versus a morally inferior Russia.

Ending the discursive patterns of the inferiority of the “Other” also undermines the identity and superiority of the Self. Over the centuries, relations with Russia have been juxtaposed as Western versus Eastern,

European versus Asiatic, civilisation versus barbarism, modern versus backward, developed versus underdeveloped, liberal versus despotic, Enlightened versus superstitious, free versus enslaved, progressive versus stagnant, good versus evil, open society versus closed society, and the free world versus the authoritarian world.

The concept of a common West did not have a prominent role in European thought and intellectual inquiry until the late nineteenth century, which was to a great extent caused by Russia's entry into the European political map (Heller, 2010). During the Cold War, this binary division was expressed ideologically as the bipolar division of power became a rivalry of capitalism versus communism, democracy versus totalitarianism, and Christianity versus atheism. After the Cold War, the enduring dividing lines on the European continent have been re-ideologised as liberal democracy versus authoritarianism.

The inferior barbarian is treated with disdain for his backwardness, yet simultaneously with immense dread as a threat to civilisation. Russia continues to be portrayed as both inferior and menacing, which often results in paradoxical representations. The barbaric stereotype implies that Russia is presented with a dilemma as it can only play one of two roles: Russia can adopt the role as the student that will be civilised by the West as the teacher, or Russia can reject the subject-object or teacher-student relationship and remain uncivilised and thus a threat that must be either contained or defeated. Neither of these two roles allows Russia to claim political subjectivity as an equal. Translated into propaganda, the socialising or civilising mission of the West produces a civilised and generous identity for itself, while Russia is assigned the role of the reluctant pupil and anti-civilisational force.

This chapter first explores to what extent anti-Russian propaganda is informed by the "Othering" of Russia as the diametrically opposite of the West. The stereotype as the "Other" has its roots in Orientalism, in which the inferior is portrayed as backwards and concurrently an existential threat. This threat demands a subject-object relationship between the civilised and uncivilised in which the pupil can either be civilised or contained. Second, the chapter assesses how the "Othering" of Russia transitioned from inferior ethnicity to ideology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Third, propaganda in the post-Cold War era has recast Russia as a civilisational apprentice of the West in a subject-object relationship in which efforts to restore Russian political subjectivity is tantamount to becoming a counter-civilisational force. Last, Russia's

rejection of the teacher-student and superior-inferior relationship and its manifestation as sovereignty inequality has resulted in the conflict with the West.

*The Subject-Object Relationship Between the Civilised “Us”  
and the Barbaric “Other”*

Propaganda is characterised by the appeal of virtuous ideas such as reason, civilisation and human freedom to define the in-groups and the diametrically opposite to define Russia as the main out-group. Relations between the West and Russia have throughout history been conceptualised as a relationship between political subjects that drives civilisation forward, and political objects that must be civilised. The teacher-student relationship justifies a hierarchy and sovereign inequality as inferior ethnicity, morality, culture and values cannot be given equal status to the superior.

Propaganda is instrumental to legitimise special privileges for the West as the teacher, while the uncivilised nature of the Russian student presents an ultimatum—accept the role as the apprentice or be confronted in the form of containment or defeat. Either way, the stereotype precludes Russia from restoring its political subjectivity and sovereign equality. Russia’s acceptance of its role as an apprentice of the West is imperative for the West own identity-building as a benign hegemon devoted to socialising and civilising for common good. Andrius Kubilius, a member of the European Parliament and the former Prime Minister of Lithuania, argued for a combination: “The new EU strategy towards Russia should entail three elements—deterrence, containment and transformation” (Kubilius, 2021).

The inferior “Other” often plays the dual role of both a backward people and as an existential threat (Linklater, 2005). Case in point, Hitler’s propaganda against the Jews were defined by two distinct styles of language—either “scornful derision” of the inferior race or “panic-stricken fear” of their threat to civilisation (Klemperer, 2006: 162). Russophobia has similarly produced two depictions in the language over the past 500 years—disdain for Russians as an uncivilised and backward people, and simultaneously an immense threat. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was common to argue that despite Russia’s “syndrome of backwardness”, it represents a threat to international security (Snyder, 1994: 181).

Consequently, propaganda can produce what Orwell referred to as doublethink, which is the act of accepting two contradictory beliefs simultaneously. Russia is depicted as hopelessly weak and lingering towards collapse, and simultaneously an all-powerful threat responsible for nearly all of the West's problems. US Senator John McCain argued that "Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country" that is crippled by corruption and authoritarianism, although it is also a country that can mastermind a great conspiracy of influencing almost every election and referendum across the West. Scornful derision is expressed towards Russia's hopeless economy the size of the Italian economy and its military budget being less than 10% of NATO's military budget, yet simultaneously the panic-stricken fear of Russia conquering Europe requires the Western bloc to continuously increase its military spending, end economic reliance on Russia and rediscover solidarity against the Russian menace. During the Russian Duma elections, some media reports argued that Russia has no democracy, yet in the breath celebrated that Putin's United Russia party lost many seats in the Duma. During the tensions between Ukraine and Russia in 2021/22, the Ukrainians were portrayed as brave, united and capable of destroying the Russian invading forces, while other reports there were warnings that the large hordes of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border could overwhelm the poor Ukrainians within a few days or hours.

### AN ORIENTAL BARBARIAN

The East–West schism has been an enduring feature of Western civilisation since the democratic people of ancient Greece competed with the barbaric Scythians and despotic Persians, followed by the civilised Roman Empire attacked by the uncivilised Huns. Charlemagne and Byzantium engaged in East–West rivalry in the Middle Ages over being the rightful heir to the Roman Empire, a claim to represent Europe, which produced propaganda about the Orthodox of the East (Mettan, 2017). Russia was detached from Europe in the thirteenth century as Kievan Rus disintegrated and the Mongols invaded and occupied Russian lands for the next 250 years. Relations between the West and Russia have ever since been informed by this period as Russia was assigned the identity and role of the inferior and despotic Asiatic people.

The focus on race was a central aspect of Russophobia for centuries. The Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century established the initial

racial, geographical, economic and cultural Otherness of Russia. Portrayed as an Asiatic successor of the Mongols, Russia embodied both the barbaric inferiority of Eastern hordes and the existential threat that reaffirmed the West's own civilisational superiority. Russophobic stereotypes began forming in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as Russia liberated itself from the Mongol-yoke, defeated the Tatar kingdoms and returned to the European political realm. Western European states assigned Russia the role of a barbarian Asiatic power from the East that threatened European civilisation, which was a sentiment that the Poles could also harness support in their struggle against Muscovy.

In the nineteenth century, it became increasingly common to draw parallels between the sacking of Rome by barbarians to the Russians as the new menacing savages at the gates of Europe. Voltaire even compared the struggle between France and Russia as a rivalry between the Athenians and the Scythians, a comparison the English also at times made between themselves and the Russians. The Germans have also been portrayed during the First World War with images of the barbaric Huns who had attacked the civilised Roman Empire (Welch, 2013). Although, the stereotype of a barbarian from the East has since been assigned primarily to Russia.

The Eastern versus Western identity determines whether conquest is characterised as barbarism or glory. Russian history is complex as the civilisation emerged in Kievan Rus, influenced by its engagement with the Vikings in the north and the Byzantine Empire in the south, before being invaded by the Mongols from the east. Situated between the in-group and the out-group, there is a greater necessity to exaggerate the differences to conceptually extradite Russia from Europe. Russia must be characterised by the bloody legacy of the Mongols and not the glorious Norman epoch of the Vikings. Russia's history of expansionism tends to be explained in nefarious terms as an instinctive impulse for empire, while in contrast the US expansion from a few colonies on the east coast of the American continent to global domination is framed in the language of freedom. In terms of religion, Russia was not defined by its shared Christian roots, instead, the Orthodox Church was depicted as a fundamentally different Eastern Christianity. During the Cold War, Russia was atheist to Western Christianity, and after the Cold War, Russian efforts to elevate the role of the Church in society was incompatible with Western secularism.

The literature on Orientalism is very applicable to understanding russo-phobia as Russia has historically been depicted as an Asian power in Europe. Orientalism is the study of how the Orient is the Other of the West (Said, 1978). The Orientalists have three defining characteristics that are consistent with propaganda techniques: exaggerating the difference between the East and West, assuming a hierarchy of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority, and the persistent use of clichés and stereotypes above facts in analyses (Said, 1978). The West is rational, humane and developed, while the Orient is irrational, aberrant and underdeveloped. The Orient is belittled due to its inferiority, yet the barbarism also makes it something to fear. The Orient can thus either be controlled by the West or imperil the security of the West.

The Oriental stereotypes often rely on simplistic ethnic typology and the assumption of fundamental divergence from Western morality and norms. The superior-inferior dichotomy is expressed in generalisation and the Orient never fundamentally changes as this would itself alter the subject-object relationship between the West and East. Last, there is a tendency among the Orientalists to assume an eternality as the Orient never changes, which results in absurd assumptions of historical continuity. In the case of Russia, the West casually draws anachronistic comparisons between contemporary Russia and Tsarist Russia or Stalinist Russia to fit the narrative of continuity.

### UNITY IN OPPOSITION TO THE BARBARIAN AT THE GATES OF EUROPE

The barbarian at the gates of Europe has been a deliberate instrument of propaganda to construe European solidarity against Russia as a non-European entity. In 1797, Polish general Micheal Sokolnicki presented to the French foreign ministry a fake testament of Peter the Great, which was aimed to convince the French that the fate of Poland and Europe were inseparable (McNally, 1958: 173). The forged testament has become a central component of anti-Russian propaganda as it builds on the stereotype of an Asiatic and barbaric Russia seeking to entangle Europe in enduring chaos and division to conquer the continent. This implies that Europe must unify as an in-group to ward off the Eastern hordes. The fake testament outlined the subsequent plan by Russia:

Hold the state in a system of continual warfare, in order to maintain strict discipline among the soldiers and in order to keep the nation on the move and ready to march at the first sign... All of these divisions will then provide total latitude for the soldiers of the front lines, so that they may with vigor and all possible certitude conquer and subjugate to the rest of Europe. (quoted in McNally, 1958: 174)

When Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, the testament became a central feature of the accompanying anti-Russian propaganda. In 1812, Charles Louis Lesur wrote *The Progress of Russian Power*, which included the fake Testament of Peter the Great. The testament emerged again in the propaganda efforts against Russia during the French-British invasion of Crimea in 1853–1856. Thereafter, the testament was yet again published by Adolf Hitler during the Second World War. During the Cold War, President Harry Truman used the forged testament to explain Soviet foreign policy and to inform how the West should respond (Clifford, 1980).

After the Cold War, the narrative of Russia's aim to sow divisions within the West was at the centre of the initiative of constructing a new Europe without Russia and continuing the containment policy. Even as the international distribution of power has changed fundamentally against Russia, the enduring inference is that a Russian conquest of Europe would ensue in the absence of European and trans-Atlantic unity. Thus, "Rus-sophobia may be defined as an intermittent state of mind attributing to Russia designs and capabilities which, if unchecked, could result in her strategic, economic, and eventually ideological domination of the greater part of the civilized world" (Wheeler, 1984: 138).

### CIVILISING RUSSIA: INTERNALISING THE SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONSHIP

Peter the Great became a central figure in Russian history in the effort of Europeanising Russia. Peter the Great modernised his country and defeated Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700–1721), which enabled Russia to establish itself as a European maritime power in the Baltic Sea. Seeking to emulate the Europeans, Peter the Great equated the Enlightenment with Europeanisation as he launched a Cultural Revolution to eviscerate Russia's Muscovite past by changing the alphabet, dress codes, shaving beards and even adopting French as the favoured language of the aristocracy. The Cultural Revolution was premised on the



idea that Europe represented progress and reason, which was contrasted with Russia as barbaric, backwards and ignorant (Zhivov, 2009: 49). The port city of St. Petersburg was constructed with access to the Baltic Sea, which became the “window to Europe” and the capital of Russia.

The response from the Europeans was consistent with the desired subject-object relationship between a civilisational teacher and a student. The Europeans applauded the efforts by Peter the Great to Europeanise Russia as the path to civilisation, although they were presented with the threat of the half-civilised powerful Russians with a maritime presence on the Baltic Sea that could encroach on Europe. Russia seemingly accepted the role as a civilisational apprentice in a subject-object relationship, although Russia had also established itself as a European great power that could restore its political subjectivity and thus sovereign equality. The ability to adopt European civilisational values was often doubted and Russia continued to be feared as an inferior and barbaric Asiatic power. With one foot in Europe and the other in Asia, Russia could take on two different roles—either a threat to Europe or a bulwark towards the East by countering Turkey or function as a bridge to China. Either way, Russia remained the “Other”. The objective was thus to ensure the Europeans influence the Russians and not vice versa.

The paradox is that by internalising the role as a civilisational object, Russia legitimises its own exclusion from the civilised world. By accepting the premise that the West could define and grant Russia’s entrance into civilisation, Peter the Great cemented the superior-inferior in which Russia is a backward country that must submit to and learn from its superior Europeans. The effort to emulate a foreign culture and language prevented Russia’s own cultural development and thus pushed the country “deeper and deeper into ignorance” (Shishkov, 1824: 10–11). Dostoyevsky (1986: 260) similarly cautioned that Russia undermined its own ability to make a civilisational contribution to Europe by merely emulating foreign cultures.

By internalising the subject-object relationship between a teacher and a student or between a master and a slave, the path to civilisation entails subordination. The consequence was that liberalism became unpatriotic and tantamount to treason as it was expressed as disdain for one’s own country. This suspicion towards liberals was expressed in Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Karamazov Brothers*, as the brother Smerdyakov argued Napoleon should have defeated Russia as “a clever nation would have conquered a very stupid one and annexed it” (Dostoyevsky, 2016: 246).

Similarly, several Russian liberals telegrammed their congratulations to the Japanese Emperor following Russia's humiliating defeat to Japan in 1905 (Chebankova, 2016: 34). Liberals in the Duma also exploited the weakness of Russia during the First World War to undermine the authority of Tsar Nicholas II, although the government instead fell to the communist uprising (Nikonov, 2017). Such events produced a conservative backlash against liberalism and Europeanisation of Russia.

### *The French and British in the Nineteenth Century*

The French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century became a central point in transitioning Russia's Otherness from ethnicity to ideology. Edmund Burke (1844: 402) linked ethnicity with ideology: "Russia seems to me still to retain, though under European forms and names, too much of the Asiatic spirit in its government and manners".

France, locked in a rivalry with Britain for the role as the dominant European power, developed the Continental System as a blockade to destroy the British economy. Russia eventually withdrew from the Continental System in 1810 due to its important trade ties with the English and Napoleon subsequently invaded Russia in 1812 to force Russia back into the arrangement. Since 1810, France vigorously promoted anti-Russian propaganda depicting Russia as a barbaric power ready to conquer Europe. Napoleon issued an order to publish articles that would demonstrate that "Europe is inevitably in the process of becoming booty for Russia" (Rimbaud, 1914: 570).

Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia altered the role of Russia in Europe. On one hand, Russia cemented its position as a European great power and representative of the Concert of Europe—the collective security system that was established after the Napoleonic Wars. On the other hand, the defeat of France had ended the long-lasting struggle between France and Britain for dominance in Europe, which subsequently enabled French-British cooperation against the Russian "Other".

After Napoleon's defeat, the Cossacks became the symbol of Russia and the Russians were portrayed as the successors of the nomadic Mongols that controlled the land, in contrast with the civilised Britain that reigned over the seas. The French anti-Russian propaganda thus continued to caution that Europe had to learn how to cooperate to

prevent the continent from falling under Russian control (Neumann, 1998: 39). The sentiment towards Russia was summarised in a book by L'abbe Dominique-Georges-Frederic de Pradt in 1823, which proclaimed Europeans had to unify against Russia to save civilisation:

Russia is built up despotically and asiatically... Europe must draw closer together and as she shuts herself up, Europe should cooperate in outlawing all participation in her affairs by any power which does not have a direct interest in them and which has the force to weigh down the balance to suit her own interests... The most pressing European interest is that of preventing Germany from becoming the grand road of Russian armies, and the road is going to be opened. (McNally, 1958: 182–183)

## RUSSIA AS THE EURASIAN SUCCESSOR OF THE MONGOLS

Following Russia's victory over Napoleon, the anti-Russian baton was passed over to Britain. Gleason (1950: 1) refers to the overwhelming russophobia in Britain as a great paradox since military cooperation with Russia enabled Britain to emerge victorious in the Napoleonic Wars and the two world wars.

Since Peter the Great returned Russia to the status of a European maritime power, British and then later US policies were aimed towards limiting Russia's access to the sea (Spykman, 1942). Russia's size and geography made it a possible hegemony in both Europe and the larger Eurasian continent, thus disrupting the balance of power among continental powers that enabled Britain (and later the US) to dominate from the maritime periphery as an offshore balancer (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016).

British-Russian relations has mainly been burdened with the binary of a maritime power versus a land power, which is expressed as a civilised state versus a barbaric power that had become the successor of the Mongols across Eurasia. British fears, suspicions, and animosity towards Russia has their origin in the Russian plan to conquer British India through Eurasian land corridors, thus cancelling the utility of British sea power.

Paul I became the Tsar in 1796 and fundamentally changed Russian policy. Tsar Paul I and Napoleon conspired against the British, resulting in Russia sending a Cossak army across Central Asia to reach British India and thus deprive Britain of the advantage of controlling the sea (Schimmelpennick van der Oye, 2015). However, after the assassination of Paul

I in 1801, the successor, Alexander I, reversed the policy and aligned Russia with the European monarchies against revolutionary France. Yet, the perception of the nomadic and Asiatic Russians as the successor of the Scythians, Huns and Mongols challenging the maritime-based empire of Britain remained and routinely reemerged as Russia used its land power to challenge Britain in Persia, India and China (Wheeler, 1984: 138).

Russia's efforts in 1820 to promote trade in the trans-Caspian region to escape "monopoly of the English" made Russia land-based empire the principal challenger to Britain's sea-based empire (Gleason, 1950: 40). The weakening of the Ottoman Empire enabled Russia to strengthen its position in the Black Sea, and the Russian victory in the Russo-Persian war of 1826–1828 resulted in Russia displacing British influence in the region. The looming threat was that Russia would similarly connect to the southern maritime periphery of Eurasia by expanding towards the Ottoman Empire and India.

Russian ambitions to retake Constantinople (Istanbul) from the Ottoman Empire was envisioned by Russia as a path to restore its Europeaness by reclaiming the major Christian city and cementing Russia as a maritime power in the Mediterranean. Dostoyevsky (1997: 900) envisioned that this objective "contains as well our final collision with Europe and our final uniting with her". In Britain, the Russians were seen to reaffirm their expansionist agenda bringing the barbarians closer towards civilised nations and British commercial interests. With the possible future challenge to British India, the power politics was expressed in frantic Russophobia that could obscure a rational foreign policy.

John Stuart Mill cautioned in 1836 against the irrationality of British military budgets that were out of control as "Ministers are smitten with the epidemic disease of Russo-phobia" (Mill, 1836: 276). In 1838, the *Chronicle* called for constraining irrational fear and hostility: "Let Russia be watched, and when detected in hostility towards us, let us retaliate, but do not let a great nation... make itself ridiculous by an insane Russo-Phobia" (quoted in Gleason, 1950: 212).

British Russophobia reached its peak in 1853 and became an important contributing factor to the Crimean War (1853–1856). The propaganda from the British Parliament was consistently framed in polemics of civilisation versus barbarity, which evoked the age-old comparisons to the West civilisation versus Asiatic barbarians: "The forces of barbarism were led by the Tsar and his Scythian hordes: the forces of civilization by Palmerston and the troops of Turkey, England, and France", which depicted the "Tsar

as the incarnation of evil at the head of the hosts of darkness was every day more vividly portrayed” (Martin, 1924: 280). European diplomats expressed that the intention of the Crimean War was to push Russia back into Asia and exclude it from European affairs (Kipp & Lincoln, 1979: 4).

The arguments for confronting Russia were to great extent informed by the stereotype of the “Other” as inferior and weak, yet simultaneously an overwhelming threat to civilisation: “Russia, though terrible, seemed easy to defeat... In a contest between good and evil who could doubt that victory would be speedy?” (Martin, 1924: 281). The Manichean frame assigned clear identities depicting a villain, a victim and a saviour:

Russia, as becomes a villain, is diabolic, clever, yet somehow easy to defeat by courage and a fleet; Turkey, the distressed maiden, bravely bids the ravisher defiance; the suggestion that England shall complete the romance in the role of the gallant Knight-errant is overwhelming. The voices of honour and self-interest are indistinguishable. (Martin, 1924: 46)

While Turkey had only a few years earlier been portrayed as an Asiatic oppressor of Greek Orthodox Christians, the Turks were suddenly recast as a victim of the Russians to fit the new narrative.

### *The Communist Threat: Ideologising Barbarism and Ethnic Inferiority*

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 represented a challenge as Russia had clearly abandoned the role as an aspirant of Western civilisation, and instead aimed to push its own ideology on the world. The Bolshevik Revolution contributed to transforming the concept of barbarism from ethnic inferiority to the language of communist ideology. Barbarism was portrayed as an intrinsic feature of Bolshevism as Churchill told the House of Commons: “Bolshevism is not a policy; it is a disease. It is not a creed; it is a pestilence”. Animals were a favourite imagery by Churchill to de-humanise the Bolsheviks who he referred to as “an animal form of Barbarism... troops of ferocious baboons amid the ruins of cities and the corpses of their victims” (Carlton, 2001: 334–335).

The Asian ethnic component of Russians and involvement of Jews in the Bolshevik Revolution were initially key indicators of the “Otherness” to Europe. Churchill denounced the Bolsheviks: “All form and emphasis is lost in a vast process of Asiatic liquefaction”. Churchill contrasted the

respectable “national Jews” with the sinister “international Jews” and “terrorist Jews” that were involved in the Bolshevik Revolution as a part of “a worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization” (Rubinstein, 2004: 169). John Maynard Keynes argued Bolshevik Revolution had naturally established itself in Russia due to its “cruelty and stupidity” and due to the Jewish-Russian background of the revolutionaries: “it is the fruit of some beastliness in the Russian nature - or in the Russian and Jewish natures when, as now, they are allied together” (Keynes, 1925: 270).

Fascism originates from the radicalisation of “Us” versus “Them” (Stanley, 2018). Presenting the in-group/out-group relationship as friends versus enemies lays the foundation for mass violence and war. Carl Schmitt (2010) argued that politics is shaped by a friend-enemy binary to the extent that a state defines itself by its enemies. The concept of the *enemy within* aims to strengthen political unity by identifying those who do not display in-group loyalty by dissenting from beliefs and behaviour of the social order (Schmitt, 2010). Carl Schmitt became a prominent member of the Nazi Party in Germany, which demonstrates that excessive self-identification by one’s enemies is an indication of fascism.

Extreme propaganda of “Us” versus “Them” has been likened to fascism in some regards in terms of using virtuous and superior ideals to advance repugnant ends that contradict those ideals. Fascism promotes natural hierarchies of worth and rejects equality as unnatural, in which the superior and deserving “Us” in juxtaposed to the inferior, immoral and undeserving “Other” (Stanley, 2018). The extreme distinction and dichotomy between the morally good friend and the evil enemy is largely an artificial construct that can only be developed with propaganda and emotional rhetoric.

Nazi Germany’s radical racial policies were merged with the contempt for communism as a Jewish-Russian conspiracy. The Slavs were depicted as sub-humans or *Untermenschen*. To clear away inferior races and give way to civilisation, Hitler argued: “In the East a similar process will repeat itself for a second time as in the conquest of America” (Beorn, 2018: 61). Ahead of the invasion of the Soviet Union, Heinrich Himmler gave a speech to Waffen SS:

When you, my men, fight over there in the East, you are carrying on the same struggle, against the same subhumanity, the same inferior races, that at one time appeared under the name of Huns, another time... under

the name of Magyars, another time under the name of Tartars, and still another time under the name of Genghis Khan and the Mongols. Today they appear as Russians under the political banner of Bolshevism. (Stein, 1984: 127)

Hitler suggested that Russians as an inferior people could only prosper in a subject-object relationship. He proclaimed that Russia had only been successful as a German nation-building project and civilising mission as “the organization of a Russian state formation was not the result of the political abilities of the Slavs in Russia, but only an excellent example of the state-forming efficacy of the German element in an inferior race” (Hitler, 2011: 654).

While Russia was an indispensable ally of Western powers and the principal contributor to defeating the Nazis, the victory over fascism created a similar problem as the defeat of Napoleon. The barbarians could not be accommodated into the civilised body of politics in Europe. At the onset of the war in 1941, Harry Truman had argued: “If we see that Germany is winning the war we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany and in that way let them kill as many as possible” (Gaddis, 2005: 4). Yet again, the Russians were seen as an instrument against other barbaric forces as opposed to being accepted in the in-group as part of “Us”. Crane, an advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt, advocated in favour of supporting Nazi Germany as “the real bulwark of Christian culture” in opposition to the Jews and Bolsheviks (Kaplan, 1995).

After the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, Russian power was dominant in Europe and the Red Army was frequently compared to the Golden Horde. In 1946, Konrad Adenauer wrote that “Asia stands on the Elbe” (Hewitson & D’Auria, 2012: 43). US General Patton, who became a national hero in the Second World War, was explicit about the alien Asiatic character of the Russians:

The difficulty in understanding the Russian is that we do not take cognizance of the fact that he is not a European but an Asiatic and therefore thinks deviously. We can no more understand a Russian than a Chinaman or a Japanese and, from what I have seen of them, I have no particular desire to understand them except to ascertain how much lead or iron it takes to kill them. (Province, 1983: 99)

Once Nazi Germany marched into the Soviet Union, Hollywood began to shape public opinion by churning out pro-Russian movies such as *The*

*North Star*, *Mission to Moscow* and *Song of Russia*. However, when the war was over and the Cold War commenced, Hollywood immediately began producing anti-Russian movies like *The Iron Curtain*, *The Red Menace*, *Whip Hand* and *I Was a Communist* (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018: 117).

### *The Cold War: Containment or Confrontation*

Britain had relied on propaganda to get the US involved in both world wars and continued to push for the US to contain the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Russophobia was an important instrument to obtain US Congressional support for economic aid. Correlation between US economic aid to Europe and fear of Russia was evident as aid increased when the fear increased, and it decreased when tensions abated. John Balfour, a British Minister posted in Washington remarked in 1947: "The high pitch of Russophobia should go a long way towards keeping the unintelligent and emotional in line" (Boyle, 1982: 388). Documents from the British Foreign Ministry also reveal that the US containment policy of the Soviet Union was greatly influenced by Britain (Boyle, 1982: 389).

As the Cold War commenced, the West/East dichotomy of civilised versus barbarian and European versus Asiatic was incrementally re-coded and replaced as competing ideologies as capitalist versus communist, democratic versus authoritarian, Christian versus atheist, free versus unfree, and market economy versus planned economy. In terms of security, the West/East dichotomy was expressed as defensive versus offensive, status quo versus revisionist and expansionist. Facts and events were subsequently filtered through this ideological lens. American journalists reported on the Soviet Union were preoccupied with affirming US superiority versus Soviet inferiority, with a language organised along with the binary language of Soviet stagnation versus American progress, Soviet despotism versus American freedom, and Soviet lies versus American truth (Fainberg, 2021: 264).

The bipolar distribution of power and the competing security interests it entailed was conceptualised almost solely as a social struggle between incompatible ideologies. The Soviet "Other" reinvigorated the West's political identity as the vanguard of civilisation and freedom, which legitimised a US-centric global anti-communist policy to replace the collapse of European colonial empires.

In George Kennan's Long Telegram in 1946 calling for containment of the Soviet Union, the communist authorities in Moscow were



to some extent portrayed as an extension of the Asiatic character: “In atmosphere of oriental secretiveness and conspiracy which pervades this Government, possibilities for distorting or poisoning sources and currents of information are infinite”. Marxism was not the independent variable that informed Moscow’s actions, rather “it is fig leaf of their moral and intellectual respectability” (Kennan, 1946). Unlike the inherent “Anglo-Saxon traditions of compromise”, Kennan (1947) believed that “From the Russian-Asiatic world out of which they had emerged they carried with them a scepticism as to the possibilities of permanent and peaceful coexistence of rival forces”.

The Bolshevik overthrow of Tsarist Russia represented the end of Peter the Great’s effort to Europeanise and civilise Russia. According to Kennan, the Asiatic hordes had retaken control over Russia with Stalin as “a native of the Asiatic country of Georgia, holding court in the barbaric splendour of the Moscow Kremlin” had “stripped Russia of its brittle veneer of European culture” (Engerman, 2004: 263). Subsequently, Kennan (1967: 560) argued that “Russian diplomacy, like that of the Orient in general, is concentrated on impressing an adversary with the terrifying strength of Russian power”.

US Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1950), argued in March 1950 that the crisis between the US and the Soviet Union involved “the most basic conceptions of good and evil”. A document by the British Foreign Office in 1951 largely defined the Cold War as a propaganda war vis-à-vis the Russians: “The ‘cold war’ is a struggle for men’s minds. It is a struggle to determine whether the mass of mankind shall look for hope towards the Soviet Union or towards the Western democracies” (Taylor, 2019: 277). A key US National Security Council Report in 1950 defined the “nature of conflict” with simple binary words of freedom versus slavery, and diversity versus totalitarianism (NSC68). During the early 1950s, there was subsequently a growing interest in psychological warfare and it became a belief that nefarious techniques of mind control could be used virtuously to promote Western democratic values (Del Pero, 2001: 1304).

While the US had allied with the Soviet Union against Germany during the Second World War, the US switched after the war the Soviets became an enemy and the Germans had to be rehabilitated as an ally. Propaganda was thus focused on mythmaking to revise stereotypes that contrasted a new “Us” and “Them” representing goodness versus wickedness. The US partnership with Germany required the embrace of the

Himmerod Memorandum, which called for ending the “defamation” of the Wehrmacht and to transform public opinion with propaganda. The whitewashing of Wehrmacht’s war crimes and casting it as an opponent of anti-Bolshevist force was deemed necessary to adapt to the new Cold War realities in which the US allied itself with the Bundeswehr as the successor of Wehrmacht. Subsequently, several high-ranking Nazis ended up in key positions on the side of freedom against communism. Case in point, Adolf Heusinger, the Operations Chief within General Staff of the High Command of the Nazi German Army, became the first Inspector General of the Bundeswehr in 1957 and then appointed as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee in 1961.

The intensity of the bipolar military and ideological conflict of the Cold War created a power structure that was heavily reliant on an “Other”. The US economy had become excessively reliant on an immense armament industry and US influence in the world was dependent on an extensive alliance system. In President Eisenhower’s farewell speech in 1961, he cautioned that the confrontation against the Soviet Union had given the rise to a powerful US “military-industrial complex” and “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence”. Towards the end of the Cold War, George Kennan cautioned against the US dependence on the Soviet adversary:

Were the Soviet Union to sink tomorrow under the waters of the ocean, the American military-industrial complex would have to go on, substantially unchanged until some other adversary could be invented. Anything else would be an unacceptable shock to the American economy. (Cousins, 1987: iv)

The Cold War rivalry against the Soviet Union strengthened the liberal identity of the US and laid the foundation for a liberal identity for the collective West. Paradoxically, it was a very illiberal part of US history with execution of spies, purges of the political Left, suppression of political activists and imperial wars fought in the name of freedom (Kuzmarov & Marciano, 2018: 60).

*The Post-Cold War Era: Reconstructing the Teacher-Student Relationship*

The US has heavily propagandised how the Cold War ended, by selling it as a victory rather than having ended as a compromise. Jack Matlock, the last US ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987–1991 recalls how the Cold War ended through compromise and mutual recognition of security interests. In December 1989, Gorbachev and Bush declared the end of the Cold War as a negotiated compromise at the Malta Summit. President Bush had instructed his administration not to treat the fall of the Berlin Wall as the victory of one side over the other, as he was resolute that the negotiated end of the Cold War implied “there were no losers, only winners” (Cohen, 2009: 160).

However, when the Soviet Union collapsed two years later, in December 1991, the foundations for a workable post-Cold War peace began to collapse. The dismantlement of the Soviet Union and communism improved the conditions for pan-European security, although it also enabled the US to propagandise the end of the Cold War as a victory rather than a negotiated settlement. Former ambassador Jack Matlock recalls how “mythmaking began almost as soon as the Soviet Union fell”, which convinced Americans that the end of the Cold War was the result of “a quasi-military victory rather than a negotiated outcome that benefitted both sides” (Matlock, 2010: x, 3). The historical revisionism had detrimental consequences as it strengthened a political culture in the US that believes peace can only be achieved through military might and victory as opposed to diplomacy and compromise (Matlock, 2010).

One month after the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Bush (1992) reversed his position during the State of the Union Address: “the Cold War didn’t ‘end – it was won... By the grace of God, America won the Cold War”. Historical revisionism was important to the post-Cold War narrative of what NATO expansionism represented. If the Cold War ended as a negotiated outcome in 1989 then NATO expansionism was revisionist and a betrayal of the peace, however, if the Cold War ended in 1991 with a Western victory then Russia’s opposition to NATO expansionism is a revisionist effort to overturn the outcome of the Cold War. Furthermore, as East–West conflicts are revived due to the absence of a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement, the US solution to a new Cold War with Russia rests on flawed lessons from the past. Rather than seeking to establish a workable peace that recognises the security

concerns of both sides, the US has embraced an ideological view in which durable peace is created when good defeats evils. In 2007, Hillary Clinton introduced legislation in Congress for a Cold War Medal Act to honour Cold War veterans for “victory” and “defeat[ing] the threat from the Iron Curtain” (Tsygankov, 2009: 17).

The compromises between the US and the Soviet Union were similarly erased from the historical narrative. Most importantly, the West’s reassurances that NATO would not expand “one inch eastward” are commonly presented as Russian mythmaking and misinformation. However, declassified documents reveal that repeated assurances that NATO would not expand were given by Western leaders such as James Baker, George Bush, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Helmut Kohl, Robert Gates, Francois Mitterrand, Margaret Thatcher, Douglas Hurd, John Major and Manfred Woerner (National Security Archive, 2017). In February 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker sought Moscow’s support for German reunification by asking Gorbachev:

Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no U.S. forces or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO’s jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position? (Sarotte, 2021: 55)

In a meeting with Shevardnadze, Baker similarly assured “there would, of course, have to be iron-clad guarantees that NATO’s jurisdiction or forces would not move eastward” (Brown, 2020: 325). West German officials seeking Moscow’s support for reunification similarly sought to reassure Moscow that NATO would not expand. The West German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, made this explicit in several speeches: “Whatever happens in the Warsaw Pact, an extension of NATO’s territory to the east, that is, nearer to the borders of the Soviet Union, will not happen” (Sarotte, 2021: 52). NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner, similarly assured Moscow on 17 May 1990 that “The very fact that we are ready not to deploy NATO troops beyond the territory of the Federal Republic gives the Soviet Union firm security guarantees” (NATO, 1990). These documented promises continue to be dismissed by the West as “myths and misperceptions” (Chatham House, 2021).

## A WEAK BARBARIAN AT THE GATES OF EUROPE

Post-Soviet Russia endeavoured to continue its “return to Europe” much like Peter the Great three centuries earlier. Yeltsin’s neo-Petrine policies entailed committing Russia to liberal democracy and free market capitalism, whilst reducing ties to authoritarian countries in the East that might slow down Russia’s reunification with Europe. Russia thus embraced the role of the civilisational student of the West by accepting unilateral concessions to adapt along with Western precepts. However, unlike the era of Peter the Great, Russia was weak and did not have the power to negotiate a role for itself in Europe.

The West was faced with the same dilemma as under Peter the Great. Moscow demonstrated its genuine intention to “Europeanise” Russia, although accepting Russia into the in-group of European nations would disrupt the power balance on the continent and undermine the Euro-Atlantic structures and solidarity inherited from the Cold War. The solution was therefore to create a permanent subject-object relationship between the West as a civilisational teacher and Russia as the student. Yeltsin’s policies had achieved the opposite of what had been intended. By accepting and internalising the role as a civilisational object that would accept unilateral concessions, the West did not have to accommodate Russia and Moscow became responsible for its own exclusion from the new Europe.

By excluding Russia from the new Europe organised by expanding NATO and the EU, the West preserved the stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them” that continues to inform propaganda. The subject-object relationship implies sovereign inequality as the civilised or liberal US is endowed with external governance over the barbarian or authoritarian “Other”. As a political object, Russia’s role was to implement the decisions of the West, and “Russia remains construed as the object to be acted upon, the diseased that needs to be cured” (Browning, 2003: 48). Even the liberal and pro-Western foreign minister of Yeltsin, Andrey Kozyrev, complained in 1994 about the untenable attempt to make Russia subservient to European institutions that denied it representation: “Some people in the West have succumbed to the fantasy that a partnership can be built with Russia on the principle of ‘if the Russians are good guys now, they should follow us in every way’” (Pouliot, 2010: 178).

Putin rejected the teacher-student relationship by repudiating Yeltsin’s effort to integrate *into* the West, and advocated instead for integrating

*with* the West as equals. Interpreted through the dichotomous stereotypes, Moscow's demand for political subjectivity and to be treated as an equal was met with scepticism and dismissed as Russian nostalgia for great power status and belittling the role of liberal democracy. Any reference to equal representation in Europe and mutual restraint has consistently been vilified as Russia rejecting democracy, pursuing imperial ambitions, and implicitly a return to Peter the Great's forged testament as the Russian demand for a "veto" over NATO is allegedly an attempt to divide the West.

The ideological division of the Cold War was recast as liberal democracy versus authoritarianism, although such outdated binaries add little heuristic value to define the in-group versus the out-group. Artificially redividing the world into liberal democracies versus authoritarian states make little sense as Russia enjoys good relations with Israel, Japan, South Korea, India, Brazil, South Africa and other democracies that are not members of NATO: Furthermore, Laruelle (2020) observes:

One has to point out the irony that the portrayal of Russia as a totalitarian enemy of the West is being driven in part by the governments of Poland and the Baltic states, which are far more ethno-nationalist than Putin's regime. Moreover, the U.S. has been supporting far more authoritarian regimes than Russia — Saudi Arabia or Sisi's Egypt, for instance— without casting them in essentialist terms as foes of the West.

### THE RELUCTANT APPRENTICE IN THE NEW CIVILISING MISSION

Russia was presented with the dilemma of accepting its role as an apprentice of Western civilisation by accepting NATO expansion as the mere enlargement of democracy and peace, or it could object and resist the development of a Europe without Russia, but then be castigated as a counter-civilisational force (Williams & Neumann, 2000: 361). Moscow's resistance to the civilisational teacher-student format was equated with the repudiation of liberal democratic values, and Russia therefore became responsible for its own exclusion from Europe.

By excluding Russia from the new Europe, the EU itself fundamentally changed. It had been common to argue that the EU's Other had been its own past, which is why the former adversaries of Germany and France

sought security *with* each other and not *against* each other. However, by excluding Russia it became the “Other” of the EU and security was not pursued *with* Russia, rather security was developed *against* Russia in terms of preventing the out-group from harming the in-group.

The West did not consider the preservation of dividing lines, promotion of sovereign inequality and the expansion of a Cold War military alliance as belligerent. On the contrary, by filtering these policies through the subject-object stereotypes, these policies reaffirmed the benign character of the West and the virtue of socialising Russia towards liberal democratic norms (Lehti, 1999: 28). Both NATO and the EU embraced their new purpose as “socialising agents” (Gheciu, 2005), while the centrality of liberal democracy meant that a subject-object format was conceptualised as a teacher-student relationship (Haukkala, 2005; Neumann, 1999).

The US formulated a policy in the early 1990s on how to reform and domestically transform Russia in the image of the US (Cohen, 2001). The reforms that had been initiated by Gorbachev and further developed by Yeltsin was to be outsourced to Washington. Diplomacy between the West and Russia was primarily focused on reforming Russia as an object of security rather than engage Moscow in pan-European affairs, which fuelled a sense in Russia of having fallen under a sort of colonial tutelage. The relationship was summarised aptly by Bill Clinton in 1996: “We keep telling ol’ Boris, ‘O.K., now, here’s what you’ve got to do next—here’s some more shit for your face’” (Talbot, 2007: 201). Stephen Cohen (2001: 7) encapsulated the civilising mission that took place instead of a partnership between sovereign equals:

Legions of American political missionaries and evangelists, usually called ‘advisers,’ spread across Russia in the early and mid-1990s. Funded by the U.S. government, ideological organizations, foundations, and educational institutions, they encamped wherever the ‘Russia we want’ might be proselytized, from political movements, trade unions, media, and schools to Moscow offices of the Russian government itself. Among other missionary deeds, U.S. citizens gave money to favored Russian politicians, instructed ministers, drafted legislation and presidential decrees, underwrote textbooks, and served at Yeltsin’s reelection headquarters in 1996.

The West returned to the historical idea of having a “civilising mission” or “white Man’s burden” to tame the barbaric East, which was applied to Russia (Browning, 2003; Lehti, 1999: 28; Linklater, 2011; Zielonka, 2013). The behaviour towards Russia fit within the definition of imperialism, which is “the sustained effort to assimilate a country or region to the political, economic or cultural system of another power” (Nicolaidis et al., 2014: 2). Although, the new civilising mission was reconceptualised in liberal democratic language. For example, the EU Commission President, Romano Prodi (2000), argued: “Europe needs to project its model of society into the wider world. We are not simply here to defend our own interests: we have a unique historic experience to offer”.

Conceptualising the EU as a “normative power” was problematic as it divided the world hierarchically between the superior in-group versus the inferior out-group, while the identity and success of the EU become dependent on the out-groups adopting its norms and values (Diez, 2005: 614). While the rhetoric of normative power is intended to imply its benevolent nature, it justifies an exclusive security architecture based on sovereign inequality. The notion of the West or Europe as a “credible force for good” implies a universalism that is often colonial in origin (Nicolaidis et al., 2014: 8).

The West and Russia have been conceptualised as inherent opposites and thus incomparable. The EU proclaims to be a postmodern power in contrast with Russia as a modern power. The postmodern-modern binary infers a hierarchical construct as the former has evolved past the latter, which is a successor format of the modern-backwards binary. Any efforts to include Russia as an equal would be tantamount to the EU regressing as opposed to Russia learning from the EU. The postmodern-modern dichotomisation has several sub-binaries such as “post-sovereignty compared to sovereignty; normative foreign policy compared to realpolitik; free trade compared to autarky; soft power compared to hard power; and decentralisation compared to centralisation” (Klinke, 2012: 934). Russia is depicted as a nineteenth-century power, which stands in contrast to the EU as a new animal in politics that seeks to elevate international politics above the rivalry of sovereign states. A former official from the European Commission explained the tensions with Russia as being the result of “very different values systems”: “For Russia it’s a balance of power, spheres of influence type of approach, you know: win/lose — and for us it’s a question of independence and freedom and the right to choose and democracy” (Klinke, 2012: 937).



The civilising mission of the EU resulted in several paradoxes in Europe. For example, the EU's "Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia" in 1999 argued for multilateralism, yet the document did not present a joint framework and instead outlined a vast number of tasks that Russia must implement. Institutions were not used to harmonise competing interests and facilitate benign competition. Instead, institutional and diplomatic engagement is used as a tool to reward good behaviour, which is commonly defined as accepting unilateral concessions. Meanwhile, the condition for perpetuating sovereign inequality is to exaggerate or imagine the differences between the West and Russia.

The ideological foundation for the solidarity and identity of the collective West has completed the Othering of Russia from ethnic to ideological inferiority. The focus on an Asiatic ethnicity as the source of inferiority is largely absent after the Cold War, and when it emerges it stands awkwardly out from the mainstream narrative. There is seemingly a complete transition from ethnicity to liberal values as the West clothe all competing security interests in the language of competing values.

Some exceptions do occur as for example the Estonian politician, Tiit Made, argued in 1991 that the Russian people were wild and uncivilised as Russian women had for centuries been raped by the Mongols and Tatars, which is common Russophobic rhetoric in the Baltic States (Neumann, 1998). In more recent times, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper remarked that Russians "are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique" (Sainato, 2017). Later, Clapper also argued it is in Russia's "genes to be opposed, diametrically opposed, to the United States and Western democracies". Similarly, the former US assistant secretary of defence Peter Rodman and *The Washington Post* columnist George Will opines that expansionism is "in the Russian DNA" (Lieven, 2004: 161). Although such assertions about ethnicity are built into the language, they are rarely accompanied by racial theories.

### *Propaganda Enables Mobilisation for War but Obstructs a Workable Peace*

Propaganda, the science of convincing an audience without appealing to reason, carries with it the risk of producing irrational policies. History reveals that propaganda is an indispensable instrument to drum up support for conflicts, but then becomes an obstruction to the peace that

should follow. The positive effect of propaganda is to construct internal solidarity and mobilise resources against an adversary, and undermining an adversary's cohesion and ability to bring together its human and material assets. The principal negative aspect of using irrational impulses to persuade the public is that it can result in irrational policies in terms of flawed strategic focus and the use of resources.

Lippman (1955) cautioned that democracies are feeble in dealing with wars, as the public must be managed. Democracies are initially unable to prepare for an impending crisis, and once the war commenced they become obsessed with a decisive victory rather than a realistic format for peace. When ideals conflict with making the decisions required to win, the idealistic principles were immediately abandoned. To overcome the public's inertia towards conflict "the enemy had to be portrayed as evil incarnate, as absolute and congenital wickedness... As a result of this impassioned nonsense, public opinion became so envenomed that the people would not countenance a workable peace" (Lippman, 1955: 21).

During the First World War, US President Woodrow Wilson worked towards convincing the reluctant population to abandon isolationist sentiments and join the war against Germany. The war was sold as peace by presenting the conflict as the ultimate struggle between good and evil, and thus the idealistic slogan "the war to end all wars". Framing the war as a conflict between good versus evil was very powerful to mobilise public opinion and resources, however, it created a "Manichean trap" undermining peace (Diesen, 2017). Once the conflict was defined as good versus evil, compromise and a balance of power were tantamount to appeasement and betraying the promise of perpetual peace.

The US could not end the war early with a peace agreement as a complete victory over the Germans was the only acceptable outcome. Furthermore, once Germany had been defeated, humiliating conditions were imposed in the Treaty of Versailles. The fierce animosity towards Germany made its way into the Versailles Agreement, which implied that wartime propaganda obstructed the post-war peace (Taylor, 2019: 63). The flawed peace treaty premised enduring peace on perpetuating the weakness of Germany thus laying the foundation for German revisionism of the post-war agreement, which became a major contribution to the Second World War. Churchill even blamed the US entry into the war as having disrupted the balance of power, which unleashed all the conditions for the Second World War. Churchill argued:

If [America] hadn't entered the war the Allies would have made peace with Germany in the Spring of 1917. Had we made pace then there would have been no collapse in Russia followed by Communism, no breakdown in Italy followed by Fascism, and Germany would not have signed the Versailles Treaty, which has enthroned Nazism in Germany. (Langworth, 2017: 74)

The same dynamic was observed during the Russian Civil War as British propaganda had the positive effect of mobilising the British public opinion and resources to intervene in the conflict, although the propaganda obstructed the process towards a workable peace. Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz castigated the distorted coverage of Russia by the *Times* during the Russian Civil War. The anti-communist propaganda of the *Times* reported on what the British wanted to see—Polish victories, fleeing communists and the pending collapse the Soviet authorities. In reality, the opposite was happening (Lippman & Merz, 1920). However, having convinced the British public that the Bolsheviks were on the verge of defeat, there was little appetite for reaching a settlement with the new authorities in Moscow.

Propaganda also contributed to the failure of establishing a workable peace after the Second World War. The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany resulted in a severely skewed balance of power, which made it difficult to establish a stable security order as no comparable European rivals were remaining. This represented a profound disruption to the traditional British and American offshore strategy of entering European wars towards the end to impose a balance of power settlement on the continent, in which no one power could dominate the continent and thus threaten the UK and US (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). Furthermore, the Soviet authorities were seen to act unpredictable and provocative, and it represented a radical alternative to capitalism.

Yet, interpreting all conflicts through the ideological lens of capitalism versus communism reduced the ability for rational reflection regarding the underpinning security concerns that were not linked to the binary ideological rivalry. George Kennan was appointed as Ambassador to the Soviet Union and had hoped that the Soviet proposal for German reunification on the condition of its permanent neutrality would soften the West's posture towards Moscow. Kennan was dismayed by the propaganda on both sides as the Western powers rejected a neutral unified Germany, and instead pushed for the rearmament of Western Germany as a NATO ally, enhancing the nuclear deterrent and as US Secretary

of State John Foster Dulles argued—use “moral pressure and the weight of propaganda” to “liberate” the Soviet peoples from their government (Kennan, 1973: 174). Kennan cabled Washington in 1952 and cautioned that “if one were able to strip away all the overgrowth of propagandistic distortion and maligning of foreign intentions, one would find that there remained a certain hard core of genuine belief in the sinisterness of western intentions” (Kennan, 1973: 341).

A disappointed Kennan expressed his profound dismay that any hopes of a post-war settlement had been abandoned: “The die is now cast. There will be no European settlement. The arms race will go uncontrollably ahead. These people will have their war...What will remain of our world when it is all over is beyond human reckoning” (Kennan, 2014).

The binary ideological prism of the Cold War provided a focused format and broad consensus to confront the Soviet adversary, although the over-simplifying the international system to a conflict between capitalism and communism resulted in misjudging the motivations of both allies and adversaries. Case in point, the brutal US invasion of Vietnam was not primarily a war against a puppet state of the Soviet Union, rather it was an indigenous nationalist response to colonisation. Misconstruing the motives of Ho Chi Minh resulted in the US misunderstanding the willingness to fight and it obfuscated the possibilities of a workable peace. Propaganda often result in self-delusion as the decision to go to war may be the result of rational analysis, however: “you may have to sell it in such a way as to create the misimpression that it is the Soviet Union that you are fighting. That is what the United States has done ever since the Truman Doctrine” (Hoffmann et al., 1981: 14).

During the Cuban missile crisis, a necessary compromise to avoid nuclear war and enhance mutual security was feared to make the US look weak and undermine its security guarantees. Subsequently, President Kennedy had to lie to the US public by claiming a deal had not been reached in which the US would remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return for the Soviet Union removing its missiles from Cuba. Thus, Washington could advance the dangerous narrative of its adversaries faltering under US maximum pressure and achieving peace through victory. In other words, political legitimacy required being tough and uncompromising towards Moscow.

Towards the end of the Cold War, the necessity of russophobia became evident as reduced tensions with the Soviets became a threat to the West. Some argued that Gorbachev’s policies towards the West were insincere.

Although, irrespective of sincerity, the Soviet peace offensive threatened the entire foundation of solidarity with the West as an in-group by altering its relationship with the Soviets as the out-group. Critics argued that the principal policy of the Soviets was to reduce the American presence in Europe and sow divisions to increase Moscow's influence (Gelman, 1987). Gorbachev's "peace offensive" was thus met with profound scepticism as it reduced European dependence on the US and it undermined Western solidarity and thus the balancing of the Soviet Union.

The reactions to Gorbachev's peace offensive was similar to that of the Soviet peace offensive after Stalin's death in 1953—when Moscow made concessions, walked back its rhetoric of world revolution, and called for peaceful conflict resolution with the West. The efforts were largely denounced by the US as "peace propaganda" aimed to sow divisions, prevent rearmament and create the image of the Soviets as a proponent of peace. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson criticised that "the Russians have sought to 'monopolize' the dove of peace" (Brooks, 2000: 6). Thus, the mere call for peace threatened the dichotomous stereotype of the benign US versus the belligerent Soviet Union.

When the Cold War finally came to an end, the obvious question for scholars of propaganda should have been how the fierce propaganda throughout the Cold War would undermine a post-Cold War settlement. During the Cold War, Solzhenitsyn had expressed concerns that the anti-communist propaganda had become interchangeable with anti-Russian propaganda. Solzhenitsyn had advocated that the US should also label Russia as a "captive nation" and a victim of communism rather than a benefactor as it would generate sympathy for the Russians, create a common opposition to communism, and lay the foundation for a harmonious peace once communism collapsed (Lapidus, 1984). However, the US strategy for "captive nations" was a Cold War propaganda strategy to use ethnic nationalism to divide and destabilise the multi-ethnic Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Lapidus, 1984). Thus, the preference for portraying the Soviet Union as a manifestation of Russian imperialism would result in the continuation of containment after the Cold War by fuelling ethnic nationalism and mobilise US sentiment against post-communist Russia.

A workable peace after the Cold War was obstructed by making NATO an insurance policy against future conflicts with Russia. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright confirmed the insurance policy logic in a testimony

to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 1997: “On the off-chance that in fact Russia doesn’t work out the way that we are hoping it will... NATO is there” (Carpenter & Conly, 1998). Former US Secretary of State James Baker (2002) acknowledged that NATO had become “an insurance policy against resurgent and possibly virulent Russian nationalism”. Baker warned against the approach of preparing NATO for a future conflict with Russia as it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When Russia eventually responded to these security challenges, NATO could denounce Russia as aggressive and threatening, thus gradually returning to its official mission of containing Russia.

There was initially an overwhelming consensus among US policy-makers after the Cold War that NATO expansion would poison the relationship with Russia and reignite a conflict (Grayson, 1999). After significant lobbying, the consensus shifted under the ideological argument that NATO had converted itself into a peaceful community of democracies. Beneath the new branding of NATO, there was nonetheless recognition for the implied continued mission of containing Russia (Grayson, 1999; Mandelbaum, 1995). Even hawks, such as Richard Pipes signed a statement by the Coalition Against NATO Expansion (CANE), which recognised that:

By its nature, a military alliance is directed against someone. The geography of NATO expansion makes its target clear: Russia... The proposal to expand NATO tosses it away by telling Russia in unmistakable terms that it remains excluded from the community of Western nations... [Russia] will remember, and ultimately, she will react, either from a position of renewed strength or out of desperation. The last great unfinished business of the 20th century is the reintegration of Russia with the West. With the proposal to expand NATO, we have turned our back on it. (CENA, 1998)

NATO’s messaging to Russia was characterised by a contradictory approach of *reassurance* and *deterrence*. NATO reassured Russia it was not considered a threat and was not the target of NATO, although simultaneously deterring Russia by cautioning that NATO would be turned against Russia if it chose the wrong path. NATO (2010) defined this insurance policy: “because Russia’s future policies toward NATO remain difficult to predict, the Allies must pursue the goal of cooperation while also guarding against the possibility that Russia could decide to move in a more adversarial direction”.

As Russia is presented with the dilemma of being an apprentice or threat to Western civilisation, the West had to respond with strategic ambiguity. Attempting to simultaneously civilise and contain Russia demanded strategic ambiguity in the 1990s as Russia had to internalise the notion of the West as a benign hegemon in order for Russia to accept its role as a political object. Russia could not be defined as a threat and openly contained, yet Russia could not be disconfirmed as a threat as it would undermine the security guarantees to the Central and Eastern European allies.

Russia raising the security concerns of an expanding military alliance and being excluded from Europe reaffirms Russia's backwardness and made NATO expansion even more necessary. NATO had transformed itself into a community of liberal democratic values and NATO's failure to expand was a great danger as it would reaffirm the Soviet propaganda that NATO is an offensive military alliance rather than a defensive alliance: "If Russia's rulers have no revanchist aspirations, they have no reason to resent NATO's inclusion of the new democracies" (Will, 1996).

Kennan, the author of the Long Telegram of 1946 and architect of the containment policy against the Soviet Union, lived well after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was exasperated that the containment policy would continue against post-Soviet Russia. In an interview with Friedman (1998), Kennan lambasted the "ill-informed" Senate debates that demonstrated "so little understanding of Russian history and Soviet history", which subsequently resulted in the decision to expand NATO:

I was particularly bothered by the references to Russia as a country dying to attack Western Europe. Don't people understand? Our differences in the cold war were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime. Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are -- but this is just wrong.

Bloc discipline within an alliance requires the continuous elevation of an external threat to perpetuate the dividing lines between the in-group and the out-group. The endurance of anti-Russian propaganda therefore requires the creation of a Russian threat when it is insufficient or absent. In Italy, the US pursued clandestine stay-behind operations after

the Second World War under the codename *Operation Gladio* lasting until 1990, in which the CIA and NATO conducted false-flag terrorist attacks that could be blamed on red brigades (Ganser, 2005). Such stay-behind operations also existed in other Western European states, and the European Community (1990) acknowledged that Western intelligence agencies in collaboration with NATO “were involved in serious cases of terrorism and crime” against the populations of Western Europe. The US planned similar false-flag operations within its own territory. Case in point, the US Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed *Operation Northwoods* in 1962, in which the US government would commit acts of terrorism against American civilian and military targets to blame them on the Cuban government (Nelson, 2001). Declassified documents also reveal that the US sought to acquire an authentic Soviet aircraft or manufacture a replica to stage “a provocation operation in which Soviet aircraft would appear to attack US or friendly installations to provide an excuse for US intervention” (US National Archives, 1962: 2).

The similar need to uphold solidarity and bloc discipline made empathy towards Russia problematic after the Cold War. Dissenting from the West and US leadership is labelled as a threat to alliance solidarity, which enables Russia to divide the West. The framing of alliance solidarity to shield against the Russian threats is central to obtaining compliance by allied states.

Obtaining acquiescence from Norway regarding missile defence is an important key case study in how Russia is used to limit dissent in the post-Cold War era. Norway has a strategic territory in the high north, which is important to intercept Russian missiles flying over the Arctic. Leaked cables from the US embassy in Norway revealed how Norwegian opposition to missile defence was overcome by appealing to the need for “alliance solidarity”. US Ambassador Benson Kelley Whitney reported that “Norway remains opposed to U.S. plans for missile defenses and was the only NATO ally to publicly express scepticism over these plans”. Although, Whitney wrote that the Norwegian government “will have a hard time defending its position if the issue shifts to one of alliance solidarity” (Wikileaks, 2008). In a cable with the title “Missile Defence Public Diplomacy and Outreach”, the US ambassador clarified how he communicates directly with the public by engaging with media, government and think tank researchers to encourage them “to present a broader picture of the issue, with equal focus on Russian attempts to undermine alliance



solidarity” (Wikileaks, 2007). The ambassador concludes that compliance with US wishes depends on communicating the Russian threat: “We believe focus on Russia’s threats to the alliance will resonate with the Norwegian’s general wariness towards their large neighbor” (Wikileaks, 2007). The use of ideology to uphold bloc discipline within NATO results in there not being any new Willy Brandt on the political map. Case in point, the head of the German navy had to resign after arguing that Russia did not have any plans to invade Ukraine, that Crimea would not be returned, and that Putin probably deserves respect (BBC, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The Othering of Russia has been a fundamental component of Western unity and identity. Russia has had the role of the Other in a dichotomous relationship of Europe versus Asia, civilisation versus barbarity, freedom versus slavery and liberalism versus authoritarianism. The propaganda of exaggerating or constructing the difference between “Us” and “Them” is central to sustaining the West discursively as a homogenous and unified entity.

The dichotomous stereotypes of the in-group and out-group affirm Western superiority and thus legitimises hierarchical structures. The civilising or socialising role of the West implies that even its aggressive policies towards Russia have benign intentions and are a force for good. The assumed inferiority of Russia expresses itself as utter derision for its backwardness and simultaneously as an overwhelming threat to civilisation. While the inferior barbarian is a great threat, it can easily be defeated if there is a willingness of the collective West to confront. Fear of Russia creates unease among the public, and the remedy offered is European or Western solidarity.

The superior-inferior framing inherently makes Russia an object of security, in which Russia can either accept the role as an aspirant of the West striving towards joining Western civilisation, or it can reject this role in which it will be contained and confronted. Loyalty and morality must be expressed as ideological conformity. However, the eternal inferiority implies that Russia will never “graduate” and obtain political subjectivity on par with the in-group.

The foundational stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them” inform Western propaganda in terms of the choice of the communicators for source credibility, the strategic narratives, creation of a new language, and ideology

to contrast Western legitimacy versus Russian illegitimacy. Propaganda can legitimise the construction of a Europe that excludes the largest state on the continent, although propaganda also impedes the ability to find workable solutions to the subsequent conflicts, as compromise is tantamount to appeasement and defeat.

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# Source Credibility: Creating Experts to Herd the Masses

## INTRODUCTION

It has become common in the West to depict state-controlled media of authoritarian states as the principal source of propaganda. This erroneous portrayal demonstrates how propaganda itself has become propagandised. State-controlled media as a communicator is less efficient as it invokes scepticism and caution among the audience due to the awareness of an agenda.

A key component of propaganda is to conceal the communicator as communication is only effective with a credible source. Source credibility is a central feature of propaganda, which recognises that propaganda entails developing positive characteristics of the communicator to ensure the receiver's acceptance of the message. The audience is more likely to accept a message when the source is believed to be a trustworthy impartial expert and/or motivated by altruism. Besides the perception of competence, people are more likely to trust a likeable source.

Propagandists aim to influence or construct what are seemingly credible sources as narratives should be laundered through intermediaries. Concurrently, governments aim to denigrate the sources of the adversary by depicting them as untrustworthy, manipulative and belligerent. Governments commonly label their propaganda as counter-propaganda to control the perceived credibility of sources. Ad hominem attacks on



the adversaries communicator thus become a common feature of propaganda as the merit of arguments have little significance if the source is deemed untrustworthy. For example, the receiver's acceptance of a message and competing narratives will differ if the Western communicator is an independent human rights organisation versus Russian state media.

This chapter first outlines the concept of source credibility and how propagandists aim to manufacture such sources that can launder their narratives. Second, this chapter explores how Western governments manipulate civil society by using NGOs as intermediaries. These non-governmental organisations are funded by governments, commonly staffed with former government officials, and align with government objectives—although operating openly under the guise of independent organisations promoting liberal democratic values. Bellingcat and the Integrity Initiative are case studies that reveal how the US and UK manipulate civil society and the media to herd the masses. Third, the credible sources and expert class is manufactured and the masses are manipulated by controlling or influencing think tanks, the media, popular culture, PR firms, digital giants and dissidents. It is concluded that the West's anti-Russian propaganda is to a large extent focused on source credibility by constructing sources critical of Russia and degrading the sources sympathetic to Russia.

### *Source Credibility*

Communication is not effective without a credible source. The concept of source credibility was developed in Aristotle's *The Rhetoric* in which persuasion depends on ethos, logos and pathos. The ethos or character of the communicator is the most important component as it entails competency and moral authority (McCroskey, 1966). Credible communication requires a source that is deemed to be trustworthy and an expert (Martin, 1971: 67). Social experiments demonstrate that the persuasiveness of messaging changes profoundly by merely introducing a different communicator (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Propaganda can be conceptualised as herding the masses, and a key element is thus the construction of authority figures and experts to herd the public towards the correct opinions. Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that the world is too complex for any individual to comprehend, which is why societies need people and institutions that can collect, analyse and

disseminate information. Thus, the public looks towards an expert class to guide the masses: “In making up its mind its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader [an icon or celebrity]. This is one of the most firmly established principles of mass psychology” (Bernays, 1928: 50).

During the Cold War, propaganda was portrayed as principally an instrument of authoritarian communist states. Convincing the audience that the West does not use propaganda is imperative for the effectiveness of the propaganda. In reality, scholars recognised that Western propaganda was more efficient than communist propaganda because it could be concealed by mobilising private industry and organisations (Hixson, 1998). In contrast, the obvious propaganda initiatives by the Soviets were more obvious and thus less efficient.

The strategy of source credibility was deliberate as made explicit by George Kennan (1948a: 4), who argued for covert operations through private intermediaries: “General direction and financial support would come from the Government; guidance and funds would pass to a private American organization or organizations (perhaps ‘business’ enterprises) composed of private citizens”. Without source credibility, the communication can even be counter-productive. Thus, the entire notion that state-owned media are the main purveyors of propaganda is fundamentally flawed as “historically, intelligence services and propaganda institutions have posed as ordinary citizens to assume a credibility that they lack in their own roles” (Golovchenko et al., 2018: 992).

The US use of advertisement agencies, businesses, private institutions and organisations has enabled the US to sell its propaganda more convincingly. *The New York Times* boasted that the unique skill of the US to use advertisement in politics:

Propaganda, using state apparatuses, was what other states used in pursuit of their goals. Publicity, with private sector support, was the handmaiden of a government that presented itself as opposed to heavy-handed involvement abroad and sought to circumvent autocratic leaders to get the humane, rational message of the American people directly to peoples with similar aspirations... no country has developed as close a link between statesmanship and salesmanship as the United States. (De Grazia, 2002)

In his book on how governments and intelligence agencies construct and manage narratives, former Indian spy chief Vikram Sood (2020) argues it

is imperative to be first: “tell your story first, any other story thereafter will only be a reaction”. Governments seeking to control the information space must develop a cabal of “independent experts” that can quickly be deployed to push a narrative. Once a dominant narrative has been established, there is pressure for conformity by the rest of the media. Failure to conform to strategic narratives results in denial of political legitimacy, which also functions as a warning shot to other politicians, journalists and academics who have been opaque about expressing their loyalty.

## COUNTER-PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is commonly concealed as counter-propaganda as an effective instrument to censor the opponent’s arguments. Russel (1932: 139–140) argued that propaganda entails circumventing reason and “close the mind to argument”, which infers that countering propaganda requires elevating reason by presenting all perspectives by for example organising debates between Churchill and the Soviet Ambassador, Gandhi and Viceroy, and Stalin and the Archbishop of Canterbury. However, propaganda concealed as counter-propaganda instead aim to control the narrative by monopolising on truth and undermining the opponent.

A key instrument against foreign propaganda is our propaganda: “The only effective weapon against propaganda on behalf of one policy seems to be propaganda on behalf of an alternative” (Lasswell, 1995: 22). In Orwell’s 1984, he referred to a Ministry of Truth that would monopolise on truth. Almost two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville (2003: 162) cautioned:

Whoever should be able to create and maintain a tribunal of this kind would waste his time in prosecuting the liberty of the press; for he would be the absolute master of the whole community and would be as free to rid himself of the authors as of their writings.

The former Director of the US Information Agency’s Office to Counter Soviet Disinformation and Active Measures defined counter-propaganda as “carefully prepared answers to false propaganda with the purpose of refuting the disinformation and undermining the propagandist” (Romerstein, 2009: 137). Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland (2015) called for greater information control to counter Russian propaganda:

To fight disinformation not only in Ukraine and Russia, but across Russian-speaking communities in Europe, we are joining forces with our partners in the EU to support alternatives to state-sponsored, Russian programming. We are also training foreign journalists and civil society actors in the art of fighting lies with the truth.

The EU proclaims to counter Russian propaganda by supporting media in its “eastern neighbourhood” to denounce Russian disinformation and instead persuade people about the benefits of European-style reforms. Making the plea to develop mechanisms to counter Russian disinformation, the British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab argued that “Pro-Russian trolls are posting comments on Ukraine and other areas, both to influence opinion here but to be played back in the Russian media”, which should be countered by mechanisms to “provide a rebuttal - and frankly to provide the truth - for Cothe people of this country but also in Russia or China or around the world” (RFE/RL, 2021).

Both the US and the EU establish fact-checkers who often push an agenda by checking narratives rather than facts. Case in point, EU fact-checkers label the reference to the toppling of President Yanukovich of Ukraine in 2014 as a “coup” to be Russian disinformation as the EU has labelled it a “democratic revolution”. Repudiating fake news is also equated to defending interests as, for example, leading EU officials advocated combating fake news to counter “populist rhetoric” and ensure that EU-sceptics “don’t win at the ballot boxes” (Williams, 2018). Robinson (2022) observes that the “disinformation industry” may be a cure worse than the disease, as fact-checkers have become sources of disinformation presenting unsubstantiated opinions as facts and enouncing perspectives favourable to Russia as fake news.

### *“International Non-Governmental Organisations” Representing Civil Society*

Governments have strong incentives to create or influence intermediaries in civil society that enjoy greater credibility than the state. Civil society operates independently of the government and includes charities, social movements, churches, business associates, trade unions and other formal and informal groups. Civil society limits the power of the state to

organise society and provides an alternative and thus often a more apolitical and credible source of information, which is why governments seek to influence and manipulate civil society.

US interference in European elections largely began with the manipulation of Italy's 1948 election by spreading propaganda, fabricating grassroots initiatives and funding their preferred candidates to ensure the electoral defeat of the political Left. The successful Italian election interference operation of 1948s became a "template" that would be replicated (Shimer, 2020).

Towards the end of the Cold War, greater steps were taken to manipulate the politics of foreign nations by constructing "private" international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which could conceal and legitimise actions by intelligence agencies. The label "non-governmental" organisations are very deceptive as they are almost completely funded by the government, often staffed by people connected to the government and intelligence agencies, and pursue the strategic objectives of the government.

Civil society is intended to act as a mediator between the citizen and the state, and NGOs become agents of socialisation and influence by attempting to represent civil society. In the past, it was common to make distinctions between voluntary aid organisations and political organisations, although in more recent times they have become indistinguishable as political operators and agents of influence. NGOs work closely with media, governments and business interests for visibility and political influence.

Covert manipulation of civil society by intelligence agencies can be embarrassing and even counter-productive when they are revealed. However, under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights, Western governments have sought legitimacy for overtly asserting authority over civil society. In the 1980s, a process commenced in which the budgets for covert CIA operations were transferred to "non-governmental organisations" such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and Freedom House NGOs—which were funded and staffed by the government.

## NED AND FREEDOM HOUSE: HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

NED was created in 1983 as a private organisation, inaugurated by President Ronald Reagan and funded by the US Congress. Covert operations were instead made overt under the legitimacy of democracy and freedom. As Reagan argued in the inauguration ceremony of NED: “This program will not be hidden in shadows. It’ll stand proudly in the spotlight, and that’s where it belongs. We can and should be proud of our message of democracy”. Allen Weinstein, a co-founder of NED, acknowledged that “a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA” (Ignatius, 1991). *Philip Agee*, a CIA whistle-blower, explained that NED was established as a “propaganda and inducement program” to subvert foreign nations and legitimise the subversion by styling it as a democracy promotion initiative (Stevenson, 2021: 241). CIA Director William J. Casey wrote a letter to Edwin Meese, a White House counsellor to President Reagan, advocating for the establishment of a “National Endowment”, although recognising the CIA needed to maintain a distance: “Obviously we here [at the CIA] should not get out front in the development of such an organization, nor do we wish to appear to be a sponsor or advocate” (Parry, 2015).

By the late 1980s, NED began providing funding to anti-communist groups behind within the Soviet bloc. Washington Post reporter David Ignatius (1991) argued that NED has been the “sugar daddy of overt operations” in which Washington can support regime change under the auspices of “democracy promotion”, paramilitary operations under the guise of backing “freedom fighters”, and “what used to be called ‘propaganda’ and can now simply be called information”. In more recent times, former CIA Director, Leon Panetta argued that the CIA was still occasionally involved in influence campaigns abroad but noted that “Even though we were operating on a covert basis... you had to make sure that the overt methods that were being used at least delivered the same message” (Shimer, 2020).

Freedom House had been established in 1941 with the support of Franklin Roosevelt as a counterweight to the Nazi propaganda from Germany. Freedom House has the political objective of overturning isolationist tradition and sentiment within the US by drumming up public support for joining the war. Freedom House labels itself an independent “non-government” organisation, although the vast majority of its funding derives from the US government. Documents released by the

Reagan presidential library reveal that both Freedom House and NED cooperated closely with CIA propaganda initiatives in the 1980s (Parry, 2015). The documents reveal that the CIA provides funding for Freedom House and NED, while in return these alleged “independent” democracy organisations alter their reports in accordance with the instructions of the CIA (Parry, 2015). Chomsky and Herman (1994: 28) similarly notes that Freedom House “has long served as a virtual propaganda arm of the government and international right wing”.

Public diplomacy, the influence of governments over civil society, increased after the Cold War as capital, people, institutions and political campaigns were less constrained by borders under neoliberalism. With the end of ideological rivalry that claimed to champion human freedoms—the new international divisions were set between superior and inferior democracy. While liberal values legitimise post-sovereign concepts of security, USAID acknowledged that its focus on the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact members was informed by “the significance of these regions to the United States” (USAID, 1999: 16).

The US is the innovator in developing government-funded “non-governmental organisations”, although the EU followed the same practice as “funding has gone almost entirely to pro-western elite NGOs” (Youngs, 2004: 427). Research reveals that NGOs experience that the EU use them to “manufacture credibility” by moulding human rights issues around strategic interests (Youngs, 2004: 430).

## COLOUR REVOLUTIONS

The uprisings against Russian-friendly governments were portrayed as organic and home-grown popular revolts, and the common denominator for support for political groups has been pro-Western/anti-Russian orientation as opposed to democratic quality. The social engineering of these NGOs entailed the development of branding, slogans and posters with revolutionary lingo, and training in civil disobedience. NED, Freedom House, IRI, NDI and other institutions cooperated with local partners, and also supported the mobilisation of opposition under their authority.

The first US-backed colour revolution was in Serbia in 2000, which achieved what war could not achieve, the removal of Slobodan Milosevic (Dobbs, 2000). The colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space demonstrated how domestic discontent against corruption and democratic deficiency could be harnessed by government-funded NGOs to

pursue geopolitical objectives. The Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 were hailed by the Western political-media establishment as grassroots “democratic revolutions”. In 2004, the US passed the Belarus Democracy Act that similarly approved “pro-democracy” activities to topple the government.

Popular demand for democracy and combatting corruption were high-jacked by the NGOs during the colour revolutions, which converted the protests into geostrategic movements advocating for NATO and EU membership (Lane, 2008). Leading these democratic revolutions were USAID, NED, Freedom House and other government-funded NGOs. Beissinger (2006) referred to the revolutions as a democracy “module” that is reproduced across the world, while Sussman and Krader (2008) conceptualised the US marketing of regime change as democratic movements as “template revolutions”.

James Woolsey (2005), a former CIA Director and former head of Freedom House, explained that Freedom House contributed to “help bring about a movement toward democracy in Ukraine” during the Orange Revolution. *The Guardian* described the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as “an American creation, a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in western branding and mass marketing”, which replicated the template of “winning other people’s elections” as had been done in Serbia and Georgia (Traynor, 2004). Another article by the *Guardian* referred to the Orange Revolution as a “postmodern coup d’état” and a “CIA-sponsored third world uprising of cold war days, adapted to post-Soviet conditions” (Steele, 2004). Anne Applebaum (2004), an American journalist and wife of Radosław Sikorski, who would become Poland’s Foreign Minister, denounced such critics of the Orange Revolution as “freedom haters”.

The efforts to manipulate the democratic process produces profound distrust and incentivises governments to assert greater control over civil society. Case in point, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates (2014: 359) referred to the failed attempt to remove Hamid Karzai from power in 2009 as “our clumsy and failed putsch”, which fuelled suspicion in Afghanistan towards the US and the democratic project.

Gleb Pavlovsky, an advisor to Putin’s administration, argued that the Orange Revolution engineered in Ukraine “was a very useful catastrophe for Russia” as Moscow learned from the interference: “It very quickly became clear that they [the West] would try to export this to us and



that we should prepare for this, and very quickly strengthen our political system” (Popescu & Wilson, 2009: 29). The same government-funded NGOs were involved in the Arab Spring, at which point in time US Senator John McCain tweeted on 5 December 2011 a direct threat to Moscow: “Dear Vlad, the Arab Spring is coming to a neighbourhood near you”. Carl Gershman (2016), the president of NED, similarly advocated that the US government should “summon the will” to carry out regime change in Russia. On its website, NED also lists how it spends millions of dollars annually in Russia to fund activities such as “engaging activists” and “fostering civic engagement” (Shane, 2018).

### THE CASE OF BELLINGCAT: THE “INTELLIGENCE AGENCY OF THE PEOPLE”

Campaigns to delegitimise Russia and other adversarial states are more credible when it is independent researchers that disseminate their findings to the media. Bellingcat is a prime example of a government-constructed entity that yields authority and legitimacy from its status as an independent investigative organisation. Bellingcat brands itself “an intelligence agency for the people”, yet is largely a government intelligence agency masquerading as private and independent citizen journalists to obtain credibility.

Bellingcat was established by Eliot Higgins, an eager video gamer. Higgins admitted in an interview with the *Guardian*: “I knew no more about weapons than the average Xbox owner. I had no knowledge beyond what I’d learned from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Rambo” (Weaver, 2013).

Higgins began his rise to fame by studying pictures on social media of the gas attack in the Ghouta suburb in Syria in August 2013. His findings of the Syrian government’s culpability was later debunked by journalists and weapons experts. Theodore Postol, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and former UN weapons inspector Richard Lloyd, conducted an extensive forensic report of the Ghouta attack that reached the conclusion the missiles were launched from a rebel-controlled region (Lloyd & Postol, 2014). When asked about the research of Higgins, Postol responded that he “has done a very nice job collecting information on a website. As far as his analysis, it’s so lacking any analytical foundation it’s clear he has no idea what he’s talking

about” (Russell-Sluchansky, 2014). Yet, the media uncritically repeated the findings of the blogger as evidence.

Higgins was thereafter also hailed by the media for his investigation into MH17, the plane that was shot down over Ukraine in July 2014. Bellingcat used a digital forensic software and concluded that Russia manipulated images on Photoshop, a finding denounced by an actual forensic expert as “erroneous interpretation” as the alleged evidence “doesn’t prove anything” (Bidder, 2015). *Spiegel Magazine* revealed that Higgins did not use the digital analytical tools correctly and his evidence was dismissed as “doing is nothing more than reading tea leaves. Error Level Analysis is a method used by hobbyists” (Bidder, 2015).

When confronted with his shortcomings, Higgins would commonly respond by stating “suck my balls”. Despite the unprofessional demeanour of the blogger, the lack of relevant skillset, failing to use digital forensic tools, and reaching the wrong conclusion—the media was attracted by his ability to provide evidence for allegations, and the think tanks and intelligence agencies saw a potential partner.

In 2016, Higgins was hired as a *senior* fellow in the *Atlantic Council’s* Digital Forensic Research Lab and Future Europe Initiative projects. Funding of Bellingcat also poured in through funding from the National Endowment for Democracy. In an article written in the Atlantic Council, Higgins (2016) defined Bellingcat as an instrument against Russia: “New generation of digital detectives fight to keep Russia honest”. Far from only providing the “research”, Higgins also published policy recommendations in the Atlantic Council that included containing Russia and launching air strikes against Syrian government soldiers (Czuperski et al., 2016).

Over the next years, Bellingcat seemingly replaced the role of Western intelligence agencies as its investigations were behind the main “revelations” about Russia—including the alleged poisoning of Skripal in 2018 and Navalny in 2020. Leaked documents show how Bellingcat collaborates with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which funds various media outlets to change attitudes and to “weaken the Russian state’s influence” (Maté, 2021). A leaked note from the Integrity Initiative, funded by the British Foreign Office, acknowledged that Bellingcat’s credibility as a source was diminishing: “Bellingcat was somewhat discredited, both by spreading disinformation itself, and by being willing to produce reports for anyone willing to pay” (Maté, 2021).

Marc Polymeropolous, the CIA's former deputy chief of operations for Europe and Eurasia, was explicit about the usefulness of Bellingcat for US intelligence agencies: "Whenever we had to talk to our liaison partners about it, instead of trying to have things cleared or worry about classification issues, you could just reference their work" (Mackinnon, 2020). Daniel Fried, a retired US diplomat also hailed the unique function of Bellingcat: "The advantage of having Bellingcat do it is that you don't have to have to have a sources-and-methods debate within your government" (Mackinnon, 2020). While the CIA celebrates the role of Bellingcat as an instrument against Russia, they insist that there is no direct cooperation.

### THE INTEGRITY INITIATIVE AND THE COUNTER-PROPAGANDA INDUSTRY

The Institute for Statecraft labels itself a "pro-democracy" think tank and falls within the category of the cabal of private institutions funded by government and intelligence agencies. In 2015, the British government launched the Integrity Initiative under The Institute for Statecraft as a covert propaganda operation to manipulate media coverage. According to its website, the Integrity Initiative is "dedicated to revealing and combating propaganda and disinformation". While the official objective is to defend democracy from primarily Russia, the network functions as an instrument by the British government to disseminate anti-Russian propaganda. The budget plan demonstrates that 95 per cent of the initiative is funded by the British government, the US State Department, NATO and Facebook. The Integrity Initiative lists Bellingcat and the Atlantic Council as its partner organisations.

The Integrity Initiative builds what it defines as "cluster groups", which are groups of contacts consisting of trusted journalists, academics, researchers, politicians, lobbyists, think tanks and military personnel in foreign countries that are tasked with acting in conformity to establish and cement the narrative by the British government. It is common knowledge in the media industry that seizing the narrative early is imperative to control the story, and the Integrity Initiative has thus set the objective of "Increasing the speed of response, mobilising the network to activism in pursuit of the 'golden minute'" (MoA, 2018).

When a dispute or conflict emerges with Russia, the coordinated efforts by the cluster groups manufacture the illusion of consensus around a

narrative to manipulate group psychology and herd public opinion. The Integrity Initiative recognises the imperative of sowing a narrative to obtain legitimacy for its policies and agenda, while concurrently denigrating the argument of Russia and anyone who may be seen as being too soft on Russia. The Integrity Initiative defines its mission:

To counter Russian disinformation and malign influence in Europe by: expanding the knowledge base; harnessing existing expertise, and; establishing a network of networks of experts, opinion formers and policy makers, to educate national audiences in the threat and to help build national capacities to counter it. (MoA, 2018)

Case in point, on 7 June 2018 the Spanish cluster of the Integrity Initiative was able to smear and disrupt the appointment of Perto Banos as the Director of the National Security Department in Spain, who the British government deemed was too friendly towards Russia (MoA, 2018). The leaked documents from the Integrity Initiative revealed that the operation only took a few hours: at 14:00 the “Spanish cluster leader alerts other cluster members and prepares a dossier to inform the main Spanish media. The cluster starts a campaign on Twitter”, while already at 19:45 it was reported that some Spanish diplomats and two political parties had intervened by expressing their concerns and attempting to stop the appointment (Blumenthal, 2018).

The operation was eventually leaked to the media, partly because the propaganda initiative began to target the domestic political opposition. In December 2018, it was reported by the Sunday Mail that Integrity Initiative was targeting the leader of the domestic political opposition—Jeremy Corbyn. Shadow Justice Minister Richard Burgon demanded that “the Conservative government in this country shouldn’t be using public funds or the state to undermine or attack the official opposition” (Manthorpe & Martin, 2018).

### *Think Tanks and Political Influence for Sale*

Influence over think tanks as an intermediary between policymakers and academia is an important aspect of controlling information. Governments are supposed to rely on academia as a source of expertise to make informed decisions. The think tanks were initially intended to function as

a bridge between academia and policymakers by for example organising media contributions and media appearances.

While academia has a high degree of independence, the think tanks often follow a business model in which political influence is for sale by funding the “expert class” with the desirable analysis. Controlling think tanks is thus important to either corrupt the link between policymakers and academia, or alternatively replace independent academia. The top 50 think tanks in the US receive more than \$1 billion annually from the US government and defence contractors (Boland, 2020), which funds an expert class to inform the political class.

Since the 1980s think tanks have played an oversized role in shaping US policies. The US think tanks overwhelm the influence of academics at universities in terms of presenting analysis to the public through the news or to the government through for example Congressional hearings. Several investigations by the *New York Times* revealed that the think tanks industry has grown immensely over the past decades and in the process become extremely corrupted by a cynical business model that sells access and influence (Rojansky & Shapiro, 2021). Some think tanks do not even attempt to uphold the illusion of objective analysis as they “have become advocacy groups, or even lobbyists, by another name”, simply as a function of market forces as “political parties want loyal propagandists, not niggling, equivocating academic hangers-on. And potential donors want veteran sharpshooters to fire their policy bullets into exactly the right target at precisely the right moment” (Rojansky & Shapiro, 2021).

The largest recipient of funding is RAND Corporation, a renowned American think tank closely linked with US intelligence services since the 1940s. In one report with the title “Extending Russia” in 2019, RAND Corporation outlines a grand strategy of weakening Russia by creating crises and fuelling instability to consume its focus and exhausts its resources. The report presents separate chapters for each target towards this end: arming Ukraine, supporting rebel fighters in Syria, backing regime change in Belarus, exploiting tensions in the South Caucasus, undermining Russian influence from Moldova to Central Asia and promoting “democratic uprisings” in Russia with covert support for dissidents such as Alexey Navalny (RAND, 2019). These objectives are described as a great power struggle with Russia, although all the policies are in the public space framed and legitimised under the guise of promoting democracy and human rights. The report further notes that “Western policymakers seeking to deter or discredit Russia would

appear to have found fertile ground in the regime's sensitivity to domestic unrest and foreign ostracism". Under the heading "pathways for influence operations", the report cites "election upsets, mass protests, and civil disobedience" as means of delegitimising the government (RAND, 2019: 138–139).

At the second and third place of top-funded think tanks are the Centre for a New American Security (CNAS) and the Atlantic Council which functions as a NATO lobby group. The funding of think tanks by the defence industry has especially a negative impact by financing pro-war policy research for self-preservation. 12 of the 25 most cited US think tanks receive large funding from weapons manufacturers (Marshall, 2020). Subsequently, the advocates for peaceful resolution of conflict do not have much of a presence in either Congressional hearings or the media.

The think tanks also facilitate cooperation between government/intelligence agencies and private industry. For example, to determine what is disinformation and fake news, Facebook established a partnership with two major think tanks—the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), both funded by the US government through the National Endowment for Democracy.

### *The Media, Popular Culture, PR Firms and Digital Platforms*

The media is an important instrument for ruling elites to perpetuate their power, philosophy, culture and morality. The media can have a central role as a "watchdog" to constrain the various branches of power, although the media is also an important instrument for the state to mobilise popular support and resources in international affairs. In international conflicts, the ability to hold powerful institutions accountable is limited due to powerful narratives and symbols, while patriotism is commonly expressed as the preparedness to stand in solidarity with one's own group against the external adversary. Subsequently, in propagandised societies where the international system is largely defined by the opposition to an external enemy, it becomes extremely difficult for journalists to dissent and to challenge the narrative of the in-group. For example, the American media will be hesitant to challenge its government's narratives about Russia if it is feared to be interpreted as aligning with Russia as the principal

out-group. In his seminal work on propaganda, Huxley (1932: 133) contrasted authoritarian and democratic propaganda:

In the totalitarian East there is political censorship, and the media of mass communication are controlled by the State. In the democratic West there is economic censorship and the media of mass communication are controlled by members of the Power Elite. Censorship by rising costs and the concentration of communication power in the hands of a few big concerns is less objectionable than State ownership and government propaganda.

Private media does not equate to independent media as private media can be funded by the state and intelligence agencies, although the illusion of independence and objectivity is imperative for source credibility. Case in point, when Axel Springer bought Politico in 2021, the Chief Executive, Mathias Döpfner said he: “expects Politico staffers to adhere to Axel Springer-wide guiding principles... The principles include support for a united Europe [the European Union], Israel’s right to exist and a free-market economy, among others” (Pancevski, 2021). Döpfner clarified the limitations on intellectual pluralism and dissenting opinions: “These values are like a constitution, they apply to every employee of our company” and people who does not accept these principles “should not work for Axel Springer” (Pancevski, 2021). In addition to Politico, Axel Springer owns Business Insider, Die Welt, Bild, Fakt and a multitude of other publications. In an interview with *The Nation*, two former CIA officers disclosed that Axel Springer was on among several media platforms the CIA funded as a propaganda instrument during the Cold War, which has grown into a media oligarch (Devlin, 2021).

Besides incentivising self-censorship, the US government also make direct efforts to control and use the private media. The lines between media and intelligence agencies are blurred as intelligence officials became ever-more common participants in the media. In the 1970s there was a great scandal in the US as the CIA Operation Mockingbird was revealed, which was a domestic CIA operation to infiltrate the major US media networks to manipulate the news according to their agenda.

Such scandals were avoided during Russiagate as intelligence officials could hide in plain sight as they were hired by the media as analysts. The media and intelligence agencies even merged in some instances, which is problematic as the job description of intelligence agencies includes disseminating disinformation. As US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo,

cheerfully boasted in 2019: “I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole. It was like we had entire training courses”. In 2017, CNN hired former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former CIA Director and NSA Director Michael Hayden as national security analysts for the network. In 2018, MSNBC and NBC News hired former CIA Director John Brennan as a senior national security and intelligence analyst. An abundance of other officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), National Security Council (NSC), the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and other agencies have been hired or become regular contributors to disseminate the news (Shafer, 2018). Leon Panetta, former CIA Director and Secretary of Defence, argued that the CIA on some occasions also manipulates foreign media to “change attitudes within the country”. According to Panetta, the common method of the CIA is to “acquire media within a country or within a region” or “influence those that may own elements of the media” (Shimer, 2020).

The media is used by the US government in various ways, such as producing “feedback loops”, in which the government leaks information to the media and then quotes the subsequent press releases as sources confirming the government’s claims (Coyne & Hall, 2021). There is no need to censor journalists when only hiring journalists with the “correct” opinions, which is a trend fragmenting the media space domestically and internationally. The lack of journalistic objectivity in the Western media towards Russia can also be found in the selection of reporters. Case in point, a *New York Times* job posting for the role as a foreign correspondent in Russia presented the following job posting:

Vladimir Putin’s Russia remains one of the biggest stories in the world. It sends out hit squads armed with nerve agents against its enemies, most recently the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny. It has its cyber agents sow chaos and disharmony in the West to tarnish its democratic systems, while promoting its faux version of democracy. It has deployed private military contractors around the globe to secretly spread its influence. At home, its hospitals are filling up fast with Covid patients as its president hides out in his villa. If that sounds like a place you want to cover, then we have good news: We will have an opening for a new correspondent as Andy Higgins takes over as our next Eastern Europe Bureau Chief early next year. (Robinson, 2020)



## POPULAR CULTURE

Propaganda is laundered through popular culture as a source with likability and emotional appeal. In 1928, Bernays (1928: 156) acknowledged: “The American motion picture is the greatest unconscious carrier of propaganda in the world of today. It is a great distributor for ideas and opinions”. Over time, the Pentagon, CIA and NSA asserted greater direct influence over movie production by altering the scripts or preventing film production when they are deemed too critical of the military and the US government. Coyne and Hall (2021) assert that “the U.S. government has worked behind the scenes on more than eight hundred major motion pictures and over one thousand television series”. In 2017, the so-called “Committee to Investigate Russia” was established by Hollywood director Rob Reiner and produced a video accusing Russia of “continuing attacks on our democracy”. The video is narrated by the political active Morgan Freedom, proclaiming “We have been attacked. We are at war”—before presenting the narrative of Russia’s election interference: “A former KGB spy, angry at the collapse of his motherland plots a course for revenge... to attack democracies”.

Sports is also an important part of popular culture that is cultivated by propagandists. The US government has for example been exposed for paying the National Football League (NFL) to make the sport a delivery system for militaristic nationalism:

National Guard units singing the national anthem, full-field flag displays, surprise homecomings, and soldier recognitions at every home game for some franchises would become the norm. Military appreciation nights, salutes to ‘hometown heroes,’ and on-field enlistment ceremonies would likewise look to link Americans obsession with football to the increasingly militarized U.S. foreign policy. (Coyne & Hall, 2021)

## PR FIRMS AND ADVERTISEMENT

PR firms are also central in the marketing of products and politics, which can glorify the in-group, demonise the out-group and set the domineering narrative. In the effort to drum up support for the war against Iraq in 1991, PR company Hill & Knowlton was hired for \$10.7 million. It was problematic to sell the war through the usual binary divide as the brutal government of Kuwait was hardly known for freedom. However, the American population became convinced by a PR campaign that included

coaching a 15-year-old girl to deliver an emotional testimony on 10 October 1990 about how Iraqi soldiers had removed babies from incubators in a Kuwaiti hospital and left them to die on the floor. The horrific story sold the Iraq war as it made a strong moral case for war. The testimony and story was a complete fraud and the girl was revealed to be the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the US.

In 2006, the anti-Putin oligarch Boris Berezovsky, hired the PR firm Bell Pottinger to develop an information strategy to spin the story about the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in the UK. Berezovsky had initially assisted Putin in becoming president, although after taking the presidency, Putin declared an end to the rule of the oligarchs. Even on the day after Litvinenko died, Bell Pottinger convened a meeting in Berezovsky's office to coordinate how the story should be managed (Sixsmith, 2007). Rather than focusing on murky relations with Chechen separatists and Berezovsky, the narrative was that of a former Russian spy who stood up to Putin and was thus assassinated—even though Litvinenko had never actually been a Russian spy. The PR agency Bell Pottinger eventually collapsed a decade later after a PR campaign for South African President Jacob Zuma that went wrong. Bell Pottinger was caught using covert dissemination of articles, blog posts, tweets and cartoons to fuel racial tensions in South Africa with the slogan “white monopoly capital” and “economic apartheid” to delegitimise the political opposition.

## DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Digital platforms are also becoming increasingly important sources to disseminate narratives. Digital giants can manipulate entire elections by altering algorithms. In 2011, the *Guardian* reported on the US military creating a troll army of fake personas to manipulate social media with the objective of “degrading the enemy narrative” (Fielding & Cobain, 2011). Although, the use of online bots has since been depicted as solely a Russian instrument of power. There are also other instances of direct manipulation of social media as when Twitter's head of editorial for the Middle East, Gordon MacMillan, was revealed to also work with psyops for the British Army's information warfare unit (Dearden, 2019). However, it is embarrassing and counter-productive when propaganda is exposed, and it is more efficient to run propaganda openly under the guise of counter-propaganda.

Tech giants and the US government have formed partnerships in information warfare that obscures the distinction between defensive and offensive measures. Mark Zuckerberg (2018) penned an op-ed with the title “Protecting democracy is an arms race: here’s how Facebook can help”, in which he argued Facebook is a partner of the US government as the information arms race would require the “combined forces of the U.S. private and public sectors”. By framing the problem of information warfare within the narrow scope of protecting Western democracies, Zuckerberg did not raise the issue of information warfare and election interference by the US and its allies. Instead, Zuckerberg expressed Facebook’s determination to combat “bad actors” such as Russia, Iran and other states that Washington considers its main adversaries.

Besides spreading one’s own propaganda and constraining the opponents, counter-propaganda initiatives can also be used to delegitimise domestic movements. LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman was exposed for having funded an operation by Democratic operatives in which thousands of fake Russian accounts were created that seemingly backed Alabama Republican Roy Moore. By “exposing” the fake Russian support for Moore, he subsequently lost the 2017 race Senate race by a small margin (Shane & Blinder, 2018). Both former UN ambassador Susan Rica and Attorney General William Barr blamed “foreign actors” for increasing tensions after George Floyd’s death, which led to looting and violence. The fight against Russian disinformation enables the deflection of domestic problems and subsequently intensifies propaganda and disinformation.

The Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act was signed into law in the US in December 2016, which established the Global Engagement Centre to counter foreign propaganda. Opposition media is censored by using the label disinformation and propaganda. Russian media channels such as RT are undermined by being compelled by the US government to register as “foreign agents”. Knowing that there will be regulatory consequences if they fail to abide, social media platforms act on these guidelines by limiting the exposure by altering the algorithms and inconsistently using the label “state-sponsored”.

Western media outlets are also targeted under the guise of fighting disinformation. Facebook partnered with several large media companies such as the *New York Times*, CNN and News Corp to control and restrict the content of its rivals. *The Washington Post* published a black

list of no less than 200 websites that were accused of being “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda” that included publications such as Antiwar.com, Wikileaks and the Ron Paul Institute (Taibbi, 2016). The blacklist of the *Washington Post* equated Russian propaganda with criticism of mainstream media, NATO, the EU, Obama, Clinton, Merkel and other establishment figures. Google acted on similar blacklists by altering its algorithms to reduce traffic to news sites such as Democracy Now and the Intercept, while YouTube demonetised several of the sites. The media outlets accused of repeating Russian propaganda subsequently experienced a large drop in clicks (Macleod, 2018). The censorship functioned as a warning to other journalists and media platforms to conform to the anti-Russian rhetoric. In response to selective censorship and manipulation, Twitter and Facebook users began migrating towards Parler as an alternative social media platform. In a coordinated attack, Apple and Google suspended the Parler app from their platforms, while Amazon expelled Parler from its servers and thus removed the entire social media platform from the internet.

### *Dissidents*

Dissidents are an important component of propaganda as an alternative source of authority. The dissidents of adversaries can be directed against the out-group to fragment cohesion, encourage further dissent and legitimise coercive actions such as sanctions, coups or invasions. Dissidents can also be used for propaganda within the in-group by constructing stereotypes of “Our” superiority vis-à-vis “Their” moral corruption.

Dissidents are an important component of propaganda as their life under difficult conditions or having fled their country appeals to emotion and the sense of justice and humanism of the audience. Propaganda uses dissents in two steps—first engineering sympathy for the dissidents, and second convert sympathies into support for political objectives. A rhetorical trap ensures that sympathy can be converted to political objectives because if the audience cares about the injustice, then they have a moral responsibility to rescue them by intervening with economic sanctions or military action. Dissidents advocating economic or military hostilities against their own country provides vital legitimisation for coercion as the hostile power can proclaim to stand with the population against their government.

The natural sympathy towards dissidents also inoculate them and by extension their narrative from criticism. Disseminating narratives through dissidents enables intellectual opposition to be framed and condemned as not caring about the real or exaggerated suffering of the oppressed individuals. The more unfamiliarity and antagonism towards a country, the more dissidents can be used as an alternative source of authority. Case in point, North Korean dissidents such as Shin Dong-hyuk, *Kwon Hyuk* and Yeonmi Park were able to disseminate inconsistent and implausible narratives before they were exposed as frauds.

During the First World War, Germany used Bolshevik dissenters to get Russia out of the War. General Ludendorff wrote in his memoirs: “From a military point of view his [Lenin’s] journey was justified, for it was imperative that Russia should fall” (Rawcliffe, 1988: 27). The German general who was responsible for sending Lenin to Russia similarly justified it as propaganda: “In the same way as I send shells into the enemy trenches, or as I discharge poison gas at him, I, as an enemy, have the right to use propaganda against him” (Carr, 1985: 137).

George Kennan, the intellectual architect of US containment policy of the Soviet Union in the early days of the Cold War, argued in favour of a propaganda campaign that included establishing “liberation committees” as public American organisations to “provide an inspiration for continuing popular resistance” (Kennan, 1948b: 3). The ruthlessness of the Soviet system created many admirable Russian dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Andrey Sakharov and Anatoly Koryagin whom the West and the average Russian could embrace as an alternative source of authority.

However, in post-Soviet Russia, there has not been dissidents of the same calibre. Solzhenitsyn, a towering dissident of the Soviet Union, even became an ardent supporter of Putin and cautioned Russia against following the neoliberal path under US hegemony. Key dissidents supported by the West are either oligarchs or liberals who are rejected by the vast amount of Russians.

While the 1990s were a golden era for the US, it was an abysmal decade for Russia. Subsequently, the dissidents of the 1990s that are hailed by the US as a liberal opposition are widely unpopular in Russia. Under the liberal pro-Western policies of Yeltsin, a despised oligarchic class emerged under the US-backed “shock therapy” policies and then the entire pro-Western political platform collapsed as Russian society descended into anarchy and the West began constructing a post-Cold War

Europe without Russia. When Putin replaced Yeltsin, the liberals and their failed policies were pushed aside and Putin announced that his principal task was to liquidate the oligarch class who had seized control over the economy, media and increasingly politics (Sakwa, 2007: 151–152). Many of the oligarchs who had plundered the Russian economy in what had become known as a criminal revolution, had transferred much of their wealth to the West and established residence in the UK and US. These oligarchs became the ideal dissidents of the US and UK, although largely despised by the Russian public.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man, was arrested and had his oil empire nationalised immediately before he could sell a large share of his assets to Exxon Mobile and Chevron-Texaco. Another oligarch, Boris Berezovsky had a seat on Yeltsin's National Security Council and assisted in making Putin the successor of Yeltsin, before Putin began to restrain the oligarchs and Berezovsky fled to London. Among the liberals, there were Gary Kasparov and others who remained marginal and were commonly associated with their loyalties to the West.

The case of Andrey Kozyrev is an example of the US promoting an ideal dissident for the US that belongs to the 1990s era, which is widely unpopular in Russia and seen as representing US interests. Kozyrev was the former Russian Foreign Minister who Yeltsin eventually replaced in January 1996, as he was widely criticised and discredited for being excessively pro-Western, liberal internationalist and capitulating Russian interests to the US. Kozyrev later became an American citizen and moved to Miami, an unusual decision for a former high-ranking government official. The American Foreign Policy Council invited and presented Kozyrev in 2018 as a speaker on the topic of "the conflicting interest of Putin and the Russian population at large" (AFPC, 2018). The assumption that Putin does not represent the Russian people and Alexey Navalny became an important dissident in the anti-Russian propaganda. Navalny grew to fame as an anti-corruption activist who aimed to hold corrupt politicians to account in a country where the political leadership has traditionally exempted itself from the rule of law. Yet, as a dissident, Navalny also became an important figure for the Western political-media establishment. The Western narrative inaccurately depicts Navalny as leading the opposition against Putin, while in reality the Communist Party is the major opposition and Navalny is a marginal figure. Yet, the narrative suggests that Navalny's political threat to Putin resulted in the Russian government

attempting to murder him in the most brutal manner with a chemical weapon.

The think tank RAND Corporation, which has historically close ties to US intelligence agencies, published a report in which it outlined recommended: “Policy Measures to Diminish Domestic and Foreign Support for the Russian Regime” (RAND, 2019: 158). The report mentions Navalny as a credible authority for his anti-corruption work and activism. The report goes on to argue, “if damaging information could be acquired” against Russian authorities, then it could be “leaked through an intermediary” with continuing references to Navalny’s work making him a credible source (RAND, 2019: 163). However, the report cautions: “it would seem highly inadvisable for Western intelligence agencies to attempt to cooperate directly with anti-corruption groups inside Russia, such as Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation. Such cooperation would undermine the effectiveness of those groups within Russia” (RAND, 2019: 163). British diplomat James Ford, whom the FSB asserts is an MI6 intelligence agent, was caught on tape with Vladimir Ashurkov, Navalny’s right-hand man and Executive Director of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation. On tape, Ashurkov asked Ford for \$10–\$20 million to finance Navalny’s campaign and asked for any compromising material that the British may have on Russian officials. While Ashurkov attempted to collude with a foreign government, Ford did not make any offers. In January 2021, Ashurkov also sent a letter to President Biden urging him of imposing sanctions against Russia.

Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist activist punk rock group, was sold to the Western public as another martyred group standing up to Putin. Members of the group were convicted for acts of religious hatred committed in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The Western political-media establishment falsely portrayed the punishment as the result of criticising Putin. The group had staged provocative anti-Putin protests on many occasions without arrest. The severe reaction was the result of staging the protest on Church property and against the Church, as the Orthodox Church is at the centre of the national identity and has been granted special protection due to the religious suppression experienced under the rule of the communists. In a letter written in 2004, the jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky opined that President Putin is more liberal than 70 per cent of the Russian population. Putin called for leniency towards Pussy riot while a large portion of the public wanted harsh punishment

and only 5 per cent thought they should escape unpunished (Robinson, 2012). However, Pussy Riot was paraded in the Western media and talk shows are key Russian dissidents pursuing legitimate democratic protests against an illegitimate authoritarian government.

Sergey Magnitsky was sold as a dissident and a martyr, and his death was used to demonise Russia and launch anti-Russian sanctions through the Magnitsky Act. The narrative of Magnitsky as a Russian lawyer and an anti-corruption whistle-blower has to a great extent been debunked. The story concealed from the Western audience was that Magnitsky was never a lawyer, but an accountant who supported Bill Browder in corruption and looting the Russian state during the 1990s. After Browder was forced to leave Russia, he has worked towards imposing sanctions on Russia and proudly refers to himself as Putin's no. 1 enemy (Bidder, 2019). An investigation by *Spiegel Magazine* reveals that the story Browder sold to Western capitals was full of contradictions and outright falsehoods about Magnitsky revealing any secrets, yet the Western political-media establishment accepted the anti-Kremlin narrative uncritically (Bidder, 2019).

## OUR DISSIDENTS

The acceptable scope of discourse is the assumption that irrespective of mistakes done on both sides, the West's intentions were good as opposed to the intention of Russia. Western dissidents moving beyond this scope are commonly exposed to ad hominem attacks by connecting them to Russia as the out-group. Intellectual dissents opposing hostile policies towards Russia are commonly denounced and labelled as "Russian agents", "Putin apologists" or "useful idiots". In German, the term "Putinverstehern" ("Putin understander") is a derogatory term intended to disqualify someone from the legitimate scope of discourse.

In the US, political dissidents are commonly denounced as traitors and agents of Russia. Presidential candidate Jill Stein was denounced as a Russian agent as the independent presidential ticket siphoned votes away from Hillary Clinton. Presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard was also dismissed as a Russian agent for dissenting over foreign policy. Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders was similarly touted as a Russian agent. Even Hillary Clinton labelled Gabbard and Stein as Russian agents:



I think [the Russians] got their eye on somebody who is currently in the Democratic primary and are grooming her to be the third-party candidate. She's the favorite of the Russians, they have a bunch of sites and bots and other ways of supporting her so far... And that's assuming Jill Stein will give it up, which she might not, cause she's also a Russian asset. (Cunningham, 2019)

Even the hawkish anti-Russian Mitch McConnell was assigned the nickname "Moscow-Mitch" for voting against an election security bill, based on the assumption that anyone not voting in favour of election security are assisting the nefarious intentions of Russia.

The think tank Atlantic Council produced a series of publications that shamed politicians, journalists, experts and political parties as "Kremlin's Trojan Horses". The criteria for being designated a Russian Trojan horse was criticism of NATO, advocacy of reducing anti-Russian sanctions or expressing understanding towards Russia. The European political parties alone that are listed as the Kremlin's Trojan horses include UK's Labour and UKIP; Germany's Die Linke and Alternative for Germany; France's Republicans and National Front; Netherlands' Freedom Party and Forum for Democracy; Belgium's Flemish Interest; Austria's Freedom Party of Austria; Italy's Lega Nord and Democratic Party; Hungary's Fidesz and Jobbik; Greece's Syriza and Golden Dawn; Bulgaria's Ataka; the Czech Republic's Workers Party for Social Justice and The Czech Communist Party; Lithuania's Order and Justice Party; Sweden's Sweden Democrats; Norway's Progress Party, Socialist Left Party and Red Party; Denmark's People's Party; Spain's Podemos (Atlantic Council, 2016, 2017, 2018). The Atlantic Council calls for "exposing" their opaque connections in what can be interpreted as an effort to delegitimise and blacklist the political opposition.

Whistle-blowers are also delegitimised as Russian agents. The founder of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, rose to fame as he published documents revealing US war crimes in Iraq, classified US diplomatic cables and other embarrassments among more than 10 million documents on war and spying. Wikileaks also published Vault 7, which includes the CIA's hacking techniques by for example using stolen malware produced in countries such as Russia, which is used to imitate Russian hackers and leave false fingerprints to misdirect attribution to Russia.

US vice president Joe Biden labelled Assange a "high-tech terrorist" in 2010 (MacAskill, 2010). Nonetheless, the Obama administration did

not prosecute Julian Assange for publishing classified documents since it would be a threat to press freedom. In what was referred to as the “New York Times problem”, the US Department of Justice could not prosecute Assange without also possibly prosecuting the *New York Times* or other newspapers for doing the same (Horwitz, 2013).

However, by delegitimising Assange a Russian agent, the argument could be made that he was not a journalist. *The New York Times* reported in August 2016 that among US officials “the emerging consensus is that Mr. Assange and WikiLeaks probably have no direct ties to Russian intelligence services” (Becker et al., 2016). Although, however, as relations deteriorated under the Russiagate allegations, CIA Director Mike Pompeo broke with this consensus in 2017 by stating: “It is time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is—a nonstate hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia” (Harris, 2017). In the absence of evidence, Pompeo argued that WikiLeaks had criminalised itself by cooperating with Russian state media: “Russia’s primary propaganda outlet has actively collaborated with WikiLeaks” (Harris, 2017).

Whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowden who worked for the NSA could be prosecuted without involving Russia, although manufacturing a Russian connection was instrumental to delegitimise him and shifting the narrative from US spying to Russian spying. The US government relentlessly delegitimised Snowden as a Kremlin agent for seeking asylum in Russia. This portrayal deliberately misrepresented facts as Snowden was merely on a flight to Latin America that transited through Moscow when US authorities revoked his passport. Obama’s administration, including Deputy Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, presented Snowden’s decision of going to Russia as conclusive evidence that he was a Kremlin stooge and not a legitimate whistle-blower. Yet, a more honest assessment emerges in the memoirs of Ben Rhodes, in a chapter about Cuba where he discusses how he successfully exercised political pressure on Havana. Rhodes refer to how the Obama administration cancelled Snowden’s passport and Rhodes personally pressured the Cuban government to reject Snowden’s transit. Rhodes (2018) boasted how Snowden “wanted to go to Venezuela, transiting through Havana”, although by threatening the Cubans to reject entry “Snowden was stuck in the Moscow airport, trying to find someone who would take him in”.

## CONCLUSION

Source credibility of authorities and experts is imperative to establish shape public opinion. Anti-Russian propaganda is to a large extent focused on constructing credible sources to disseminate information on behalf of Western governments, and to denigrate the sources communicating favourable messaging about Russia.

Assigning dichotomous moral authority of the communicators of the West and Russia has an immense influence on how the message is received by the audience. On the Western side, there are seemingly trustworthy, likeable, virtuous and objective sources from non-governmental organisations representing civil society, independent think tanks, an independent media, athletes and actors from popular culture, persecuted dissidents and whistle-blowers and independent agencies devoted to exposing lies and countering propaganda. On the Russian side, there are state-controlled propaganda outlets, intelligence agencies, spies, traitors and useful idiots who peddle talking points from the Kremlin. The Western sources are credible to such an extent that criticising them can be denounced as an attack on freedom, democracy and innocent victims. In contrast, Russian sources are burdened with a diminished reputation to the extent that it legitimises silencing them to fight propaganda and safeguard democracy.

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## Language and Strategic Narratives: Imparting Legitimacy

### INTRODUCTION

Manipulating language and constructing strategic narratives diminishes the relevance of reason for persuasion. Changing the way people speak can also change the way they think. Dichotomous stereotypes of virtue versus evil lay the foundation for constructing a language and narratives that bestow legitimacy to the in-group and deny legitimacy to the out-group. Linguistic techniques disassociate the in-group from the out-group by enhancing friend-enemy distinctions, and compels in-group loyalty and resistance to the out-group. Paradoxically, the language of freedom usually becomes the rallying cry for strict conformity as dissent in the form of empathy to the out-group allegedly threatens freedom.

This chapter explores how the West manipulates language and meaning to the extent it becomes difficult to express dissent. Language intends to convey meaning and enables rational reflection, while propaganda distorts meaning by hiding unchallenged normative presupposition and appealing to irrational impulses. Language and concepts enable comparisons between “Us” and “Them”, which can therefore even produce mutual understanding and empathy. In contrast, propaganda dismantles common concepts and uses binary categories of words to prevent comparison to make the white whiter, the black blacker, and eviscerate the grey. Identical actions are contrasted by linguistic techniques as, for



example, “We” are tough and determined, while “They” are aggressive and bullying.

This chapter first outlines the use of language and strategic narratives legitimising hegemony. The power and security interests of the West are concealed and legitimised through ideology. In the post-Cold War era, interests are commonly framed in the language of liberal democracy and a fixed understanding of Europe. Second, language is used to delegitimise Russia, by removing the conceptual space for legitimate influence beyond its borders and even contesting the legitimacy of the government within Russian borders. The strategic narratives infer a continuity of liberalism versus fascism and Soviet imperialism, demonises the leader and criminalises policies. Last, the concept of propaganda is redefined to uncritically include all Russian influence. It is concluded that the binary Us versus Them has restructured the language and narratives to the extent it becomes problematic to express dissent.

### *Legitimising Hegemony*

Ideologies incentivise the manipulation of language, as violent means are legitimised by virtuous ends. Edmund Burke (1852: 163) remarked that the French revolutionaries could not speak honestly to the population: “The whole compass of language is tried to find synonymes and circumlocutions for massacre and murder. Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes agitation, sometimes effervescence, sometimes excess”. Orwell (2021: 180) similarly argued: “The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them”.

When the Cold War and communism came to an end, the language and narratives changed as reframing was required to change the social realities in Europe and the world. Consensus is not necessarily reached by a truth-seeking rational debate in which the majority aligns with the superior argument. Rather, consensus can be achieved by manipulating language to narrow the scope of expressing legitimate dissent. Language is used to infer either legitimacy or illegitimacy, and “politics is a struggle over legitimacy, and this struggle is fought out with rhetorical arguments... By skilfully manipulating the community’s standard of legitimacy through rhetoric, political actors are able to gain an advantage over their competitors” (Schimmelfennig, 2003: 208).

Thought is constrained by the limits of language, and Orwell's concept of Doublepeak entailed constructing a language where the opposition cannot be articulated and therefore not thought. In the fictional 1984, Orwell outlies the slogans of the Party: "War Is Peace, Freedom Is Slavery, and Ignorance Is Strength". Under liberal hegemony in the post-Cold War era, subversion is democracy promotion, a coup is a democratic revolution, invasion is humanitarian intervention, expansion of military blocs is European integration, spheres of influence is a ring of well-governed states, assassination is liquidation, gunboat diplomacy is freedom of navigation and expansion is enlargement.

During the US bombing campaign against Iraq in the first Gulf War, the term "collateral damage" was introduced by the Pentagon to describe the vast amount of civilian deaths (Nunberg, 2009). The passing of the Patriot Act after the September 11 attacks occurred without sufficient democratic debate and undermined key freedoms. The "Total Information Awareness", a NSA mass spying programme launched in February 2003, was renamed to "Terrorism Information Awareness" to suggest the general public was not the main target of spying. While the language changed, the program nonetheless continued mass spying on the entire population.

"Support the troops" is a euphemism for supporting continued warfare and a militaristic foreign policy. It becomes a rhetorical trap as most of the population support the troops who have expressed their patriotic creed by the preparedness to die for their country. Although, support for the troops could also be understood as honouring a social contract between the soldiers and government, in which the soldiers are ready to give their lives while the government promises to only put the soldiers in harm's way when it is imperative for national security. Thus, the mantra of "support the troops" does the opposite by enabling the government to break its side of the social contract.

Ill-defined words and concepts are especially vulnerable to manipulation. Framing the September 11 attacks as an act of war as opposed to a crime, infers a military rather than a civilian response with missiles and tanks instead of law and courts. Instead of withdrawing from the Geneva Convention, the US merely invented new words and concepts to define its actions and its enemies. The US re-labelled and legitimised torture as "enhanced interrogation techniques". The US also invented the legal concept of "unlawful enemy combatants" to disregard international law. International law divides participants of war into two categories:

enemy combatants and civilians. An enemy combatant fights on behalf of a state and is entitled to protection as a prisoner of war under the Geneva Convention. A civilian fighter must be prosecuted in a civilian court rather than be dealt with by a military tribunal. By inventing a third category of unlawful enemy combatants, the US exempted itself from the Geneva Convention and could send the fighters to Guantanamo Bay (Harris, 2003).

In the Global War on Terror, it has been common to dichotomise freedom fighters versus terrorists as an expression of “Us” versus “Them”. Terrorism is commonly defined as using violence against a civilian population for the purpose of using fear to achieve political objectives. Terrorism is a reference to the means and freedom fighter is a reference to the end. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive as freedom fighters may use terrorism as a means of obtaining freedom. However, as emotive and deliberately vagueness terms, freedom fighter versus terrorist is presented as good guy versus bad guy, and is thus used to differentiate between those aligned with the in-groups and the out-group.

The language against terrorism has a striking similarity with the language against Russia. President Bush repeated the reasoning of fighting terrorism with offensive actions: “We will fight them over there so we do not have to face them in the United States of America”, which implied a false dilemma of taking the war to them or being attacked at home. The Chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff, used a similar language as he stated that the US “aids Ukraine and her people so that we can fight Russia over there and we don’t have to fight Russia here” (US Senate, 2020). President Bush explained the motivations of the terrorists as “evil-doers” who “hate us for our freedom”, framing it as a conflict between good and evil rather than the consequence of US meddling in the Middle East. US military actions were thus acting on behalf of the civilized world as Bush stated, “we defend not only our precious freedoms, but the freedom of people everywhere”. Former FBI Director James Comey explained Russian motivations in a similar language as he testified before a Senate Intelligence Committee:

They’re [the Russians] coming after America... They think that this great experiment of ours is a threat to them, and so they’re going to try to run it down and dirty it up as much as possible. That’s what this is about... we remain that shining city on the hill, and they don’t like it. (Song & Breuninger, 2017)

A common argument is that Russia opposes NATO expansionism because the Kremlin fears that prosperous democracies on its borders will spread hope and envy among the Russian population, which threatens the illegitimate Putin regime. The narrative neglects that Russia enjoys a good relationship with democracies such as South Korea, Japan, India, Israel and almost all non-NATO states. Furthermore, Ukraine is hardly a source of envy for Russian liberals. The narrative of Russia fearing democracies on its border implies that Moscow's security concerns are illegitimate and the US response must be uncompromising and peace can only be achieved from a "position of strength".

### SPEAKING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The legitimisation of "Us" and de-legitimisation of "Them" is to a large extent done by reorganising the language by speaking liberal democracy and Europe. Propaganda devotes significant focus towards framing an issue, often in simple binaries, as it limits the scope of acceptable discourse and thus possible conclusions. Furthermore, the intellectual opposition must then challenge the entire frame rather than simply presenting the argument. For example, US propaganda in preparation of the first Gulf War framed the binary option of attacking immediately versus devoting more time for sanctions before invading (Entman, 1993: 55).

Throughout the Cold War, the US ascribed itself the role as the "leader of the free world", and Reagan contrasted the Soviet adversary as an "evil empire". The claim to represent the "free world" and the "international community" was included in a hegemonic concept after the Cold War, in which the alternative to a US-dominated world was a return to anarchy and the worst atrocities of the twentieth century. Proxy conflicts between NATO and Russia are commonly framed as the "freedom-loving people" of country X as the victim of the Russian "regime" as the aggressor, while NATO asserts the external role as a saviour and protector of the victim.

The word government is divided into dichotomous categories of "Our" democratic administration versus "Their" regime. The words democracy and regime are not simply descriptions of certain kinds of political institutional arrangement, they are evaluative words that infer legitimacy or illegitimacy (Lawson, 1993). The concepts of democracy and regime are contested and much like the capitalist-socialist dichotomisation, there are various degrees and overlap. Yet, the blanket terms

obscure nuances and obstruct rational debate about the form of government. Rational reflection is undermined by a label that imparts a political identity that inevitably shapes the conclusion.

Uncritically using these dichotomous terms has a profound political impact. Democracy is treated as inherently good, while regime infers the absence of moral authority and democratic mandate. The regime label triggers immediate disapproval and moral opposition. Such words can be helpful to characterise the different forms of governance to evade relativism, although the political influence of these words makes them largely influenced by ideology and power interests rather than objective indicators.

The term *regime* unconsciously attributes legitimacy to the means and ends of a government. “Anti-government” protesters are expected to follow the law and refrain from violence, and their purpose is to pressure changes within the system. In contrast, “anti-regime” protesters are to some extent excused for engaging in violence, and toppling the government in a regime change is deemed to be a desirable objective. Regime-critics enjoy great legitimacy, while the regime-supporter is an instrument of state power and thus deprived of both agency and legitimacy. Whoever can claim the authority to classify and represent democracy thus has immense power. Case in point, the democratically elected Russian-friendly government of Yanukovich in Ukraine was labelled by the US as a “regime”, while the pro-Western/anti-Russian government that seized power in a coup is a “government”. Protesters who attack police and burn down public buildings in adversarial states are “mostly peaceful”, while the American protesters on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 were “insurrectionists” and “domestic terrorists”.

As the West proclaims to represent liberal democracy, pro-Western political groups in adversarial states are portrayed as having democratic credentials and aspirations. When Russian armoured vehicles fired upon the parliament in Russia in 1993 and Yeltsin concentrated power in the presidency, it was “pro-democratic”. When the US intervened in the Russian elections of 1996 to get Yeltsin re-elected it was in defence of democracy by maintaining the pro-Western candidate. Russian oligarchs who plundered the riches of the country and used the wealth to obtain political power was democratic to the extent they could be cultivated by Western governments.

The prevalence of constructivism in the EU and the focus on *speech acts* suggests that the language is deliberately manipulated to create a

different social reality. Speech act links language and power as specific changes in speech alter the state of affairs in the world. Case in point, a predominant belief in the EU is that using realist analysis is immoral and debating competing national interests legitimises *realpolitik* (Toje & Kunz, 2012: 3). Constructivism emerged from the desire to focus on non-systemic variables to be a force for good, although by ignoring structure and power competition as a driver of policy, the EU does not discuss ways to mitigate the security dilemma. Both the EU and NATO expresses a hegemonic concept in the language of values, which delegitimises all opposition from Russia.

### SPEAKING EUROPE

The ideology of an inter-democratic Europe also produces a language that limits intellectual pluralism and dissent. Europe is a contested concept and European history is largely a tale of unifying or organising the continent through diplomacy, war and manipulation of the language. Both the EU and NATO proclaim to pursue the unification of Europe, although monopolising on a fixed understanding of Europe is a hegemonic strategy that divides the continent and delegitimises competing understandings. Europe's four largest cities (Istanbul, Moscow, London and Saint Petersburg) are not part of the EU, yet the EU has hijacked the concept of Europe. Similarly, Russia as the largest European state in terms of territory and population has been demoted to the only non-European state in Europe.

The early documents of the EU made a distinction between Europe and the EU, although the EU then began to eliminate all distinction in its discourse and documents as the EU became indistinguishable from Europe. Language is a key component of power politics in Europe as “the EU has in its own possessive way given this all-embracing name to the debate about the future of just the EU, which is indeed suggestive of the present EU mind-set” (Emerson, 2001: 1). The path to hegemony requires altering the language to limit intellectual pluralism. The EU “has monopolised and narrowed-down the horizon of the integration discourse to merely one end-game: a new pan-European state”, and the “EU-centrism does no justice” to European states such as Russia (De Wilde, 2007: 2, 8). Otto von Bismarck, the creator of modern Germany, famously observed: “I have always found the word ‘Europe’

in the mouths of politicians who wanted from other powers something they did not dare to demand in their own name”.

The term “Euro-speak”, a reference to Orwell’s *Newspeak*, describes the unique language of the EU that limits the possibility of expressing dissent. The concept of Euro-speak is the vernacular of EU politicians who rely on emotional rhetoric linked to a fixed understanding of Europe to reconcile contradictory terms in a single phrase (Diez, 1999; Schmitter, 1996). Euro-speak enables power interests to be concealed as benign ideals about European unity. The federalist project of centralising decision-making and power in Brussels is usually referred to as “European integration”, “more Europe”, “solidarity” or “ever-closer Union”. The British concept of Europe suggests that power should reside in national parliaments, which is not compatible with EU federalism. Instead of a rational debate about the federalist versus the functionalist path to integration (Mitrany, 1948), Euro-speak delegitimises dissent by denouncing British opposition to the centralisation of power as “against European”, “Europhobia”, “nationalism”, “populism” or even “anti-European”.

Euro-speak is also instrumental to monopolise on the representation of values. The reference to “Common European values” or “Western values” are claimed to be universal but almost exclusively lean in favour of liberal ideals above conservatism. While the European Community was established in 1957 by mostly Christian conservative governments, the European values have begun to abandon the former balance between liberalism and conservatism. Communist rule in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Russia undermined the nation, tradition and the Church, and these states subsequently have a proclivity to define European values in terms of conservatism by defending and reproducing their distinctive culture and faith (Diesen, 2021). Conflicts thus arise on issues such as multiculturalism: Are European values defined by the humanitarian aspect of embracing large flows of refugees and migrants in a multicultural society, or does it undermine the ability to reproduce the traditional and Christian identity of Europe? Propagandistic language that delegitimises opposition is effective to suppress alternatives, although it prevents compromise and workable solutions. A rational and philosophical debate about the pluralism of European values positioned between the particular and universal or between liberal and conservative could bridge conflicting ideals. However, Euro-speak is designed to override rational debate with the dichotomous framing of “common European values” versus illegitimate xenophobia.

The expansion of the EU and NATO is labelled “European integration”, in which Eastern European states must decouple from Russia as the largest state in Europe and instead look towards Washington and Brussels for leadership. In contrast, there is no conceptual space for legitimate Russian influence to the extent that all Russian influence is labelled a “sphere of influence”. Even including Russia in Europe is tantamount to dividing the West and economic integration between Europe’s largest states, Russia and Germany, threatens to undermine European integration. All Western influence in the pan-European space is legitimised as European integration, while Russia cannot have a “veto” over Europe. States in the shared neighbourhood choosing the West over Russia are chasing the “European dream”, while governments failing to align with the West are captive to Russia, misinformed by disinformation, or deny the aspirations of their people.

The EU and NATO claim a passive role in the revision of the European security architecture. Initially, the EU’s *Wider Europe* document referred to enlargement as the EU “drawing closer” to the Eastern European neighbourhood (European Commission, 2003), while the following European Neighbourhood Policy document suggests that the new Eastern European neighbours are “drawn closer to the EU as a result of Enlargement” (European Commission, 2004). Rather than referring to its own interests and creating a Europe with one centre of power, the EU passively suggests it “has a duty” and responsibility to “respond” to the “sovereign right” of its neighbours to pursue their “European aspirations” and “democratisation” (European Commission, 2003).

It was previously common for academics to refer to the Near Abroad of both the EU and Russia, to reference the security interests in their respective immediate neighbourhoods (Emerson, 2001; Wæver, 1997). The common language has since been severed as the EU now uses the term European Neighbourhood Policy, while the term Near Abroad is vilified as a synonym for spheres of influence as the EU cautioned that Russia’s “doctrine of ‘the near abroad’ harks back to the sphere of interest policy of the past” (European Commission, 2008: 5). While the EU aims to create “a ‘ring of friends’ - with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations” (European Commission, 2003: 4), all Russian influence beyond its own borders is tantamount to spheres of influence.

The West has redefined the spheres of influence concept and turned the meaning on its head. The spheres of influence concept infer exclusive influence that imperils sovereignty, although it has been reconceptualised



as preventing states from joining Western blocs. An artificial dilemma suggests that neighbouring states can either align with Western blocs that give the West exclusive influence, or be under a Russian sphere of influence. Russian efforts to develop influence in the Balkans is commonly denounced as an attempt to restore a sphere of influence, and the only alternative to a Russian sphere of influence is for the West to wield exclusive influence. In Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and other states in the shared neighbourhood the concept of multilateralism is similarly rejected under the language of either aligning with the West or falling under a Russian sphere of influence.

Russia has been adamant it does not seek spheres of influence but it demands a “sphere of interest” in which other states must recognise that when operating along Russian borders they must take into account Russian security interests (Trenin, 2009). By redefining the concept, the West’s demand that the shared neighbourhood chooses between the West and Russia is no longer an effort to establish spheres of influence, rather it is Russia’s opposition to the either-or format for European security is an attempt to assert a sphere of influence by limiting the sovereign right of states to choose blocs.

Russian concerns about the zero-sum format of European integration by expanding exclusive blocs is said to merely reveal Russia’s “zero-sum mentality”, which makes Russia responsible for its own exclusion. Russian concerns about the implications of preserving the security architecture from the Cold War are similarly dismissed as evidence of Russia’s “Cold War mentality”. In contrast, if Russia accepts the narrative that the EU and NATO are a “force for good”, then there is no legitimate opposition to their expansionism. The EU insists that “by its very nature, the EU plays no zero-sum game” (European Commission, 2013), thus improving EU–Russia relations requires the EU to “reverse Russia’s drift to a bloc mentality” and overcome Russia’s “zero-sum attitude” (Lobjakas, 2005). This language implicitly rejects the existence of a security dilemma and the mere recognition of Russian security concerns legitimises the dangerous mentality of the Kremlin.

Similarly, the concepts of revision versus status quo are placed on its head. In international relations, it is common to distinguish between the revisionist states that seek to alter the existing security architecture and status quo powers that aim to preserve their existing position against the revisionist powers. The West commonly describes Russia as a revisionist power, although it is the West that is unilaterally altering the European

security architecture and Russia as the weaker part seeking to preserve its existing position. The Russian Federation has only used military force as a status quo power: Russia intervened in Georgia to repel an invasion of South Ossetia, in Ukraine to prevent the loss of Crimea and NATO expansion and in Syria to prevent regime change. In all instances, the West supported revisionist objectives and Russia held its existing position. However, by inferring that only NATO and the EU have legitimate security interests and influence, Russia's obstruction to NATO/EU expansionism is labelled revisionism.

### *Delegitimising Russia*

Propagandist language such as “false moral equivalence” and “whataboutism” is constructed to delegitimise comparison between “Us” and “Them”. In 1985, the Reagan administration introduced the concept of “false moral equivalence” to denounce any efforts to compare US and Soviet values. The term “whataboutism” is also a common rhetorical smokescreen used by the US to dismiss the inconsistent application of principles. When one set of rules applies for the West and another applies for Russia—any efforts to point out the hypocrisy of the West is rebuked by the Kafkaesque term “whataboutism”, which implies that incomparable events are compared as a distraction. Former US Ambassador to the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick (1986) argued that framing the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union as a “superpower rivalry” was misleading and inappropriate as the focus on power rather than values enables Moscow to claim “moral equivalence”. Kirkpatrick (1986) insisted that the rivalry should be conceptualised as a conflict between good and evil values because “once you view the United States and the Soviet Union as contending for the world, you have already suggested a symmetry between their goals: to dominate the world”.

After the Cold War, the political language was reorganised according to the teacher-student relationship. Cooperation between a teacher and a student does not entail compromise and mutual social learning, rather it was for the Russian student to accept unilateral concessions. Decisions were to be made unilaterally by the West and implemented by Russia. Instead of referring to Russian security interests and policies, there is a pedagogic language with references to Russian “behaviour” that should be modified with “rewards” or “punishment”.

Diplomacy was no longer an instrument for resolving competing security interests, rather diplomatic meetings became a reward for good behaviour in terms of Russia adjusting its policies. Diplomacy becomes more important when relations deteriorate, although under the teacher-student paradigm the perspectives of an ill-behaving student must not be legitimised by being represented in an open format. Diplomacy in effect becomes criminalised under this pedagogic function as engaging the Kremlin during tensions is feared to legitimise and reward its “bad behaviour” and its leaders. Case in point, when a conflict arose and diplomacy was needed to resolve differences in 2008, the West suspended cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council as a punishment.

While the actions of the disobedient student are characterised as “aggressive”, “threatening” or “bullying”, the corresponding actions by the virtuous teacher are defined as “steadfast”, “resolute” or “principled”. US warships sailing along the Russian coastline are undeterred in upholding “freedom of navigation”, which are at times intercepted by “provocative” and “aggressive” manoeuvres by the Russian military. The West being “uncompromising” becomes a positive word as it implies the policies are guided by values, as opposed to security interests. Western military posturing stabilises, Russian military posturing destabilises. Simply put, linguistic tactics eliminates the existence of a security dilemma.

The narrative of the Russian “energy weapon” is important to delegitimise Russian influence in Europe. Energy relations has had a central role in relations between the West and Russia. Russia’s marginal role in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union was to an extent the result of geoeconomics, in which political influence derives from asymmetrical economic interdependence. Russia was excessively reliant on exporting gas to Europe, while Europe has been too dependent on imported Russian gas. The West’s eager use of sanctions is not conceptualised as an “economic weapon”, while any political influence deriving from exporting gas falls under the concept of the “energy weapon”. Paradoxically, the US proclaims to defend European energy security by placing sanctions on European companies that participate in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany. Washington openly uses energy as a weapon by stating that sanctions on Nord Stream 2 will be used as leverage in negotiations with Russia over the peaceful settlement in Donbas. The US seeks to fight the Russian energy weapon by supplying more expensive LNG from the US to replace Russian

gas supplies. The US Department of Energy (2019) announced it was increasing export capacity for the purpose of “spreading freedom gas” and “molecules of U.S. freedom” around the world. The language was reminiscent of the US efforts to rename French fries into “freedom fries” following the French opposition to the Iraq War.

*Continuity of the Twentieth Century: Liberalism Versus Fascism and Communism*

A common theme of propaganda is the reliance on generalisations and the assumption of eternity, which allows for the irrational assumption of historical continuity. Furthermore, it is assumed that change must be imposed by the West. The narrative of liberalism defeating fascism and communism is appealing due to the reassuring historical precedents of moral authority and victory.

Fascism is an appealing term for propagandists to delegitimise an opponent, as fascism is an emotive, loaded and high-inference word with extremely negative connotations. It also mutes intellectual opposition as few would risk the social cost of defending a person or a state that has been labelled a fascist. Fascism as a political ideology is difficult to define, and vague terms can be used selectively. Fascism is commonly defined as an extreme ethnic division between “Us” and “Them”. The fascist builds on nostalgia for lost greatness for an ethnic group, which is used to mobilise the population with mass indoctrination and to restore greatness with military power (Stanley, 2018). Yet, fascism has become a common vernacular intended as a political insult, although the term is often deprived of specific definition and used almost synonymously with authoritarianism. Orwell (1946) opined: “The word fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies ‘something not desirable’”.

Russia does not fit the description as Moscow has embraced its multi-ethnic Eurasian demographic, and Tatars hold many of the top positions in government. Accusing Russia of fascism became common from the 2000s in the US and Eastern European countries to further dichotomise the difference between the West and Russia. Accusations that Moscow embraces fascist ideas have been demonstrated to be based on deceptive and dishonest analysis, which is aimed to reject Russia’s future in Europe (Laruelle, 2020).

One of the more common clichés is to accuse Russia of attempting to restore the Soviet Empire. The Soviet reference is efficient propaganda as it has powerful connotations, although it is never explained what it entails.

The restoration of the Soviet Union offers the audience a familiar reference in which the world was divided into a good actor versus an evil actor, with the comfortable conclusion of the West prevailing. Although, what does restoring the Soviet Union entail—will it seek unity under a communist government, will it restore territorial control over people who do not want to be ruled by Moscow and will Russian advance an alternative ideology through global revolution?

Strong emotional associations about a known enemy are evoked to delegitimise a regional economic integration initiative similar to what occurs around the world. As US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton asserted that the Eurasian Economic Union was merely a Russian ploy to “re-Sovietizing the region”. However, the Eurasian Economic Union has voluntary membership and is primarily preoccupied with issues such as harmonising tariff levels and creating a common market for service, which makes the organisation comparable to the EU. However, the ability to compare the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union is prevented by referring to one as “European integration” and the other as “re-Sovietising”.

Russia’s alleged nefarious intentions of restoring the Soviet Union are presented by taking quotes out of context. Quasi facts are used to substantiate one-dimensional and anachronistic stereotypes of barbarism, authoritarianism and expansionism. Case in point, Putin’s reference to the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” is commonly cited by journalists, academics and politicians as conclusive evidence of the desire to restore the Soviet Union. The context is usually omitted as it was a speech about the difficult situation for Russians that was being reversed and the challenge of finding “our own path in order to build a democratic, free and just society and state”:

We should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. Individual savings were depreciated, and old ideals destroyed. Many institutions were disbanded or reformed carelessly. Terrorist intervention and the Khasavyurt capitulation that followed damaged the country’s integrity. Oligarchic groups – possessing absolute control over information channels – served exclusively their own corporate interests. Mass poverty began to be seen as the norm. And all this was happening against the backdrop of a dramatic economic downturn,

unstable finances, and the paralysis of the social sphere. Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse, the prolonged agony of the Soviet system. But they were mistaken. (Putin, 2005)

The question of Russia's Europeanness became a key feature of discourse during the Cold War, which was yet again revived once Russia rejected the role as a political object to be civilised. Instead of considering the two world wars as the result of the expanding industrial societies of European empires, Arendt (1951) reconceptualised the Second World War as the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. By redefining the struggle between the great powers through the dichotomous prism of democracy versus totalitarianism, the Soviet Union could be placed in a common category with Nazi Germany in which the Soviets lost 27 million citizens to defeat. Other scholars also produced literature with titles like *Democracy and Totalitarianism* to define the conflict (Aron, 1969). The label of "totalitarianism" was propagandised by focusing on the similarities and ignoring the differences between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany (Adler & Paterson, 1970).

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was put forth as evidence of similarity and even shared guilt for the Second World War, a case of historical revisionism that ignored the preceding Munich Agreement that deliberately excluded the Soviet Union (Adler & Paterson, 1970). Furthermore, the binary world view neglects that reaching an agreement with Hitler could be a means for delaying or preventing a war, while it does not contradict the Soviet Union's victory of Nazi Germany.

Historical revisionism of the Soviet Union and the Second World War contributes to delegitimising a role for Russia in Europe. If the narrative focuses on the Soviets as the dominant force in defeating Nazi Germany, then Russia is an integral part of Europe and the former Soviet republics are linked together by a proud legacy. In contrast, if the narrative suggests that the Soviet Union colluded with Nazi Germany and thus blamed for starting the Second World War, then Russia's credentials as a European state is weakened and the Soviet legacy should be condemned as an evil.

The European choice and commitment to democracy entails choosing the right side, and repudiating the shared past with Russia. The EU argues that its efforts of blaming the Second World War on both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union has been with the purpose of "rooting democracy more firmly and reinforcing peace and stability in

our continent” (European Parliament, 2008). Former Soviet republics signal their return to Europe by commemorating “Soviet occupation day” and establishing museums of “Soviet occupation”. The consequence is the de-legitimisation of the Russian-speaking population domestically and establishing an anti-Russian position internationally.

The Europeanness of Russia was challenged by undermining its contribution in terms of winning the war. A YouGov poll from 2018 revealed that only 11 per cent of Americans, 15 per cent of French and 27 per cent of Germans responded that the Soviet Union contributed the most to defeating the Soviet Union—and the US was primarily credited with the victory (Czajkowski, 2018). The Soviet Union inflicted approximately 80–90 per cent of all German military casualties and as Churchill famously remarked, the Soviets “tore *the* guts out of *the* Nazi war machine”. Yet, perceptions can be manipulated over time. In 1945, 57 per cent of French recognised the reality that the Soviet Union was most responsible for defeating Nazi Germany, even though the UK and the US had a greater role in liberating France. By 1994 only 25 per cent of French believed that the Soviet Union contributed the most, in 2004 this number was down to 20 per cent, and by 2014 merely 15 per cent of the French population believed in the objective and measurable (Matthews 2014).

### *The Illegitimate Leader: Vladimir the Terrible*

It is a common feature of propaganda to demonise the leader of a country, which allows the propagandist to proclaim solidarity with the people against their leader. The US commonly defines its adversaries by the leadership, such as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Xi Jinping. Implicitly, and often explicitly, the US proclaims to represent the plight of their people against their government.

The rhetoric of Russia as barbaric despotism alternated between the binary alternative of Russia being a barbaric people versus having an illegitimate authoritarian government holding its people hostage. The distinction had been important as anti-Russian propaganda transitioned from opposition to Russians as an ethnically inferior people and an enemy, to become ideological in which the West interfere in the domestic affairs of Russia and undermine the government under the guise of representing the Russian people against their illegitimate and criminal government. When the Russian people do not turn against their government following

the West, the rhetoric implies an aversion to freedom by the Russian people. Based on the concept of Aristotle's "natural slavery", it had become common to refer to the "slave mentality" or "slave soul" to explain their inability to stand up to an illegitimate state (Rancour-Laferriere, 1995). Such depictions of Russia persists as it is common to make obscure comparisons to Stalin and Ivan the Terrible, while asserting "The Russian people would respond to Putin's steady withdrawal of their individual liberties with obedience" (Levine, 2008: 24).

The vilification of Putin is an interesting case study as he is one of the most popular, if not the most popular national leader. A German polling agency demonstrates that Putin's approval ratings have mostly been above 75 per cent, and has even reached 88 per cent (Statista, 2021). Gorbachev explained Putin's popularity as being the result of having saved Russia from disintegration and collapse (Lupu, 2014).

The common expectation of Russia's future was summarised by the title on the front cover of *The Atlantic* in May 2001: "Russia is Finished: The unstoppable descent into social catastrophe and strategic irrelevance". It was widely expected that Russia would share the fate of the Soviet Union as the 1990s became a nightmare. Russia had undergone a socio-economic collapse in the 1990s as the oligarchs had robbed the country and transferred the wealth abroad to Western countries. The nation began to fragment into ethnic identities and the call for secessionism spread across its regions, which also led to a disastrous war in Chechnya. Strategic irrelevance was also a fair description as the West abandoned the idea of a common European security architecture, and NATO authorised itself to invade Yugoslavia in 1999 without a UN mandate.

Under Putin's leadership, the seemingly irreversible downward spiral was reversed as Russia enjoyed steady socio-economic recovery and stability domestically, and Russia reasserted itself on the international sphere. These achievements are rarely presented by the Western political-media establishment. Rather, the dominant narrative is that the West had reached out to Russia and worked towards a closer partnership, until it was disrupted by Putin rise to power and aspirations for restoring empire. Yet, the economic problems, killing of journalists and other social problems that began in the 1990s are frequently blamed on Putin, despite these problems declining under Putin.

Putin's former job as a KGB officer is frequently recited as a source of illegitimacy, although the same criterion is not assigned to President



Bush senior who was a former Director of the CIA. Joe Biden said that Putin has “no soul” and labelled him a “killer”. Hillary Clinton argued that Putin “was a KGB agent. By definition he doesn’t have a soul”, while Senator John McCain “looked into his [Putin’s] eyes and saw three letters: a K, a G and a B” (Smith, 2008). Attributing Russian policy to Putin’s flawed personality or absence of a soul implies that Russia is not acting out of defence of legitimate security interests. Such rhetoric and insults did not even occur at the height of the Cold War.

The framing of good versus evil is integrated into linguistics to the extent it delegitimises diplomacy and compromise. Senator John McCain, explained Putin’s motivations: “Vladimir Putin is an evil man, and he is intent on evil deeds, which include the destruction of the liberal world order that the United States has led” (Cole, 2018). Chuck Schumer similarly opined that Putin is “a schoolyard bully, and the only way you deal with bullies is stand up to them”. The euphemisms of being a criminal and a bully infer that confrontation is the only acceptable answer. Mitigating the security dilemma by taking into account Russian security interests is rejected as immoral with language such as “that’s exactly what Putin wants”, thus making zero-sum politics moral and legitimate. The language is set up in a manner that supports the mobilisation for conflict, while delegitimising a workable peace. Kissinger (2014) recognised that “the demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one”.

Binary framing tends to present two unflattering depictions of Russia and Russians. For example, is Putin self-serving by cementing his own power or does he attempt to re-establish a Russian empire? Is Putin more like Stalin or Hitler? Is Putin mad or is there a strategy behind his aggression? A study from a Pentagon think tank in 2008 theorises that Putin has Asperger’s syndrome, which explains that Putin is at a “primitive”, “pre-mammalian” and “reptilian stage of development” (Schrader, 2015). The US state-channel RFE/RL (2014) similarly suggested that “Kremlin policy appears erratic, inconsistent, and sometimes downright incoherent... is Putin himself becoming erratic? And is the collective Putin coming unglued?” (RFE/RL, 2014). Framing Russian policies as a symptom of a disease shifts all focus away from a discourse centred on Russian security interests.

Putin is frequently described as thuggish, brutal, bully, gangster and other inferences of criminality and illegitimate. The US rhetoric was summarised in a Washington Post op-ed claiming that “Vladimir

Putin likes to make the bodies bounce” and his “rule-by-fear is Soviet, but this time there is no ideology — only a noxious mixture of personal aggrandizement, xenophobia, homophobia and primitive anti-Americanism” (Hiatt, 2013). During the impeachment hearings against Trump, Congressman Jason Crow brushed over Russia’s domestic challenges and international security concerns by suggesting Putin acted solely out of blind hostility towards the US:

Vladimir Putin could care less about delivering healthcare for the people of Russia and building infrastructure in Russia. Vladimir Putin... wakes up every morning and goes to bed every night trying to figure out how to destroy American democracy, and he has organized the infrastructure of his government around that effort. (US Senate, 2020)

Putin has become a cartoon villain, routinely compared to both Hitler and Stalin. Kagan (2018) and others argue that Putin “reveres Stalin”, to infer that the alternative to a US-dominated world order would be the return of barbarians of the twentieth century. However, Putin has on many occasions denounced the crimes of Stalin and in 2017 opened the Wall of Grief as a memorial to the victims of Stalinism. Concurrently, Putin has returned white Russian officers and Soviet exiles for reburial in Russia with official ceremonies and the erection of statues in their honour.

### *The Narrative of Murdering Opponents*

The establishment of a “pattern” is a common propaganda technique to rely on the constructed stereotype rather than evidence. Furthermore, propaganda builds on the principle that the familiar is commonly confused with the known.

Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko was reported to have been shot dead on 29 May 2018. Babchenko was described by the Western media as a hero and a martyr, a Putin-critic who had left Russia as he no longer felt safe, only to be hunted down and killed in Kiev. The culpability of the Kremlin was largely deemed as given by the media, until Babchenko surprised the world by appearing alive at a news conference in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government admitted to having staged the murder. Instead of reflecting over the impulse to blame Russia without evidence, Western journalists and pundits decried that the stunt could be used by Russian propaganda to deflect blame in the future (Roth, 2018).

The Kremlin murder of journalists has been one of the main narratives accepted without evidence. Throughout the history of the Tsarist and Soviet era, Russia did not have a political culture that embraced political opposition, and as a result several journalists have been killed over the years. Yet, the propaganda attempts to pin murders of journalists on Putin. The narrative neglects that the vast majority of journalists were killed in the 1990s when Yeltsin was president, and that safety for journalists have improved as the political situation in Russia stabilised under Putin.

One of the most publicised murderers of dissidents was the killing of journalist and Putin-critic Anna Politkovskaya, which the Western political-media establishment commonly blame on the Russian president. However, acquaintances of Politkovskaya argue that “neither her editors at that newspaper, nor her family, her surviving sons, think Putin had anything to do with the killing” (Cohen, 2018; Vanden Heuvel, 2016). The objective reality is also that no evidence has ever been presented that would implicate the Kremlin. Similar efforts were made to blame Putin personally for the murder of Boris Nemtsov. Instead of presenting any evidence, the reports inflate the political relevance of Nemtsov, ignore that not even his family believe the Kremlin was involved and rely on innuendos and insinuations by emphasising Nemtsov was a critic of Putin and was killed on a bridge near the Kremlin.

### SKRIPALS

On 4 March 2018, former double agent for British intelligence, Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal were allegedly poisoned with Novichok—one of the most deadly chemical weapons in the world. Russian authorities were blamed for the poisoning in Salisbury, which mobilised the collective anti-Russian sentiments and consensus for further anti-Russian sanctions. The framing by the Western political-media establishment demonstrated that the masses were led to the desired conclusion.

The British narrative suggests that the Skripals were poisoned with Novichok, and a few hours later they passed out simultaneously so neither of them could run for help. The first coincidence was that after several hours of being exposed to the poison, the Skripals passed out simultaneously despite their different age, weight, health and gender—resulting in neither of them being able to run for help. The second coincidence was that the person who happened to discover and save the Skripals

was Colonel Alison McCourt, the Chief Nurse of the British Army who was stationed at the nearby Porton Down—the oldest chemical warfare research installation in the world. Although, Britain kept the identity of McCourt hidden for ten months until her identity was accidentally revealed. Coincidences occur and they are not evidence of a British conspiracy, although the lack of interest by the media and fear of being accused of weakening the Western narrative vis-à-vis Russia is a clear sign of media bias.

British officials and media outright lied about the origin of Novichok, which was claimed to possibly only have its origin from Russia. However, this was false as the chemical agent is also available in several other states. Boris Johnson falsely claimed that Porton Down chemical lab had assured him about the Russian origin of the nerve agent, an assertion that was repudiated by the Chief Executive of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down (Taylor, 2018). The British Foreign Office thereafter removed the tweet that quoted Boris Johnson.

The Skripals survived the poisoning and could contribute with important information, such as why the GPS on both their mobile phones were turned off for four hours on the day of the poisoning. If their testimony would incriminate the Russian state, then it seems likely that it would be at the centre of the British information war against Russia. Instead, the Skripals have disappeared under British and American protection and have never spoken directly to the media. Journalists have shown little to any interest in requesting an interview with the Skripals, and the Sunday Times reported that the British government has issued “D-notices” to legally constrain the media from independent reporting.

It was later revealed that President Trump was first reluctant to take action against Russia. However, deputy CIA director, Gina Haspel, presented Trump pictures of dead ducks and hospitalised children who had received bread from the Skripals to feed the ducks, which convinced Trump to reverse his position and take the “strong option” against Russia in terms of sanctions and expelling 60 Russian diplomats. However, the CIA seemingly manipulated Trump as no children had been reported to have become ill or been hospitalised, and there were also no ducks harmed or killed by Novichok (Dallison, 2019).

Instead of presenting evidence of Moscow’s culpability, Theresa May referred to “patterns of behaviour” and acknowledged that either the Russian state participated directly or allowed the nerve agent to “get into the hands of others”. The reference of allowing it to get into the hands of

others may refer to the reports from 1994 demonstrating that a Russian criminal syndicate had obtained Novichok and used it against enemies.

Political dissents are labelled as treasonous. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, argued that “the attack in Salisbury was an appalling act of violence”, but he requested evidence and cooperation cited the dishonest past of intelligence agencies that led to the illegal invasion of Iraq. Britain’s foreign secretary Boris Johnson labelled Corbyn “the Kremlin’s useful idiot”, the Daily Mail referred to him as a “Kremlin Stooge” and the Sun denounced Corbyn as “Putin’s puppet”. Questioning the evidence and narrative of a Russian conspiracy is paradoxically often dismissed as a conspiracy theory.

## NAVALNY

The media also appears to be disinterested in narrative flaws concerning the case of Navalny. Having fallen ill on a domestic flight on 20 August 2020, Navalny was taken to a hospital in Omsk following an emergency landing. The hospital did not discover any poison in his blood and two days later he was transported to a hospital in Germany.

The narrative suggests that the Russian government attempted to kill Navalny. Instead of organising an “accident” with plausible deniability, the Russian authorities used one of the most deadly chemical weapons in the world that could kill hundreds of civilians and unleash chaos at a Russian airport and a domestic flight. The narrative also changed numerous times as it was first the tea that had been poisoned, thereafter it was his water bottle, before accusing the Russian state of placing the poison in his underpants. Once Navalny was unconscious, he was allegedly poisoned a second time. After making an emergency landing and rushing Navalny to a state hospital to save his life, and then the doctors supposedly falsified his toxicology tests. The Russian government did not kill Navalny at the hospital but instead authorised his transfer to a German hospital. This series of events took place at the time Russia was working to have its sanctions removed and to complete the final stages of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany.

While coincidences occur, the framing of Navalny among the Western political-media establishment demonstrates an aversion towards damaging weak narratives that could benefit Russia vis-à-vis the West. The media bias is further evident by ignoring or whitewashing the well-documented ethno-nationalism and xenophobia of Navalny, as he for example referred

to Central Asian Muslims as cockroaches that should be killed. Amnesty International decided not to use the term “Prisoner of Conscience” due to discriminatory statements made. Although, after significant pressure from Western powers, Amnesty International (2021) reversed its decision as:

We recognise that an individual’s opinions and behaviour may evolve over time. It is part of Amnesty’s mission to encourage people to positively embrace a human rights vision and to not suggest that they are forever trapped by their past conduct.

However, Navalny has maintained his ethno-nationalist views and has been reluctant to withdraw them or demonstrated that his opinions have evolved. The Western political-media establishment drummed up much attention towards the Russian demonstrations on 21 April 2021 as an event that could bring down Putin, although then lost much interest in Navalny once the protests flopped.

### *Everything Is Russian Propaganda*

The term propaganda is also a vague concept that can be used loosely to delegitimise the adversary. Russian cartoons, cultural exchanges, Sputnik vaccine and anything that can create a positive image of Russia are frequently denounced as propaganda as it allegedly intends to “normalise” Russia. While criticism of Russia is framed in the language of values and virtue, Russian criticism of the US is commonly labelled “Anti-Americanism”, which is a propaganda technique to delegitimise if not criminalise opposition to US policies (Snow, 2007). The anti-American label evades addressing the security interests pursued by the adversary as it is implied the adversary is irrational.

Russia’s efforts to fight Covid-19 is denounced as propaganda. Moscow’s delivery masks, protective gear, ventilators and medical teams to Italy, was framed as a sinister ploy to create political goodwill to improve relations and weaken Italy’s support for anti-Russian sanctions. Natalie Tocci, director of the Rome-based Institute for International Affairs, argues that Russian aid to Italy is aimed to undermine the EU: “Russia needs a quick win ... It does what Russia always does, which is seize low-hanging fruit” (Togoh, 2020). Retired general Vincenzo Camporini, the former chief of staff of the Italian armed forces, similarly

cautioned against Russia's attempt to present itself as a friend to Italy: "It's very unpleasant that our tragedy is being exploited for propaganda purposes" (Trofimov, 2020). The BBC (2020) even framed Russian assistance as a military threat as Russian military virologists were dispatched, which allegedly mounted concern "that a Russian military mission had been allowed to operate within 50 km (30 miles) of a US military base in a NATO member state".

Russia's Covid-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, has been denounced by both the US and EU as Russian propaganda. The New York Times deplores the politicisation of the pandemic, yet also argues: "It is very much in America's national interest not to cede a critical 'soft power' advantage to autocratic rivals like Russia or China. Poor countries will remember who came to their assistance, and when" (NYT, 2021). The annual report of the US Department of Health and Human Services revealed that the US government had worked towards persuading Brazil to reject Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, irrespective of Brazil having Covid-19 deaths in the hundreds of thousands.

There were great concerns to grant Russia a vaccine "victory", and the Western propaganda campaign against Sputnik V was framed as countering Russian propaganda. The EU foreign policy chief, Charles Michel, expressed ideological reasons for rejecting the vaccine: "We should not let ourselves be misled by China and Russia – both regimes with less desirable values than ours... Europe will not use vaccines for propaganda purposes. We promote our values" (European Council, 2021). Euphemisms were used such as the Kremlin is "rubbing its hands" and has "clearly planted the Russian flag on the Sputnik V vaccine", while the Slovakian foreign minister even referred to the vaccine as a Russian "hybrid war tool" (France24). Hungary's procurement of Sputnik is attributed to its abandonment of liberal democracy and slide towards authoritarianism.

Some of the Western media even labelled the Sochi Olympics as the "Sochi propaganda games" since the event would be used to present Russia as a modern country. While the Kremlin was accused of attempting to present Russia favourably to the world, the Western media engaged in a mass disinformation campaign. Reports of waste of money, poor preparations, weak buildings and unnecessary infrastructure, which had been a waste that had infuriated the locals with the "regime". There was, however, never any evidence of this. A study by a senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool, cited an interview with a reporter at the

US-funded RFE/RL: “When he himself went to Sochi after the Olympic games, he said that ‘everything looked fine’, there were new roads built, it was cleaner, and people generally looked happier”, however he went on to say that “his mission was to ‘find people who were not happy’” (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018).

The cartoon *Masha and the Bear*, popular around the world, has also been labelled Russian propaganda. The cartoon is an independent project without state funding, although critics have argued the cartoon aims to subvert children by creating a positive image of Russian symbols such as bears (Mcmanus, 2018). While the bear is accused of representing a protector, the critics have failed to identify any out-group that is vilified as the “Other”. The US also reduces or cancels cultural exchange programs with Russia and China as they are feared to be tools of propaganda, without clearly conceptualising the term propaganda.

## CONCLUSION

Propaganda entails developing a simplistic and repetitive language that conforms with the binary stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them”. In 1966, Abraham Maslow stated: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail”. When the liberal ideology is the only legitimate tool for power projection, then every international issue will be framed as democracy and human rights issues.

Rather than seeking common words and concepts to compare “Us” and “Them”, the language aims to disassociate and reduce a sense of shared belonging. The use of words such as justice, freedom, openness, equality, constitution and democracy is built into the description of the in-group, which is contrasted with words such as authoritarian, dictatorship, unlawful, radical, aggressive and imperial to characterise the out-group. In Orwell’s concept of Newspeak, he argued that the language is manipulated to prevent dissent from being expressed: “In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (Orwell, 1949: 50).

There is an absence of common words and concepts to describe the West and Russia, which makes comparison difficult. The immediate consequence is that the security dilemma cannot be mitigated. “We” do not pose any threat but solely promote benign values, and “they” have no legitimate security interests to be defended. The language and narrative are highly effective to mobilise support for confronting an adversary,



although it undermines diplomacy. The uncompromising stance of the US is efficient to enhance the credibility of security guarantees, although a workable peace with adversaries is obstructed when compromise is equated to appeasement.

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# Legitimising Hierarchies: An International System of Sovereign Inequality

## INTRODUCTION

Propaganda is an indispensable tool to justify hierarchies in the international system between the superior and the inferior. In his seminal novel *Animal Farm*, published in 1945, George Orwell predicted the eventual degeneration and collapse of Stalinism. The novel tells a story of idealism in which farm animals' rebel against the human farmer, who symbolised exploitative capitalism, to create a fair society where animals are treated as equals. Gradually, the ideals of the new society become corrupted by the pigs who act as a new elite who behaves like the humans. Paradoxically, new hierarchies are established to represent and defend the virtues of equality. Eventually, the motto of the rebellion is changed from "all animals are equal" to "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others".

Democracies similarly advocate for an idealist internationalism that is linked to an entity of power. The democratic propaganda model infers a moral high ground to liberal democracies to the extent that sovereign equality between nations become immoral. Internationalist causes focusing on human freedoms eventually become subservient to national causes, and values that are sold as transcending power competition instead become instruments of power competition. The West promotes liberal democratic legitimacy as an instrument of sovereign

inequality in which “all states are equal, but some states are more equal than others”.

Should states have sovereign equality, or should the extent of sovereignty depend on civilizational and democratic development? Relativism is problematic as governments led by the rule of law and represent the will of the people have a higher moral standing than self-serving tyrannical governments. A common and seemingly reasonable argument is that governments without adequately democracy should not have equal representation in the international system. The implication is that the extent of democracy at the domestic level should determine privileges that limit democracy in the international system. Liberal democracy thus becomes a hegemonic norm.

Such a system creates immense incentives for propaganda to elevate “Our” liberal democratic credentials, and demean the democracy and human rights of the “Other”. If the West is a force for good and its adversaries are simply defined as authoritarian, can there be legitimate opposition to the West? From Woodrow Wilson ambition to make the world safe for democracies to Reagan democratic expansionist agenda, power is sold as values and virtue. Liberal democracy becomes an instrument of propaganda by selling it as a universal value in a world divided between democracy and various forms of evil, which creates a demand for hierarchies and sovereign inequality. Universal values are advanced as a struggle between sequential binaries as a superior Western civilisation has throughout history struggled against barbarians, monarchy, militarism, fascism, communism, terrorism and authoritarianism.

The polarisation between dichotomous stereotypes of superiors and inferiors have historically produced sovereign inequality. In the past, the conflict between Western powers and the rest of the world was sold as civilisation versus barbarity. The European colonial powers pursued a Civilising Mission as the White Man’s Burden, the settler colonies became the frontier where civilisation met with barbarity and the Manifest Destiny of the US eventually went beyond North America to remake the world in the image of the US.

The implied hierarchical ordering of civilisation versus barbarians continues with ideology. Framing the world as divided between liberal democracy and authoritarianism creates legitimacy to replace international law with the Orwellian concept of a “rules-based international order” that decouples legitimacy from legality. The rules-based international system endows the West with the prerogative to exempt itself from international

law. The West can interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, pursue unilateral economic sanctions and “humanitarian interventions” and make arbitrary decisions about self-determination versus territorial integrity to determine the fate of other peoples. Yet, the opponents of the West are expected to abide by international law.

This chapter first outlines the concept of idealist internationalism as a source of propaganda. Idealist internationalism makes a moral case for embracing values to transcend power politics, although these values become subordinated to a national cause as the “Other” is assigned the role as an opponent to these values. Second, liberal internationalism represents a continuation of Western civilising missions in which the world is divided into superiors with full sovereignty versus barbarians undeserving of sovereignty. Last, in the post-Cold War era, pan-European security agreements and international law have incrementally been dismantled in favour of a rules-based international system structured according to sovereign inequality.

### “REALIST LIBERALISM” VERSUS IDEALIST INTERNATIONALISM

Herz (1950a) defined the concept of “realist liberalism” as an alternative to idealist internationalism. Idealist internationalism entails the introduction of universal values and ideals aimed to transcend power politics. Ideals of human freedom are commonly and genuinely introduced into the international system as a transformative force that “separates the present evil world from the brave new world of the future” (Herz, 1950a: 164). However, eventually the internationalist ideals “become subservient to a primarily ‘national’ cause, or rather, the maintenance of the regime of one specific ‘big power’” (Herz, 1950a: 171). In contrast, realist liberalism entails the advancement of liberal idealism to the extent possible by recognising the realities of power politics.

Liberalism introduces what are considered pacifying concepts such as democracy, human rights and other ideals into the realm of politics to transcend the brutality of the international anarchy in which states compete for survival. Herz (1950a) cautioned that the efforts by liberals and idealists to transcend the security dilemma result in merely ignoring the security dilemma, thus exacerbating the destructiveness of power politics. The solution is therefore to recognise the realist foundations that states primarily compete for power and security, although once the realist

realities have been addressed there should be ambitions to build on the ideals of liberalism by introducing concepts such as human rights.

Throughout history, there have been genuine intentions to spread civilisation, law and liberal ideals to elevate humanity as a common good beyond the national power. Although, the international anarchy caused by the state being the highest sovereign will always give primacy to the national cause. All platforms of idealist internationalism have therefore eventually become subservient to the national cause. Idealist internationalism then exacerbates the crimes of realists by legitimising extreme actions to transform the world and it delegitimises rivals and the entire concept of a balance of power.

If an entity of power such as a state or military alliance is depicted as a righteous force for freedom in the world, how can there possibly be legitimate opposition? Thus, the ideals of reducing if not ending power politics end up becoming mere propaganda tools to legitimise extreme power politics. Before becoming the sixth president of the US Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams (1821), cautioned against succumbing to the lure of idealist internationalism as he argued the US

goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.

Propagandists often sell power politics as democracy and human rights. Propaganda commonly employs artificial stereotypes and ideology that purports to advance virtuous ideals, yet the objectives instead undermine these ideals (Stanley, 2015: 53). State leaders are more likely to resort to liberal lies and rhetoric when they violate international law, as they require an alternative source of legitimacy (Mearsheimer, 2013: 81). Human security and state security are conflicting concepts as the former can be promoted to denigrate the latter. Morgenthau (1948: 9) thus argued:



There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral actions. Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics.

Democracy is sold as freedom and the advancement of civilisation, although used as a political currency to organise relations between a superior and inferior. Carr's seminal work in 1939 on the twenty years crisis after the First World War recognised:

Most political ideas which have strongly influenced mankind have been based on professedly universal principles and have therefore had, at any rate in theory, an international character. The ideas of the French Revolution, free trade, communism in its original form of 1848 or in its reincarnation of 1917, Zionism, the idea of the League of Nations, are all at first sight (as they were in intention) examples of international opinion divorced from power and fostered by international propaganda. (Carr, 1985: 138)

Once power politics is sold as virtuous principles such as civilisation, freedom, democracy and human rights, the enemy must be sold as the exact opposite. Carl Schmitt (2008: 54) argued:

Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy... The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being... When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy.

Liberal theory presents an attractive and optimistic view of the world as improving domestic governance is assumed to be externalised in more benevolent foreign policies. Advancing values of human freedom and good governance are thus presented as a positive-sum approach to security that negates the security dilemma. However, liberal theory also has a dark side. When the internal characteristics of states are considered the source of conflict, they are likely to be disproportionately identified in the adversary. One's own civilizational characteristics, race, religion,

values or form of governance is deemed inherently good, while sources of conflicts and evil is externalised as a characteristic of the “Other”. Security is not achieved by accepting mutual constraints as this entails also constraining the virtuous side. The entire concept of security through sovereign equality and mutual constraint is thus replaced with the objective of converting or civilising the adversary—and if it fails then resort to containment or destruction of the opponent. The prospect of transitioning from the current volatile present to an era of perpetual peace or the end of history warrants major confrontation:

Idealistic diplomacy slips too often into fanaticism; it divides states into good and evil, into peace-loving and bellicose. It envisions a permanent peace by the punishment of the latter and the triumph of the former. The idealist, believing he has broken with power politics exaggerates its crimes. (Aron, 1966: 584)

### IDEOLOGICAL FUNDAMENTALISM AND DEMOCRACIES AT WAR

Leading scholars of international relations have identified the peculiarity of ideological fundamentalism among democracies. Ideological fundamentalism refers to considering actors as enemies based on an assigned negative political identity rather than their actual behaviour in the international system, while presenting oneself as inherently benign due to an assigned positive political identity (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

States are suspicious and apprehensive about the intentions of other states, although often cannot comprehend that other states are fearful of them (Jervis, 1976: 75). Threats are based on the capabilities and intentions of other actors, although liberal democracies insist that they have an inherently benign nature and intentions to the extent that their capabilities do not pose a threat. Waltz noted that democracies were especially inclined towards irrational behaviour because

citizens of democratic states tend to think of their countries as good, aside from what they do, simply because they are democratic... democratic states also tend to think of undemocratic states as bad, aside from what they do, simply because they are undemocratic. (Waltz, 2000: 11)

The US has especially been skilled in using ideology to develop narratives in which its power interests are linked to virtue in terms of the US being the guardian of freedom worldwide that holds back the barbarians. Although, the inability of the US to view itself through the eyes of others is the key problem of US propaganda (Snow, 2004). President Reagan seemingly did not recognise a security dilemma as he expressed astonishment that the Russians actually feared US aggression, as the struggle between the US and the Soviet Union was defined as one between a virtuous people against an evil empire. In his biography, Reagan (1990: 74) expressed his amazement:

Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians: Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans... I'd always felt that from our deeds it must be clear to anyone that Americans were a moral people who starting at the birth of our nation had always used our power only as a force of good in the world.

Flawed analyses create poor policies. Without recognition of the security dilemma and the possibility that the in-group can present a threat to the out-group, then all conflicts in the world must be attributed to the internal characteristics of the out-group. In the rivalry with Russia, all conflicts are attributed to Putin's personal ambitions or Russia's instinct to restore an empire—both motivations having nothing to do with Western policies. Subsequently, compromise becomes indistinguishable from appeasement.

Liberal theory and ideology are paradoxical by promising an escape from destructive power politics—a utopian end that justifies radical means. Liberal theory tends to convey a moral foreign policy by advocating for virtuous ideals such as human freedoms. The prospect for positive-sum security becomes possible if the internal characteristics of states dictate policies in the international system. Case in point, promoting liberal democracy is believed to be a positive-sum approach to security that can deliver perpetual peace. Yet, there is no legitimate opposition those seeking to constrain the West are portrayed as fearing and opposing democracy.

## THE PROPAGANDA OF LIBERAL IMPERIALISM

Cosmopolitanism is largely defined by Socrates' announcement that he was "a citizen of the world". The sentiment represents genuine benign ideals about shared humanity and affinity towards the entire globe as one large community. However, these same ideals underpinned Alexander the Great's "brotherhood of man" or "the unity of mankind" as he expanded his empire to the East. The ideals of liberal internationalism similarly that elevate democracy and human rights as a central theme in international politics similarly have a tradition of both pacification and imperialism (Doyle, 1983).

Under European colonisation since the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the expansion of markets went hand in hand with the missionary work of spreading Christianity and civilisation as a moral argument for constructing a world of sovereign inequality—dividing into political subjects and objects. Development and Westernisation were therefore promoted openly as two sides of the same coin as development entailed civilising barbaric peoples. Russia's role was always ambiguous as it was a Christian European empire, although having been colonised itself by the Mongols for 250 years.

The American and French liberal revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century introduced liberal ideals that reshaped governance in domestic politics, although also became central in reimagining the international system. Liberalism in both the US and France were eventually linked the concepts to hegemony. The genuine belief in liberal democracy as a superior model of domestic governance legitimises the construction of a hegemonic international system where power enlightened democracies decide (Herz, 1950b). Conquest and hegemony to defend the freedom of other peoples is deemed a responsibility of the enlightened to defend when natural law is elevated above legal positivism.

The French Revolution transferred sovereignty and authority from the monarchy to the Third Estate—the people. The French Revolution was also expected to transform the international system by transcending power rivalry as nationalism would manifest itself as an international system as a brotherhood of free and equal nations. Concurrently, the universal values of liberalism implied limitations on state sovereignty and the peaceful values were to be imposed by force. The French National Convention therefore declared in 1792 that France would "come to the aid of all

peoples who are seeking to recover their liberty". The possibility of transitioning from a world of conflict to one of perpetual peace legitimised aggression and imperialism.

The US was born out of a revolution that relied heavily on the construction of a binary division that pitted the oppressed colonists against the vicious tyranny of George III (Morgan, 1992). Power in colonial America was also wielded by a small elite and the dichotomous portrayal of the British colonists in America and Britain was key to "inventing the people" of America (Morgan, 1988). The American civilisation was then contrasted to the Native Americans as the barbarian "Other".

The term Manifest Destiny was coined in 1845 in which expansionism and hegemony were associated with morality, liberty and advancement of civilisation. Manifest Destiny linked hegemony with virtue as the US was destined by God to spread democracy and capitalism through expansionism and dominance. Thomas Jefferson argued the advancement of civilisation "justified extermination" of Native Americans, and Theodore Roosevelt later affirmed, "extermination was as ultimately beneficial as it was inevitable" (Mann, 2005: ix).

The Monroe Doctrine that sougths US dominance in the Western hemisphere was interpreted similarly as a virtuous hegemon. US Secretary of State, Richard Olney (1895), argued the US is "sovereign on this continent" and "civilization must either advance or retrograde accordingly as its supremacy is extended or curtailed".

The influential "frontier thesis" of Fredrick Jackson Turner (2008) in 1893 stipulated that preserving the virtuous character of the US was largely the consequence of the American frontier vis-à-vis the barbaric Native Americans, which created challenges ahead as the Americans reached the Pacific and eliminated their barbaric counterpart. The inference that American civilisation required a barbaric "Other" was central to the pursuit of empire in the Pacific.

Before 1898, the US had to a large extent defined its civilisational progress as an alternative to the savagery of the Europeans. However, the American identity transformed with expansionism into the Pacific. After defeating the Spanish in 1898, the US acquired the Philippines as a colony and other territorial possessions. As a colonial power with a civilising mission, the narrative of a common Western civilisation strengthened. While Theodor Roosevelt depicted colonialism as a form of Christian charity, Mark Twain believed that colonialism was a Faustian bargain in

which the US traded its soul for power. The division of the world along civilisation and barbarity underpinned the argument for a world based on sovereign inequality:

It is the function of the Anglo-Saxon race to confer these gifts of civilization... It is said that we have no right to go to a land occupied by a barbaric people and interfere with their life. It is said that if they prefer barbarism they have a right to remain barbarians. I deny the right of barbaric people to retain possession of any quarter of the globe. What I have already said I reaffirm: barbarism has no rights which civilization is bound to respect. (Abbott, 1902: 10)

Democracy promotion became a central objective of US foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson declared it as an objective for joining the First World War. The US had previously defined its morality as avoiding entanglements in destructive European wars. However, President Woodrow Wilson ran a powerful propaganda initiative to depict the war as Right versus Wrong. Wilson's Committee on Public Information was an agency to create support for the US in the war. The objective of the Committee on Public Information was to convince Americans that their enemy was a regime and an ideology rather than a people and an army, and if democracy was defeated in Europe then democracy would be endangered everywhere (Taylor, 2003: 184). Wilson thus introduced a significant shift in the role of US democracy, from the *passive* posture to be emulated, to taking on an *active* missionary duty.

Once the Cold War had commenced, Washington recognised the idealist internationalism of Moscow that was subservient to a national cause—although failed to recognise the corresponding US inclinations towards a liberal universalism. A US National Security Council Report in 1950 cautioned against “the ideological pretensions of the Kremlin” by claiming to be the representative of universalism:

In its pretensions to being (a) the source of a new universal faith and (b) the model ‘scientific’ society, the Kremlin cynically identifies itself with the genuine aspirations of large numbers of people, and places itself at the head of an international crusade with all of the benefits which derive therefrom. (NSC68)

There was some resistance towards clothing US policies in the language of democracy and human rights as it could end up constraining US policies.

George Humphrey, the Treasury Secretary during the Eisenhower administration, opined: “We should stop talking so much about democracy, and make it clear that we are quite willing to support dictatorships of the right if their policies are pro-American” (Streeter, 2000: 33). Henry Kissinger famously attempted to reassert the realist foundation in US policies by stating “*America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests*”.

The rivalry of the Cold War featured two ideologies with competing concepts of universal values of human freedom. Early on in the Cold War, the US shifted some focus from capitalism to democracy in response to the negative associations with capitalism even though several states in the capitalist camp were dictatorships (Gaddis, 2006). The focus on democracy, human rights, aid and economic development presented a Universalist appeal to the wider world under US leadership.

The high standard of living in the US was a central feature of propaganda as capitalism was the tide that would raise all boats. The Marshall Plan was a foreign policy success in terms of offering economic assistance to Europe in return for opening up their markets to dominant US industries, which concurrently positioned the US as a benevolent power. As many Europeans were sceptical that the Marshall Plan would be instrumental to subordinate their economies and cement American influence on the continent, the Marshall Plan devoted significant funds to the publicity that promoted the appeal of the American standard of living. The world’s largest ad agency, J. Walter Thompson, worked on the Marshall Plan before getting the NATO account to reinvent the military alliance and “make clear to the world the striking superiority, as much moral as material, of the Western conception of Man and his dignity” (De Grazia, 2002).

Democracy, economic development and the potential of a US standard of living was very different face to capitalism than the preceding colonisation by empires in search of controlling the global marketplace. The negative associations of capitalism were also addressed as NATO could donate some of its surplus to the underdeveloped world. A capitalist narrative of international solidarity thus developed that harmonised with Christian values. Economic assistance became a central weapon in the ideological rivalry with the Soviet Union that purportedly advanced the interests of the workers of the world. The dominant economic power of the US legitimised its hegemony and expansion through consent, as an empire by invitation.

It was important for the US to present the democratic and capitalist ideals it championed as universal values, as opposed to exporting Western values and institutions as a continuation of colonialism. The spread of capitalism, democracy and human rights was initially presented openly as a strategic political weapon, although incrementally it was expressed more as apolitical values that the West had a moral obligation to promote in the name of human freedoms. Policies were deemed more moral and thus efficient when they were seen as rooted in benign and universal ideals. Language and actions thus diverge as the increased moral justification increased the ability to manoeuvre in pursuit of national interests. Once the US had advocated universal rights, the breach of those rights among adversarial states gave the US the responsibility to intervene.

The values of human freedom were internalised by Western societies, which culminated in the emergence of various solidarity movements, primarily on the political Left, which opposed US warfare and renewed Western imperialism. The communist threat was therefore imperative as an opponent that legitimised US military interventionism around the world and delegitimised domestic opposition to such policies as Soviet sympathisers.

Amid the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, US Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson (1962: 6) remarked in the emergency UNSC meeting that:

Against the idea of diversity, Communism asserts the idea of uniformity; against freedom, inevitability; against choice, compulsion; against democracy, dogma; against independence, ideology; against tolerance, conformity. Its faith is that the iron laws of history will require every nation to traverse the same predestined path to the same predestined conclusion. Given this faith in a monolithic world, the very existence of diversity is a threat to the Communist future. I do not assert that Communism must always remain a messianic faith. Like other fanaticisms of the past, it may in time lose its sense of infallibility and accept the diversity of human destiny.

By the 1980s, the US began to more openly articulate its national cause concealed as idealist internationalism in which freedom demanded conformity. President Reagan argued in 1982:



The democracies, I suggested, like the Communists, should adopt a policy of expansionism: We should try to help the new countries of Africa and elsewhere embrace democracy and become evangelists worldwide for freedom, individual liberty, representative government, freedom of the press, self-expression, and the rule of law. (Reagan, 1990)

The US legitimised its invasions and subversions in Latin America and beyond as a crusade for freedom. President Reagan even referred to the Contras in Nicaragua as “our brothers”, “freedom fighters” and the “moral equal of our Founding Fathers” (Boyd, 1985).

### END OF HISTORY: PERPETUATING LIBERAL HEGEMONY

The collapse of the Soviet Union ended the bipolar power rivalry and the binary ideological rivalry, thus concentrating power in the collective West and seemingly making liberal democracy the sole ideological option. The “end of history” thesis laid the foundation for a liberal international order, in which power competition and ideological competition had come to a permanent end. Under this ideological veil of benevolence, stability implicitly rested on hegemony by ensuring large powers as Russia remained a political object. The seemingly virtuous claim that human security could be elevated above state-centric security concealed that this would take the form of sovereign inequality—one set of rules for the West and another for its adversaries.

The post-Cold War era of unipolarity enabled the US and the collective West to establish an international system based on sovereign inequality, in which expansionism and the use of military force have been legitimised by liberal democratic values. In no uncertain terms, President Bush (1992) outlined the US global civilising mission merely one month after the collapse of the Soviet Union: “*We are the United States of America, the leader of the west that has become the leader of the world, and as long as I am president, I will continue to lead in support of freedom everywhere*”.

The collapse of the Soviet Union presented a paradox—the US was seemingly able to lead by consent due to the absence of alternatives, although without the looming threat of communism the US also lost the legitimacy for using military power to assert US influence globally. Joseph Nye (2003: 6) acknowledged: “The absence of a warrior ethic in modern democracies means that the use of force requires an elaborate moral justification to ensure popular support”. The post-Cold War

era was thus defined by democracy promotion, humanitarian interventionism, the global war on terror and the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, all with the common denominator of sovereign inequality.

In 1993, US national security advisor Anthony Lake (1993) argued that “the successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement — enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies”. Furthermore, liberalism would legitimise empire as “Our humanitarian actions nurture the American public’s support for our engagement abroad” and “Unless NATO is willing over time to assume a broader role, then it will lose public support, and all our nations will lose a vital bond of transatlantic and European security” (Lake, 1993).

The democratic peace theory, stipulating that democracies do not go to war with each other, justified an international system based on democratic exceptionalism, in which states could claim certain privileges based on their democratic credentials as it implied a peaceful nature and moral superiority (Geis & Wagner, 2008). The implication was to divide the world along an artificial dichotomy of first-class legitimate states versus second-class illegitimate states (Geis, 2013). Liberal democracies can claim the moral authority to break security agreements, rules and norms that exists between themselves and authoritarian states while insisting that the rules still apply for the authoritarian opponent (Müller, 2004).

Through the artificial dichotomies of democracy versus authoritarianism and values versus power, the alternative to Western hegemony is a return to a Yalta 2.0 in which Europe is carved into zones of exclusive influence. It is also inferred that an inclusive security architecture and pan-European security agreement create constraints that prevent liberal values from being spread. This belief is premised on the idea of a civilising mission in which relations must be organised as sovereign inequality in a subject-object or teacher-student format. However, states develop more open societies in the absence of external threats, and the return to exclusive blocs prevents a place for common values in pan-European security. The expansion of NATO, without the inclusion of Russia, therefore has a detrimental impact on the democratisation of Russia (Russett & Oneal, 2001).

Liberal democracy legitimises imperial policies as the spread and defence of values justifies interference in domestic affairs and the disregard for consent and representation of other states (Jahn, 2005: 177–178). Instead of demilitarising international relations, democratic peace theory

justified “new wars”, in which democracies claimed the prerogative to spread democracy and human rights with military force (Geis et al., 2007). Due to these unique privileges, political leaders have an incentive to impose an “ideological frame” to portray all security issues as a moral dichotomy. Democracy itself can be undermined as it is extremely difficult for the public to express legitimate dissent to policies justified by ideology and moral authority (Moravcsik, 1994).

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made the case for the unilateral use of military force in 1998, as the US should not be constrained by international law due to its uniqueness and special mission: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us” (Herbert, 1998). Liberal democracy was subsequently promoted as a hegemonic norm:

Promoting democratization or defending human rights are privileged channels for the exportation of political technologies, economic recipes, or juridical models. No longer providing the basis for the critique of power, they have become the main language of global power – a transformation that has gone unnoticed in the enthusiastic atmosphere of the last fin de siècle. (Guilhot, 2005: 8)

A few months after the disastrous invasion of Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair suggested that not enough was done to advance liberal internationalism: “Ours are not Western values. They are the universal values of the human spirit... The spread of freedom is the best security for the free. It is our last line of defence and our first line of attack”. British diplomat Robert Cooper, who helped to develop Blair’s new doctrine of liberal internationalism argued that the doctrine necessitated limiting state sovereignty. Cooper (2002) advocated for “the new liberal imperialism” as throughout history “order meant empire. Those within the empire had order, culture and civilisation. Outside it lay barbarians, chaos and disorder. The image of peace and order through a single hegemonic power centre has remained strong ever since”. The age of liberal empire was envisioned as a new “frontier thesis” where the civilised must find its spirit and identity in the confrontation with barbarians:

Among ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle... we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era - force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century world. (Cooper, 2002)

Liberal interventionists and neoconservative imperialists unified the political spectrum from the political Left to the political Right in favour of expansionism. Liberalism shifted in accordance with Fukuyama's *End of History*, in which it was expected the world would unify around shared ideological concepts under US leadership. On the political right, neoconservatism rose in which the morality of the US would be defined by "advancing the cause of freedom around the world" and "a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness abroad" (Kristol & Brooks, 1997). In *An End to Evil*, the more hawkish Richard Perle and David Frum suggested that "when it is in our power and our interests, we should toss dictators aside with no more compunction than a police sharp shooter feels when he downs a hostage-taker" (Frum & Perle, 2003: 114).

While the lesson of Germany's history of fascism and genocide had previously been to constrain its military posturing and avoid war, the liberal internationalist agenda flipped the logic as Germany's history with genocide implied it had a special responsibility to prevent genocide in other places. Germany's Foreign Minister and vice-chancellor, Joschka Fischer, explained he had been raised on two key principles: "'never another war' and 'never another Auschwitz'", and in Kosovo "these two maxims came into conflict, and I had to give up the notion of never another war" (Spiegel, 2013). The symptoms of idealist internationalism thus became more visible in the post-Cold War era:

Democracy and human rights, once weapons for the critique of power, have now become part of the arsenal of power itself... Historically developed as an absolute limit of politics, the doctrine of human rights has given birth to a politics of human rights – a notion that while familiar to us is paradoxical if not self-contradictory. (Guilhot, 2005: 8)

After the September 11 attacks, terrorism took the centre state of representing the barbarians. Ideological fundamentalists characterise states by what they are, not by what they do. The terrorist could either hate the US for what it is—a liberal democracy with extensive freedoms or what

it does—the aggressive and hegemonic policies towards the Middle East. Susan Sontag cautioned in *The New Yorker* against “the self-righteous drivell and outright deceptions” that were used to explain the attack: “Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a ‘cowardly’ attack on ‘civilization’ or ‘liberty’ or ‘humanity’ or ‘the free world’ but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?”. However, such rhetoric was denounced as treasonous and anti-American. After the September 11 attacks, the US and NATO began their War on Terror that was accompanied by the biggest public relations effort in the history of the US. \$520 million were spent on J. Walter Thompson to promote “Brand America” to young people in the Muslim world (Sussman, 2010: 98).

The simple binary framing allowed the Bush administration to place Al-Qaida, Iraq, Iran and other incompatible entities into the same category. Framing the world as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, or between good and evil, shifts the morality from multilateralism to unilateralism. Vice President Cheney rejected Iran’s offer to cooperate with the stabilisation of Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 under the Manichean mantra “we don’t talk to evil”, in which a workable peace under multilateralism was dismissed in favour of unilateralism (BBC, 2007). Meanwhile, it was revealed that the CIA used feminism to sell the ongoing war in Afghanistan, as a propaganda strategy to boost support and shame opposition to the war. As a leaked CIA report argued: “Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban”, and framing the mission as a crusade for women rights would contribute to “overcome pervasive scepticism among women in Western Europe towards the ISAF mission” (Wikileaks, 2010). In an op-ed by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Hollywood star Angelina Jolie, the message was disseminated by purporting that “Nato has the responsibility and opportunity to be a leading protector of women’s rights” (Stoltenberg & Jolie, 2017).

With the rise of China and Russia, the West incrementally returned to a security strategy focused primarily on great power rivalry. The increasingly common argument became that the world was polarised between liberal democracies and authoritarian states, and security relied on the ability of democracies to “stick together” under US leadership (Kagan, 2008). As liberal values confer legitimacy, the West has a unique prerogative in the world while there is no conceptual space for legitimate Russian influence beyond its borders. Sherr, a fellow at the UK Defense Academy argues

that “NATO and the EU exist as communities that rest on shared values, interests, and priorities. If Russia does not adhere to these, it cannot claim the rights and advantages of countries that do” (Tsygankov & Fominykh, 2010: 28).

The use of ideology to advance sovereign inequality is also an instrument for power competition in third countries. The efforts to present power politics as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism demands propaganda to depict allies as democratic and adversaries as attempting to undermine democracy. Democracy is allegedly promoted in adversarial states such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran and former Soviet republics, while democracy promotion is not required in allied countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Pakistan and Oman. The US even support toppling democratic governments that are not aligned with the US under the auspices of promoting democracy, such as Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004 and 2014, Gaza in 2007 and Egypt in 2013.

### THE VIRTUE OF CONFRONTATION VERSUS THE SIN OF COMPROMISE

Andrius Kubilius, a member of the European Parliament and the former Prime Minister of Lithuania, advocated for a “democracy first” policy, which requires undermining the authority of the Russian government within Russia and the international system. The principle of “democracy first” entails: “the European Parliament has very clearly stated that future EU relations with Russia will depend not on ideas of ‘reset’ or ‘friendship’ with Putin or the Kremlin, but on the democratic transformation of Russia” (Kubilius, 2021: 8–9). The implementation of this policy means that “instead of directly talking to Putin, the EU must engage with the pro-European Russia of the future, addressing the majority of citizens who desire serious change in Russia” (Kubilius, 2021: 12).

A report from the Committee of Foreign Affairs in the European Parliament (2021) urged the EU “*not to recognise the parliament of Russia*” in expectation of election irregularities. The report also suggested consequences such as expulsion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), stopping the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, and intensifying sanctions against Russia. The objective according to the EU report should be nothing less than regime change. The EU was applauded for having “deterred the Kremlin regime from

further aggression against Ukraine, but they are silent with respect to containing President Putin's war against the people of Russia" (European Parliament, 2021). The legitimacy of Russian elections should be determined by "EU tribunals" that will conduct investigations in cooperation with Bellingcat (European Parliament, 2021).

On the other side of the Atlantic, US Congressmen Steve Cohen and Joe Wilson proposed a resolution to end the US recognition of Putin as the leader of Russia if he pursued another presidential term after 2024. The resolution states: "Any attempt by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin to remain in office beyond the end of his current and final term on May 7, 2024, shall warrant nonrecognition on the part of the United States".

### TOWARDS THE ORWELLIAN "RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER"

International law represents the notion of sovereign equality that imposes mutual constraints on all states, which can be expressed as "all states are equal". The liberal democracies of the West advocate for equality based on the principles of liberalism, although the different levels of democratic development imply that the world is divided into political subjects and objects—teachers with full sovereignty and students without full sovereignty.

Human security, in which the individual is the referent point, can be in direct conflict with state security in which the state is the entity to secure. States can interfere in the internal affairs of other states to either assist in improving governance or to undermine internal cohesion. Creating a common region of values must therefore take place within a common security architecture where power competition is managed to ensure that good governance is prioritised above power politics.

A durable and resilient international system relies on negotiations and compromise to develop common rules and decisions to govern relations between states. The rules-based international order abandons consensus by instead leaning on values to act unilaterally. Democracies are often inclined towards international organisations that are oligarchic rather than democratic to defend the values from the majority:

The more ‘democratic’ the organization of a group is “on paper,” i.e., by law or intention, the more the key strategists within the group will feel it to be necessary to assert their weight, influence, and indispensability, in order to defend themselves against control by the people. This holds true not only for cynical “power politicians,” but quite equally for those genuinely concerned with the welfare of the people. (Herz, 1950b: 165–166)

The West attempted to establish a values-based international system after the Second World War. However, the Soviet leadership was concerned that the West would merely use human rights as a weapon for interference into the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union to weaken an adversary. In December 1948, the Soviet Union abstained as UN members signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). While the Soviet Union did not sign on to the UDHR, it attempted to use the text to lecture the US about human rights abuses such as the treatment of the African-American minority.

The Helsinki Accords of 1975, officially known as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe—Final Act (CSCE), introduced human rights as a topic of international security. The Helsinki Accords became the foundational document for a common pan-European security order that sought to reduce power competition and enhance human freedoms. The Helsinki Accords was based on the concept of *realist idealism* as the first principle was “sovereign equality” and the seventh principle was “respect for human rights”. The success of the Helsinki Accords would rest on mitigating power competition to ensure that enhancing human rights was prioritised above destabilising the adversary.

Gorbachev’s initiative for a “Common European Home” was largely motivated by the developments from the Helsinki Accords. Gorbachev aimed to end the rivalry between the two competing military blocs and concurrently pursued extensive reforms to open up the Soviet system. The Common European Home was conceptualised as a shared European house with many separate rooms that could accommodate both capitalist and communist states. The concept of a Common European Home envisioned the dismantlement of both the Warsaw Pact and NATO as confrontational alliances, and instead develop inclusive security institutions (Tsygankov, 2016: 458).



The US presented the counter-initiative of “Europe Whole and Free” in 1989 which inferred one large room of liberal democratic values under US leadership. The concept of a “Europe Whole and Free”, paradoxically implied the exclusion of Russia from equal participation as a political subject. The term “Europe Whole and Free” was later adopted by NATO as a sign that Europe would remain divided, and the term associated “European” with “civilised”. The “Europe Whole and Free” format eventually unravelled the parallel format for realist idealism as East–West divisions of capitalism versus communism in Europe would be replaced by a subject-objective divide of civilisational teachers versus students.

The Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 was a post-Cold War advancement of the Helsinki Accords. The Charter was consistent with the concept of realist idealism by elevating the role of human rights, although within the framework of “sovereign equality” and “ending of the division of Europe” as “Security is indivisible and the security of every participating state is inseparably linked to that of all the others”.

In 1994, the principles of the Helsinki Accords was transformed into the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a collective pan-European security institution. The OSCE reaffirmed the principle of “sovereign equality” three times and “indivisible security”, in addition to including democracy and human rights as common values. Several leading academics expected that NATO would lose its purpose and wither as the OSCE became the central institution for Europe. However, the OSCE was never allowed to take the centre stage of facilitating collective European security as the US considered the organisation a challenge to US global hegemony (Sarotte, 2011).

The US abandoned the concept of common European security architecture and instead sought to advance the “Europe Whole and Free” concept through NATO expansionism that would eventually absorb the entire continent except for Russia. At a time when the West and Russia should have negotiated a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement in the form of pan-European security agreements, the West instead began discussing the expansion of NATO under the guise of spreading democracy. As Kennan lamented:

Why, with all the hopeful possibilities engendered by the end of the cold war, should East-West relations become centered on the question of who would be allied with whom and, by implication, against whom in some fanciful, totally unforeseeable and most improbable future military conflict?

Besides reverting to a zero-sum format for European security, the decision to pursue “European integration” through expansionist exclusive blocs also cancelled the format for realist idealism. The principle of “sovereign equality” and “indivisible security” enshrined in the Helsinki Accords and its successor agreements were abandoned as liberal democracy was incrementally advanced as an instrument for sovereign inequality and bloc politics.

The inclusion of Russia in a pan-European security arrangement was rejected as it would divide the Western alliance. Once the West abandoned the path of developing the OSCE as an inclusive pan-Europe security institution, both Yeltsin and Putin inquired about the possibility of becoming a NATO member as an alternative path to indivisible security. Without a response, Moscow made proposals for ending the dividing lines in Europe with the proposal for a new European security architecture in 2008 and thereafter advocated for a Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok in 2010. All suggestions for a Helsinki II agreement were either ignored or dismissed as a “peace offensive” to divide the West. Furthermore, Russian inclusion would cause an outcry in former Soviet satellite states that prefers a European security architecture based on containment and deterrence of Russia.

The West defines a stable Europe as requiring a united front and to negotiate from a position of strength vis-à-vis Russia, which entails displaying firmness rather than compromise. Cooperation in formats such as the NATO-Russia Council therefore became pointless as it left no room for a Russian voice. NATO member states negotiated a common position before presenting it united to Russia, at which point the established consensus within NATO could not be changed in the meetings with Russia. Common institutions with Russia were thus NATO unilateralism masquerading as multilateralism, and diplomacy entailed lecturing Russia and presenting demands for unilateral concessions.

The EU’s vision of European integration also implies collective hegemony in the pan-European space. A format of “concentric circles” of different levels of integration, demotes Russia to the role of a peripheral object of security. The mere presence of Russia as an alternative pole of power undermines the EU project: “The overarching image is of one centre and concentric circles, a completely different mental geography from the usual one of several competing centres” (Wæver, 2000: 259). The paradox of the benign hegemon thesis of both the EU and NATO is therefore that their alleged peaceful nature rests on the absence

of rival poles of power, which requires marginalising other great powers such as Russia. Hence, any multilateral formats for Europe to harmonise integration efforts towards the common neighbourhood is rejected.

As relations deteriorated over the competition in the shared neighbourhood, Russia and the EU reached the Common Spaces Agreement in 2005, in which both sides committed to harmonising integration efforts towards the shared neighbourhood to avoid creating new dividing lines in Europe: “They agree to actively promote [regional cooperation and integration] in a mutually beneficial manner, through close result-oriented EU-Russia collaboration and dialogue, thereby contributing effectively to creating a greater Europe without dividing lines and based on common values” (European Council, 2005: 32). However, shortly thereafter the EU created the multilateral Eastern Partnership in which all its eastern neighbours were invited except Russia. Thereafter the EU began to advance Association Agreements with the zero-sum function of decoupling the region from Russia.

By monopolising on security, NATO could sideline international law by invading Yugoslavia in 1999 without a UN mandate. The justification for violating international law was that Russia and China did not have liberal democratic traditions and did not have a legitimate veto. In 2003, the US developed a “coalition of the willing” as an alternative source for legitimacy as it invaded Iraq in violation of international law. Daalder and Lindsay (2004) recognised the need for additional legitimacy for the US to act outside international law, and advocated for establishing an “Alliance of Democracies”. This concept was later reconceptualised in more benign language as a “Concert of Democracies” that would act in the spirit of the UN without accepting constraints imposed by authoritarian states (Ikenberry & Slaughter, 2006). During the 2008 US presidential election, presidential candidate John McCain argued in favour of establishing such a “League of Democracies” as an alternative source of legitimacy than the UN (Geis, 2013). In December 2021, the US organised the first “Summit for Democracy”, which divided the world into democracies versus authoritarian states based on the principle of sovereign inequality. The US and its allies interfere in the domestic affairs of others under the pretext of pursuing “a targeted expansion of U.S. support for democracy around the world”, while upholding their sovereignty under the mantra of “defending” democracy at home (White House, 2021).

## THE “RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER” WITHOUT SPECIFIC RULES

The US and its allies increasingly refer to the “rules-based international order” as opposed to international law. The term rules-based international order is propagandised used as a synonym or advanced stage of international law, although it represents the corruption and cancellation of international law in accordance with the UN Charter. The rules-based international order is an Orwellian concept as it does consist of any specific rules, rather it infers that international humanitarian law endows the US and its allies to violate international law. The strategic ambiguity enables the West to decide when rules have been broken and how the bad actor should be “punished” for their “behaviour”. The West unilaterally introduces contradictory principles and rules, and under the guise of liberal values endows itself the prerogative to decide which principles should apply at different instances. When the West interferes in the domestic affairs of Russia it supports democracy and advances peace, and when Russia interferes in the domestic affairs of the West it is an assault on democracy and comparable to an act of war. An illegal US invasion resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands viewed through the prism of the intentions to advance security and freedom, is interpreted as more benign than a much smaller and possibly legal military actions by Russia as it is framed as an initiative to restore an empire, undermine liberal values and unravel the international order. Through the morally dichotomous framing, the principle of territorial integrity versus self-determination can be selectively applied in Kosovo and Crimea.

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov (2021a) opined that “the rules-based order is the embodiment of double standards. The right to self-determination is recognised as an absolute ‘rule’ whenever it can be used to an advantage”. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, Xie Feng, similarly argued that the US concept of a rules-based international order represents introduces the “law of the jungle” by abandoning universally recognised international law (Global Times, 2021). Lavrov (2021b) criticised the rules-based international order as an effort to construct a parallel legal framework of unilateralism, to replace multilateralism.

The West has been coming up with multiple formats such as the French-German Alliance for Multilateralism, the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, the Global Partnership to

Protect Media Freedom, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, the Call for Action to Strengthen Respect for International Humanitarian Law – all these initiatives deal with subjects that are already on the agenda of the UN and its specialised agencies. These partnerships exist outside of the universally recognised structures so as to agree on what the West wants in a restricted circle without any opponents. After that they take their decisions to the UN and present them in a way that *de facto* amounts to an ultimatum. If the UN does not agree, since imposing anything on countries that do not share the same ‘values’ is never easy, they take unilateral action.

## CONCLUSION: LEGITIMACY AS TRIAL BY PUBLIC OPINION

Selling democracy is a reference to idealist internationalism in which liberal values are demoted to a mere instrument to legitimise unilateralism and hegemony, rather than pursuing a “realist liberalism” to advance universal values as a positive-sum game.

Using liberalism to advance unilateralism and hegemony has manifested itself in the so-called rules-based international order, a parallel order in which legitimacy is decoupled from legality. As international law in accordance with the UN is dismantled and replaced with ambiguous and contested claims of legitimacy, states become more reliant on propaganda. Instead of appealing to the law as defined specifically and consistently by the UN, the struggle for legitimacy subjects all disputes to a trial by public opinion in which the role and value of propaganda elevate dramatically.

An international system based on sovereign inequality tend to rely on elusive legitimacy rather than consistent international law, becomes more reliant on propaganda. The need for legitimacy implies that every international dispute becomes a tribunal of public opinion in which the great powers compete to dominate the narrative. This represents an international system completely reliant on propaganda as even the rules will be defined by the liberal democracy versus authoritarian dichotomy whereas the virtuous West monopolise of the truth.

Propaganda enables the doublethink of developing an authoritarian international system under the auspices of developing freedom and international rules. The need for propaganda increases to sell the concept of Western hegemony as a force for good. The West frames liberal internationalism as an international aristocracy, in which the enlightened few rule to the benefit of all. Yet, the internationalist causes of human freedom become subservient to national causes to sustain the hierarchy, and the

international model of governance degrade into one defined as an international oligarchy. Propaganda is thus required to conceal political realities with the language of virtue.

Framing an international system based on sovereign inequality in the language of values inevitably sets the West on the path to an irreconcilable standoff with Russia. Moscow rejects a pan-European security architecture founded on the benign hegemony of NATO that is elevated above international law, while the West is stuck in a rhetorical trap as security agreements based on sovereign equality is portrayed as a betrayal of liberal democratic values.

Security can be enhanced by pursuing relative power versus an opponent or enhancing mutual security through security agreements. When a state or an alliance of states are not balanced, they have incentives to enhance security by expanding their relative power. Although, when a balance is re-established, security is maximised by accepting mutually beneficial security agreements. Liberal hegemony entails maximising relative power vis-à-vis Russia and selling it as mutually beneficial since power is conflated with values. However, when a balance power reasserts itself, the former liberal hegemon is trapped by its own propaganda committed to the principle that indivisible security does not require mutual constraint.

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# Russiagate: Russophobia Against the Political Opposition

## INTRODUCTION

The Russiagate investigation that emanated from the 2016 US Presidential election was a pivotal moment in the history of anti-Russian propaganda as russophobia became an immensely disruptive instrument in domestic politics. Previously anti-Russian propaganda had primarily served the purpose of establishing conformity around a foreign policy and mobilising resources towards confronting a leading adversary. This time around, russophobia was instrumental in delegitimising and undermining the political opposition and thus contributing to further polarising the US political system.

Propaganda relies heavily on connecting two stimuli to condition the desired response. Much like jeans are linked to sex or cars are linked to status, so are positive or negative stimuli deliberately associated with countries and individuals to rely less on reason to convince an audience. Accusing people of having sympathies or loyalties towards Russia undermines political credibility in the US and much of the West after decades of linking threats and fears to the Russians as the principal adversary. By associating loyalty to the in-group or out-group based on being “tough” or “soft” on Russia, the ability to formulate an ideal foreign policy diminishes.

Donald Trump proved to be an unexpectedly disruptive and resilient presidential candidate capable of challenging the orthodoxies of the in-group. Incendiary and ill-mannered statements and scandals that would sink the presidential campaigns of other candidates had seemingly did little impact on Trump's rise in the polls. For better or worse, populists seize on the growing distance between the elites and the people by claiming to represent the people against an illegitimate political elite. Criticism and derision from Trump's own political party and a hostile media appeared to merely reaffirm his populist credentials—as a candidate detached from the elites and thus owing them nothing.

Trump also took a political contrarian position on Russia at the time of intense anti-Russian sentiments among the political-media class due to the conflict in Ukraine. Trump's argument that "getting along with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing" was consistent with the advice he was receiving. Trump's *chief executive officer* in the election campaign, Steve Bannon, had expressed concerns about US policies towards Russia after the Cold War and feared this conflict distracted from the greater challenge from China. This perspective was likely reaffirmed in Trump's meeting with Henry Kissinger, as Kissinger had become very critical of the hostile rhetoric and policies towards Russia that contributes to reverse the China-Russia split he achieved with triangular diplomacy in the 1970s.

Trump's position broke with a long political consensus and culture in which political credibility is dependent on being "tough" on Russia. The political opposition early on recognised that associating Trump with Russia was a winning hand for the political opposition. The Democratic Party, intelligence agencies and the media pursued a common cause in uncritically embracing flawed and unsubstantiated accusations. The extreme "Us" versus "Them" dichotomisation linked to Russia was transferred to Trump as anyone expressing scepticism against evidence-free allegations from anonymous sources has been denounced as treasonous stooges of the Kremlin.

This chapter first explores "Russiagate 1.0" which alleged that Trump colluded with Russia to steal the election. The narrative that contradicted objective facts was based on the infamous Steele Dossier that gained credibility through propaganda by the intelligence agencies, the media and the Democratic Party. Second, this chapter assesses "Russiagate 2.0" in which Russia allegedly placed bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan to be killed by Taliban fighters. The unsubstantiated claims were presented as gospel during the US presidential election campaign of 2020 but

were abandoned a few months after Biden's election victory. Last, this chapter explores "Russiagate 3.0" which deflected blame from the Hunter Biden laptop scandal. The evidence of Joe Biden's involvement in corruption was marginalised during the election campaign by denouncing and censoring it as Russian disinformation. It is concluded that the collapse of Russiagate has little impact on its propaganda value as the stereotypes remain and thus continue to persuade.

## SELF-DECEPTION AND THE UNRAVELLING OF ORDER

Seeking order in chaos is an evolutionary instinct in human nature that developed for survival. The process of creating order entails discovering patterns, however, perceiving patterns, where they do not exist, is the source of paranoia and conspiracy theories that eventually unravels order and the internal cohesion of the in-group.

Propaganda can unravel order if artificial patterns are created to the extent it decouples from reality. Apophenia is defined as the proclivity for "unmotivated seeing of connections" in random data or events, which fuels paranoia when these connections are traced back to a hidden authority (Conrad, 1958). Governments can fuel psychotic disorder and conspiracy theories in the population by continuously escalating paranoia about the Other, the out-group contrasted to the in-group (Popper, 1966).

Ideological conformity can produce collective self-delusion by inoculating the group from hard facts. Propaganda develops dichotomous stereotypes and thus radicalise opinions by eliminating middle ground. Albert Maysles famously said that "tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance". Hannah Arendt (1951: 474) similarly cautioned that "the self-compulsion of ideological thinking" disconnects people from reality and opens the door to totalitarianism:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi... but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.

Propaganda in its excesses diminishes the ability to reflect on internal problems, which continues to weaken the political culture and trust in Western societies. A key strength of open societies is the ability to air

their problems to correct and improve, as opposed to closed societies that suppress their problems and thus create a rot decay in the system. As famously stated by Thomas Jefferson: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be”.

## DELEGITIMISING THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION WITH FABRICATED TIES TO RUSSIA

The Red Scare emerged in Britain in the 1920s and was directed against its own population to undermine the rise of the British labour movement. In the US, a Red Scare similarly broke out in 1919, in which radicals and communists were persecuted and many deported. Yet, the Red Scare was stronger in Britain as the communist activity also threatened British commercial interests in China and India, while domestically the conservatives were losing grounds to the Labour Party.

The British Labour Party emerged from the trade union movement of the late nineteenth century and offered entirely different political ideals that upset the status quo. Although, the Labour Party’s first government was brought down in 1924 by fabricating links to the main out-group—the Soviet Union. A letter purportedly from Grigory Zinoviev, the head of the Communist International (Comintern), ordered the Communist Party of Britain to engage in subversive activities and mobilise sympathetic supporters within the Labour Party to support a treaty between Britain and the Soviet Union. The letter also specified that diplomatic relations between Moscow and the Labour government would contribute to the radicalisation of the British working class, a conspiracy that would eventually spark a workers revolution. The Daily Mail printed the letter and the Labour Party predictably collapsed with its credibility in tatters for years. The letter has been proven to be a forgery, to delegitimise the political opposition and harden anti-Russian sentiments. The letter was most likely written by Desmond Morten, an MI6 officer and close friend of Winston Churchill, and Major Joseph Ball, an MI5 officer who then later joined the Conservative Central Office (Bennett, 2018). British intelligence agencies were at the centre of the scandal, in collusion with some members of the Conservative Party and partisan members of the media.

The Red Scare was revived after the Second World War as the Soviet victory of Nazi Germany had strengthened Moscow profoundly. The term *McCarthyism* was coined as an effort to create hysteria about “enemies

within” to purge opposition and coerce conformity. Group psychology creates a natural and instinctive mechanism for conformity as dissent is punished by the Self and the group. However, when the use of fear is not sufficient for conformity, there is an option of overt political repression.

In the 1950s, US Senator Joseph McCarthy led an effort to exaggerate the threat of communist infiltration to marginalise those who dared to dissent. Instead of prosecuting actual crimes or treason, the McCarthyite political regime identified behaviour that may signify dissent and thus treason. McCarthy made increasingly more and bolder accusations against people without credible evidence. Those accused of engaging in “un-American activities”, having the wrong opinions or merely failing to cooperate, could lose their jobs, be blacklisted and even be jailed. As a tool of propaganda, McCarthyism was immensely successful as it enforced conformity by curtailing democratic freedoms and narrowed the scope of permitted opinions, all in the name of protecting democracy, freedom and national security.

McCarthy’s power and influence continued to rise as the rhetoric intensified. The successful demagogic dichotomisation of the in-group versus out-group with accusations of Soviet infiltration and collusion eliminated the burden of evidence and accountability. As accusations became increasingly outrageous and targeted ever-more prominent figures, the preparedness to challenge McCarthy decreased and his power grew further. It was the effort to purge high-ranking people in the military that became one step too far and thus began the downfall of McCarthy.

By attacking the political opposition as treasonous for being soft on the Soviets, McCarthy linked confrontation to patriotism and empathy to betrayal. The ability to monopolise on patriotism endured as anti-war movements and détente in the 1960s and 1970s could be denounced as soft on the Russians and thus unpatriotic. Being “tough” of Russia has remained an important component of the national consensus and largely a condition for political legitimacy to the present day.

## RUSSIAGATE 1.0: THE TRUMP-PUTIN CONSPIRACY IN 2016

In July 2016, Wikileaks published emails from Clinton campaign manager, John Podesta, and the Democratic National Convention (DNC), which sparked the Russiagate conspiracy theory about collusion between Trump and Russia. The emails revealed Hillary Clinton’s

intimate connections to Wall Street, the Clinton Global Initiative business model selling political influence, and that the Clinton campaign colluded with the media and the DNC to undermine Bernie Sanders in the primary of the presidential elections. The Clinton campaign received special treatment from the media and the DNC. For example, questions for a CNN town hall meeting were leaked to the Clinton campaign, favourable stories were planted in the media, and the DNC rigged the Democratic primary in favour of Clinton (Sainato, 2016). The email leaks also revealed that the Clinton campaign had also worked towards getting Trump to win the Republican primaries as he was deemed to be an easy opponent to defeat. Even before the primary, the Clinton team had considered linking Trump to Russia as being a winning strategy (Macleod, 2018).

When Wikileaks released the damning emails, the Clinton campaign shifted the narrative immediately by accusing Russia of “hacking” the email servers of the DNC to make Trump win. Suddenly, it was not Clinton that had undermined democracy, rather it was the political opposition in a conspiracy with a hostile foreign power.

Russia was early on drawn into the US presidential election as Washington Post published a story claiming that Hillary Clinton could have been poisoned by Russia (Boren, 2016). While it was later confirmed that Clinton was never poisoned, the reporting was consistent with the narrative of Clinton being on the crosshairs of the Kremlin due to her preparedness to be tough on Russia. In contrast, the media consistently depicted Trump as a stooge of Russia and a threat to security for questioning the role of NATO. During the presidential debate in October 2016, Clinton labelled Trump a Russian puppet due to his soft approach towards Russia, as she argued Putin would “rather have a puppet as president” (Kellner, 2017).

The Political Left in the US, represented primarily by the Democratic Party, had traditionally been the party that was sceptical of the unchecked powers of the intelligence agencies, the military-industrial complex, and other centres of power outside of civilian control that had been created to serve foreign policy interests but had obtained undue influence in domestic affairs. However, the Democratic Party and intelligence agencies were suddenly united by a shared resentment of Trump. The intelligence agencies were hailed as the last line of defence against Trump by both the Democratic Party and the media.

After Trump won the Republican primary as the presidential candidate of the Republican Party, the intelligence agencies intervened more forcefully by making accusations of treason, while using their professional credentials as a substitute for evidence. Former Director of the CIA, Michael Morrell (2016), wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* on 5 August 2016 with the title: “I Ran the C.I.A. Now I’m Endorsing Hillary Clinton”. Morrell (2016) cautioned that Trump’s desire to change policies towards Russia was the result of manipulations by Putin, which had its intended effect as “Trump has taken policy positions consistent with Russian, not American, interests”. The former CIA Director made the astonishing accusation that “Mr. Putin had recruited Mr. Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation” and thus asserted: “I will vote for Hillary Clinton. Between now and then, I will do everything I can to ensure that she is elected as our 45th president”. On 3 November 2016, less than three weeks before the election, former CIA and NSA Director Michael Hayden (2016) argued in *The Washington Post* that “Donald Trump really does sound a lot like Vladimir Putin” and the presidential candidate should be considered a “clear and present danger” to national security.

The media has an important role in a democracy to push against unsubstantiated claims from anonymous officials in the pursuit of ideological narrative-building. However, the hysteria of Trump’s threat to democracy resulted in journalists believing they had a special responsibility to counter the new president. Journalistic standards were largely abandoned as journalists took on the role of soldiers in a domestic information war. The media’s resentment of Trump resulted in an uncritical embrace of dubious claims and dirty tactics. After Trump lost the 2020 election, a technical director at CNN was caught on tape bragging that CNN had been successful in its mission “to get Trump out of office”. The technical director explained that Biden was made to look competent, while negative stories about Trump were exaggerated: “We were creating a story there that we didn’t know anything about. I think that’s propaganda” (Moore, 2021).

The media uncritically repeated the Pentagon, CIA and anonymous government officials, while making extraordinary claims based solely on unsubstantiated claims. The reluctance to accept unsubstantiated claims from intelligence agencies was portrayed as being disloyal and unpatriotic.



The anti-Russian narrative had great consistency in media coverage. For example, it was argued that Trump had selected Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State due to his close ties with Russia, although when Tillerson was fired it was because he was too anti-Russian.

Evidence debunking key aspects of Russiagate had little impact. In October 2016, it was reported that FBI investigations into a “secret server” as a backchannel between the Trump Organisation and Russia’s Alfa-Bank had resulted in no evidence (Lichtblau & Myers, 2016). Investigations after the election of Trump also reaffirmed that the story of the secret server was completely false and fabricated (US Department of Justice, 2019: 119). Despite the early knowledge that there was no evidence behind the allegation, the story was treated by the media as a fact that conclusively proved the conspiracy between Trump and Russia.

The claims of collusion between the Kremlin and Trump continued after the election. The day after Trump unexpectedly won the presidency, Clinton’s team met and decided to disseminate a narrative that the election had been stolen (Allen & Parnes, 2017). Jennifer Palmieri (2017), the communications director for the 2016 Clinton campaign, also advocated for the strategy that Democrats push the collusion narrative “relentlessly and above all else”. The decision to not recognise the legitimacy of the 2016 presidential election heightened political tensions and polarisation to the extent that other previously accepted rules and standards by politicians, intelligence agencies and media were no longer followed.

### *The Unbelievable Steele Dossier*

The Steele Dossier became the foundational document alleging a conspiracy between Trump and the Kremlin, which laid the foundation for the so-called Russiagate investigations. The document presented unverified accusations, although it claimed credibility as it had been compiled by a former British intelligence official, MI6 agent Christopher Steele. However, it was later revealed that Steele was working for the Clinton campaign. The presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton had hired a private research firm, Fusion GPS, which had been contracted to dig up dirt on her political rival, Donald Trump. Fusion GPS gave Steele the contract to investigate and write the report.

It was revealed that the FBI and the Justice Department were aware that Steele was working for the Clinton campaign, personally resented

Trump, and had expressed hope that the dossier would be published in the media ahead of the election to prevent him from winning (McCarthy, 2019). Steele informed a British court in August 2018 that he had been hired to “obtain information necessary... to provide legal advice on the potential impact of Russian involvement on the legal validity of the outcome of the 2016 US Presidential election”, in which the DNC and Clinton campaign could have a path to legally “challenge the validity of the outcome of that election” (Scarborough, 2018).

On 10 January 2017, merely ten days before the inauguration of Trump, BuzzFeed became the first media outlet to publish the Steele Dossier (Bensinger). However, even BuzzFeed editor Ben Smith recognised “there is serious reason to doubt the allegations”, although he argued he would leave it to the public to assess whether the allegations were credible (WSJ, 2017). While the report could not be verified and had serious flaws, the media cited the credibility of Steele (Maté, 2021). Thereafter, the media was on a slippery slope as basic journalistic principles and standards were abandoned.

The Steele Dossier depicted Trump as a “Manchurian candidate” or a “Siberian candidate” secretly serving the Russians in a long-standing conspiracy, which had resulted in the executive branch of the US government falling under the control of a hostile foreign power. It was claimed that the Kremlin had compromising material from sexual escapades, as Trump was alleged to have hired prostitutes to perform a “golden shower” (urination show) on a bed in a Moscow hotel where President Obama had previously slept.

The report lacked details, evidence and was instead based on gossip and hearsay. The sources were anonymous and there was also an absence of titles, dates or any information that could be used to verify any of the claims. The Steele Dossier should also not have been considered reliable by the intelligence agencies or the media. Many of the contacts in the dossier had not even been in Russia for more than a decade, and the report made basic mistakes such as misspelling the name of Alfa-Bank, a leading financial institution in Russia. The dossier also referred to payment being made from the Russian consulate in Miami, despite there being no Russian consulate in Miami. The dossier suggested that Kremlin had courted Trump since 2011 when he was a mere TV personality. Rather than challenging the likelihood of this long timeline, the British newspaper *The Guardian* went even further by using dubious

sources to report that Trump had been a Russian asset for more than 40 years (Smith, 2021).

The most suspicious part of the dossier was that the small consulting company of Steele seemingly had top-level sources everywhere in the Kremlin, giving him access to Putin's inner circles and the Kremlin's deepest secrets. Case in point, Steele later argued that his sources included Vyacheslav Trubnikov and Vladislav Surkov (US Congress, 2019). Trubnikov ran Russia's foreign intelligence services (SVR) and Surkov is one of Putin's closest aides. Sources were casually referred to as "trusted compatriots" and lacked any critical analysis about the credibility of the alleged sources.

The dossier went on to present a deal between Trump and Moscow that defied common sense. Igor Sechin, one of Putin's closest associates and CEO of Rosneft, supposedly had a secret meeting with Carter Page on Trump's foreign policy team in July 2016. Sechin had allegedly offered Trump personally a 19.5 per cent stake in Russia's state-owned oil company Rosneft in return for lifting sanctions, a deal which Carter supposedly accepted. Russia's alleged plan to hand over a large stake of its main national oil company occurred at a time when a Trump election victory was deemed to be nearly impossible, and Russia was making great progress in diversifying its energy exports from the West to the East. Michael Cohen, Trump's lawyer then supposedly took over the negotiations, who had clandestine meetings with Russian agents in Prague in August 2016. These allegations could easily be debunked as Cohen had never been to the Czech Republic, which was eventually confirmed in the Mueller Report.

The allegations against Carter Page had originated with the Steele Dossier, were disproven in the investigation (US Department of Justice, 2019: viii). Carter was also falsely accused of passing information to one of Trump's campaign consultants, Paul Manafort. Yet, the media extended on the narrative of Paul Manafort's by linking him to Wikileaks, which contributed to cementing the linkages between Russia, Wikileaks and Trump. Without presenting any evidence, the British paper *The Guardian* accused Paul Manafort of meeting with Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. The media uncritically ran the story even though it could easily be disproven as British police had tight surveillance of the embassy.

The strongest evidence of possible collusion was the efforts by Trump's foreign policy advisor, George Papadopoulos, to obtain compromising

information on the Clinton campaign. Papadopoulos met with a Maltese professor, Joseph Mifsud, which alleged to have ties with the Kremlin. Papadopoulos had previously set up a meeting with the Egyptian president and Trump to cement Trump's foreign policy credibility. Mifsud offered to assist Papadopoulos with establishing a meeting between the Russian government and the Trump campaign, although a meeting never materialised. Mifsud also claimed that Russia had Clinton's emails and introduced Papadopoulos to a woman that was presented as "Putin's niece", although Putin does not have a niece and the woman was revealed to not be related to the Russian president. Papadopoulos explained that Mifsud was "just a guy talk[ing] up connections or something" (Taibbi 2019).

In April 2019, the Mueller report was finally released and found no evidence that the Trump campaign had "conspired or coordinated with the Russian government". There was not a single American indicted or charged with illegally working for Russia. Yet, the stereotype, suspicion and narrative of collusion remained as many media networks even expressed doubts about the findings in the Mueller report and denied any journalistic malpractice. In contrast, Lee Smith (2020) in the *New York Post* concluded on the lesson of Russiagate: "The tragic fact is that once-prestigious press organisations, including CNN as well as MSNBC, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, weren't fooled by the collusion hoax. They were an essential part of it".

The concept of the "deep state" has frequently been used to characterise a large government bureaucracy that develops a certain degree of autonomy and thus pursues independent policies. Institutions seek to preserve themselves and therefore perpetuate the status quo. The deep state thus forms a government within a government—an undemocratic bureaucracy operating under the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Case in point, there are no disruptions to the military cooperation within the NATO alliance irrespective of the governments that are elected to power.

What happens when an election or referendum takes place in which the continuity of the policies is challenged? The bureaucracy then reacts to undermine the election results and popular opinion. Russiagate revealed how a smear by the Clinton campaign was laundered through intelligence agencies such as the FBI, which did not do the basic source checking but leaked the allegations to the media with the credentials of being an official investigation. Journalists similarly became soldiers in an information war

where the higher purpose was to save democracy by undermining Trump. The media celebrated reports that generals and intelligence operatives were keeping information away from Trump, attempting to manipulate his decisions and ignoring his orders (Plott, 2019). Leaks aimed to embarrass Trump was celebrated as “resistance” to an illegitimate president. While celebrating what is by definition a “deep state”, the media simultaneously denounced the existence of a deep state as a conspiracy theory and “fake news”.

### *Intelligence Agencies as Independent Political Actors*

The intelligence agencies provided credibility to the report, which enabled the media and the Democratic Party to run with the narrative without referring to evidence. Throughout the presidential campaign, major media outlets had been hesitant to print the report by Steele as it consisted of anonymous and unsubstantiated accusations. However, after the election victory of Trump, the intelligence agencies decided that the Steele Dossier was credible. The Director of National Intelligence under the Obama administration, James Clapper, included the dossier in a briefing about president-elect Trump, which placed the report in the centre of Obama’s investigation of Russia and Trump. Furthermore, James Comey had briefed Trump about the dossier. Subsequently, as the security state had introduced the report into the political realm, it became newsworthy and thus legitimate to publish by the media.

Feedback loops for circular verification developed between the Democratic Party, the intelligence agencies and the media. The media would cite other media outlets, anonymous sources in the intelligence community, and polemic comments by politicians. The intelligence community could similarly refer to media reports and concerns by political leaders. And lastly, politicians would cite credible reporting by the media and reports from the intelligence community. Dubious rumours were thus sold as a fact. The hyperbolic language suggested alleged Russian interference was tantamount to a declaration of war as Hillary Clinton referred to a “cyber 9/11” and Thomas Friedman described it as a “Pearl Harbor-scale event” (MacLeod, 2018).

John Brennan (2018) reassured *Meet the Press* that “just because they [accusations of a Trump-Russia conspiracy] were unverified does not mean they were not true”. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper (2018a), appeared on the *Rachel Maddow Show* to similarly

keep the narrative going by arguing “some of it we did corroborate in the ICA [intelligence community assessment]. And of course, it appears that more of it has been corroborated with ensuing developments and what we’ve learned”. According to the Horowitz report, a Justice Department investigation, the FBI under James Comey had continued to cite the Steele Dossier even after they had determined the report was fake (US Department of Justice, 2019: 188).

When it was revealed in October 2017 that the Steele Dossier had been paid for by the DNC and the Clinton campaign, the political-media class had already invested their professional reputation in the narrative and entire incentive systems had been put in place to reward “resistance reporting”. The distrust and investigations against Trump were instrumental to limit his political agenda and the continuation of the conspiracy theory became an end in itself. Similarly, the US and its European allies had placed extensive sanctions on Russia based on these allegations. The revelations about Steele being hired by the democrat and the failure to disclose this information did therefore not impact the dominant narrative of the American president being beholden to Moscow or the policies it produced.

However, when the credibility of the dossier could not be defended anymore, its main proponents in the intelligence community began to distance themselves from the reports. James Clapper (2018b) referred to the “pseudo-intelligence” of the reports in his memoir. Former CIA Director John Brennan and FBI Director James Comey also distanced themselves from the report. In his Congressional testimony in December 2018, Comey claimed he “can’t remember”, “can’t recall”, and “doesn’t know” 245 times as he was asked about how the Steele Dossier could have been considered credible (Cohen, 2018). Even Christopher Steele walked back his claims once he was sued for libel and argued it was intended as “unverified” parts of “raw intelligence” that “warranted further investigation”.

In the weeks before his’s inauguration, Trump was continuously warned about refusing to accept the allegations of Russian election interference. While accepting the flawed reports about Russia having engineered his election victory would have implicitly made him an illegitimate president, the political-media class interpreted his reluctance to believe the intelligence agencies as further evidence of collusion. The Democrat Senate’s minority leader, Chuck Schumer, challenged President Trump’s patriotism and accused him of “being really dumb” for questioning the

intelligence agencies. Schumer accepted the narrative of Russian interference in the election and expressed sympathy with the intelligence agencies for being “very upset with how [Trump] has treated them and talked about them” (Shelbourne, 2017). In an unintentionally authoritarian and dystopian warning to President, Schumer cautioned against challenging the authority of the intelligence agencies: “Let me tell you, you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you” (Shelbourne, 2017).

Former NSA analyst John Schindler also warned that the intelligence community was preparing to “go nuclear” against Trump over the Russian collusion allegations, and stated that the President “will die in jail” (Agerhold, 2017). A similar reaction came from the military, which indicated it had become an independent political actor. In July 2017, Trump had criticised the ability of the military to win wars in places like Afghanistan and Syria, and the military responded by obstructing his orders of withdrawing from these countries. US Army Major General Paul Eaton argued: “I was really shocked by how many of my former colleagues voted for the former president and openly supported him. But when [Trump] turned on the military, well, the military turned on him” (Perry, 2021).

The intelligence community seemingly provided a common front against Trump’s reluctance to blame Russia for election interference. This common front was solidified by the argument that “all 17 intelligence agencies” agreed on its authenticity. The reference to the 17 intelligence agencies became a common talking point in the media that enabled dissent to be denounced as unpatriotic or a conspiracy theory. However, there were never 17 intelligence agencies that independently reached this conclusion. In June 2017 it was revealed that there were only three intelligence agencies that had reached the conclusion of Russian interference, and the analysts within these three intelligence agencies had been hand-picked. It was also revealed that CIA Director John Brennan had rejected dissent that questioned the authenticity of the evidence (Barnes, 2020).

At the Helsinki summit in July 2018, Trump defended Russia’s claims that it had not interfered in the 2016 US presidential election. Former CIA Director, John Brennan reacted to the press conference by calling the President a traitor: “Donald Trump’s press conference performance in Helsinki rises to & exceeds the threshold of ‘high crimes misdemeanors.’ It was nothing short of treasonous. Not only were Trump’s comments imbecilic, he is wholly in the pocket of Putin” (Weiner, 2018). The media

expressed utter derision for Trump's criticism of the intelligence agencies, and Reuters even printed an article with the title: "Trump has attacked U.S. intel agencies. Expect them to strike back" (Weiner, 2018). Trump's criticism of the intelligence agencies and media parroting them security and democracy.

The allegation of Russian hacking is also dubious. The DNC never gave the FBI access to its servers and outsourced instead the investigation to CrowdStrike, a private corporation to do the investigation. CrowdStrike pushed the argument that the DNC servers had been hacked and insinuated they had evidence. However, under oath, the president of CrowdStrike, ex-FBI official Shawn Henry, admitted: "We did not have concrete evidence... It appears it was set up to be exfiltrated, but we just don't have the evidence that says it actually left" (US House of Representatives, 2017: 32). The aforementioned testimony by Henry was made public in May 2020, although with an absence of interest from the media. The credibility of CrowdStrike taking responsibility for determining Russian hacking was always suspect. Ideological and geopolitical interests were evident as the co-founder of CrowdStrike, Dmitri Alperovitch, is also a senior fellow in the Atlantic Council. Furthermore, in December 2016 CrowdStrike also claimed it had evidence of Russian hacking into a Ukrainian artillery app that resulted in immense losses. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) argued that CrowdStrike had misrepresented its data, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence insisted the hacking and combat losses never happened, and the creator of the app called the report "delusional" (Kuzmenko & Cobus, 2017). Subsequently, CrowdStrike had to withdraw its report and allegations that it had evidence of a Russian hack.

The admission by Henry at CrowdStrike that there was also no evidence of Russia hacking the DNC was supported by former National Security Agency Technical Director, Bill Binney, a whistleblower who argued the DNC servers were never hacked but rather a leak had occurred from inside. Binney explains that the speed in which the emails were extracted demonstrates that they were downloaded from the computers and not hacked. The assessment Binney is supported by Ray McGovern, who worked as a CIA analyst from 1963 to 1990 and in the 1980s chaired the National Intelligence Estimate and prepared the Daily Briefs for the President:



Because NSA can trace exactly where and how any "hacked" emails from the Democratic National Committee or other servers were routed through the network, it is puzzling why NSA cannot produce hard evidence implicating the Russian government and WikiLeaks. Unless we are dealing with a leak from an insider, not a hack, as other reporting suggests. From a technical perspective alone, we are convinced that this is what happened. (Binney & McGovern, 2017)

Intelligence officials opined it was likely CIA contractors had leaked the files to Wikileaks and not been the result of a Russian hack (Walcott & Hosenball, 2017). Declassified notes also prove that CIA Director John Brennan briefed then-President Barack Obama on 26 July 2016 about how Clinton fabricated the Russia-Trump conspiracy theory as a red herring strategy. Brennan's notes to Obama confirmed that Clinton used the false allegations as *"a means of distracting the public from her use of a private email server"* and *"to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by the Russian security service"* (Scarborough, 2020).

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff had interviewed Henry from CrowdStrike in 2017 and was aware of the lack of evidence. Schiff had also interviewed Obama officials and intelligence officials who spoke of collusion in the media yet informed Schiff there was no evidence of collusion. Despite being aware of the absence of evidence, Schiff would tour the major cable news networks to deceive the public by claiming that they had collected "damning evidence" of collusion (Boston Herald, 2020).

An investigation into the origin of Russiagate reveals that it was deliberately constructed as opposed to being a misunderstanding. In January 2021, FBI agent Kevin Clinesmith pled guilty for lying and doctoring an email to obtain permission to spy on the Trump campaign. In September 2021, the cybersecurity lawyer Michael Sussman was indicted for having made a false statement to the FBI by claiming he was merely acting as a private citizen when he was peddling false accusations against Russia—at a time when he in fact worked for the Clinton campaign, who he had billed for disseminating the fraudulent story (Greenwald, 2021). As Hillary Clinton's cybersecurity lawyer was disseminating fraudulent claims under the guise of being an independent expert, Clinton herself tweeted about the testimony as evidence: "Computer scientists have apparently uncovered a covert server linking the Trump Organization to a Russian-based bank" (Greenwald, 2021).

The Trump-Russia collusion story took another hit in November 2021 as Special Council John Durham indicted Igor Danchenko on several accounts of lying to the FBI. Danchenko was the primary source in the Steele Dossier that sparked the Russiagate investigations. Danchenko had allegedly obtained the information for the Steele Dossier from a phone call and meeting in New York with the Russian–American Chamber of Commerce’s president at the time, Sergey Millian. However, Millian asserted that he had neither spoken with Danchenko on the phone nor had a meeting in person. The FBI investigation concluded that Danchenko had repeatedly emailed Millian but never received a response. The FBI also concluded that the phone calls never occurred, and that Danchenko’s did not meet with Millian in New York as Danchenko was actually with his family at Bronx Zoo when the meeting was supposed to have taken place.

The Steele Dossier is intimately linked to the think tank industry in the US, as Danchenko is an analyst at the Brookings Institution, one of the oldest and most influential think tanks in Washington. Danchenko worked for several years for Fiona Hill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who is recognised as an anti-Russian hawk, and perhaps the most devastating witness against Trump in the impeachment hearings of 2019. Besides advancing Danchenko’s career, Hill introduced him to Steele and Democratic Party operative Chuck Dolan. Danchenko was also indicted for lying to the FBI about his connections with “a long-time participant in Democratic Party politics”.

### RUSSIAGATE 2.0.—BOUNTIES ON US TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN

Without a reflection over the failed Russiagate allegations, there were few lessons learned and it did not restrain the Democratic Party, the intelligence agencies or the media. In the summer of 2020, leading up to the US presidential election, the allegations about Russia putting bounties on American soldiers in Iraq emerged. The political-media class yet again embraced evidence-free allegations and condemned scepticism as treasonous.

The New York Times first pushed the story of the Russian government paying the Taliban to kill American soldiers. The circular confirmation process yet again developed as media outlets cited what other media news networks had claimed, with the occasional citation to anonymous officials

and intelligence agencies that did not substantiate their assertions. The bounty scandal became a central feature of the Biden campaign to contrast their firm stance against Russia versus Trump's treason for standing by the Kremlin and allegedly making excuses for Putin even as they were killing American soldiers. The renewal of Russiagate also had the effect of redeeming those who had invested their credibility in the collusion narrative.

Furthermore, the claims of bounties on US troops functioned as a veto on Trump's decision to pull US troops out of Afghanistan. In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, Susan Rice (2020), the national security advisor under the Obama administration, opined that Trump "put Russia first" by refusing to react to "Russian efforts to slaughter American troops in cold blood", which confirmed that the suspicions that Trump was "actively advancing our arch adversary's nefarious interests".

While the primary objective of the disinformation about bounties on US soldiers was likely to weaken Trump and end his presidency, the allegations had implications for US foreign policy towards Russia. While some senators were calling for sanctions, Senator Ben Sasse called for an "urgent" response that should entail putting Russian military intelligence officers "in body bags" (Bolton, 2020). Joe Biden cited the bounty story in the presidential debates with Trump and argued the president was weak and embarrassed himself for failing to respond forcefully against Russia. Kamala Harris similarly cited the Russian bounties in her debate with Vice President Mike Pence to argue that a Biden-Harris administration would hold Russia accountable. Schiff argued that "this president can't stand up to Vladimir Putin" and Nancy Pelosi argued that for Trump "all roads, for him, as you know, lead to Putin" (McIntyre, 2020).

However, behind the certainty of the political-media class, there was simply no evidence for the allegations. The absence of evidence was telling since the US had spent 20 years in Afghanistan and had extensive intelligence assets that would have been able to collect evidence of such an agreement between the Taliban and Moscow. While the CIA and other intelligence agencies fuelled the evidence-free story of Russian bounties on American soldiers, the NSA strongly dissented from this allegation as it would be virtually impossible to have such a scheme without them knowing (Lubold & Strobel, 2020). The Pentagon affirmed that there was "no corroborating evidence" of the Russian bounties (McIntyre, 2020).

After winning the presidential election, the Biden administration finally admitted in April 2021 that US intelligence only had a “low to moderate” confidence in the story, which is a way for politicians to walk back a story. The topic that had dominated in the media suddenly disappeared without a national reflection and yet again without a debate about journalistic malpractice. The narrative of Russian bounties no longer served the interests of Biden, as he had won the presidency, sought to establish predictable relations with Russia and pull out US troops from Afghanistan.

### RUSSIAGATE 3.0.—THE HUNTER BIDEN LAPTOP SCANDAL

The Biden laptop scandal also emerged before the 2020 US presidential election, which triggered an immediate return to the Russiagate formula of shifting focus by denouncing it as Russian interference. Hunter Biden, the son of the then-presidential candidate, had left his laptop at a computer repair store for more than 90 days, which according to the agreement transferred ownership of the laptop to the store. After discovering worrisome material on the laptop, the technician contacted the FBI and sent a copy of the hard drive to Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York and the then-current lawyer of Trump. Giuliani shared some of the content with the New York Post, which then published the story.

The relevance of the material on the laptop was not limited to the scandal of Hunter Biden videos, in which he smoked crack and had sex with prostitutes, rather it was his involvement in his father’s political career through a pay-to-play corruption scheme for political influence. Three months after the Western-backed coup in Ukraine in February 2014, Hunter Biden and a close family friend of US Secretary of State, John Kerry, became board members of the Ukrainian gas and oil company Burisma (Sonne & Grimaldi, 2014). The job paid \$50,000 a month despite Hunter Biden having no experience or competencies in the gas industry or Ukraine. When Burisma and its board members, including Hunter Biden, were under investigation for corruption by the Ukrainian Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin, Joe Biden intervened by having him fired through threats of withholding a \$1 billion US loan guarantee. Vice President Joe Biden had insisted that the decision was not related to Burisma or his son, insisting that he has “never spoken to my son about his overseas business dealing” (Morris & Fonrouge, 2020).

The emails published by New York Post incriminated both Hunter Biden and Joe Biden. The emails revealed how Hunter Biden profited from introducing Ukrainian businessmen to his father—the Vice President under Obama, and how Hunter Biden could use his influence to advance corporate interests. Furthermore, the emails proved that Hunter Biden had asked: “Who is ultimately behind these attacks on the company [Burisma]? Who in the current interim government could put an end to such attacks?” (Morris & Fonrouge, 2020). Thereafter, Joe Biden pressured the firing of the Prosecutor General who investigated Burisma. Hunter Biden’s lawyer had responded to the accusation by linking Giuliani to Russia: “He has been pushing widely discredited conspiracy theories about the Biden family, openly relying on actors tied to Russian intelligence” (Morris & Fonrouge, 2020).

The authenticity of the emails was confirmed by some of Hunter Biden’s business partners, such as Tony Bobulinski, although there was a disinterest in pursuing the authenticity process that journalists would usually follow. Instead, the tech giants, media and intelligence agencies immediately supported and fueled the narrative of Russian disinformation. It was cautioned that merely discussing the revelations would make the Russian propaganda effective.

Twitter and Facebook immediately reacted with blatant censorship of the New York Post, which is one of the oldest and most-read publications in the US. Facebook announced it was slowing down the spread of the article. Twitter’s response was more extreme by suspending the New York Post from its platform and blocking all users from sharing the link. The extraordinary interference in the US election by the tech giants was justified by purporting to have a policy against publishing hacked material, a policy that seemingly came to existence on that day.

The intelligence community also weighed in as more than 50 former intelligence officials signed a letter to support the theory about the incident being Russian disinformation. The letter, first published by Politico, admitted that “we do not have evidence of Russian involvement” but referred to a pattern as “our experience makes us deeply suspicious that the Russian government played a significant role in this case” (Bertrand, 2020). Suggesting that the media should not consider the emails credible, the letter by the former intelligence officials stated: “If we are right, this is Russia trying to influence how Americans vote in this election, and

we believe strongly that Americans need to be aware of this” (Bertrand, 2020). The narrative of “17 intelligence agencies” from the first Russiagate was thus recast in the third Russiagate as “more than 50 intelligence officials”. A circular confirmation bias emerged as the media could refer to intelligence officials and intelligence officials could refer to the media, with the subsequent impact that merely reporting on the news or granting it credibility was tantamount to assisting Russian election meddling.

The New York Times celebrated the censorship by the tech giants as a fight against Russian disinformation: “Facebook and Twitter Dodge a 2016 repeat” (Roose, 2020). Media outlets, one after the other, dismissed the Hunter Biden report as a Russian disinformation campaign to justify the censorship. Based on the premise that Russiagate of 2016 was real, the Washington Post argued that the mere accusation of Russian interference justifies censorship:

Take a step back, and the Russian interference of 2016 holds valuable lessons on what to do and what not to do in 2020: we must treat the Hunter Biden leaks as if they were a foreign intelligence operation – even if they probably aren’t. (Rid, 2020)

The managing editor at the public broadcasting channel NPR, refused to report on the scandal of the Democrat presidential candidate’s involvement in corruption in both Ukraine and China as it was a waste of time: “We don’t want to waste our time on stories that are not really stories. And we don’t want to waste the listeners’ and readers’ time on stories that are just pure distraction” (Graham, 2020). The journalistic standards of publishing a story if it is authentic and of public interest was effectively rejected, and replaced with the principle that news agencies should not report on stories if it is suspected to have been leaked by the Russian government. The media thus shifted the narrative yet again by turning the Hunter Biden laptop scandal into the Rudy Giuliani laptop scandal, which was presented as evidence of Russiagate as Trump’s lawyer was accused of peddling Russian disinformation.

While the Steele Dossier had been published by the media during the first Russiagate under the claim that the people should make up their own mind about unsubstantiated allegations, the logic had reversed in the third Russiagate as censorship was necessary until the information could be proven to be real and not emanating from a Russian hack (Taibbi, 2020).

The narrative of Russian disinformation was from the first instance obviously false as it simply made no sense. In the past, there was no evidence, yet this time there was no feasible theory. It was proven the laptop was handed over to the repair shop, which was not denied by Hunter Biden. It was also easily verifiable that the repair shop handed the identical material to both the FBI and Giuliani. There was simply no possible role that Russia could play in the scandal.

In September 2021, one year after Politico had denounced the Hunter Biden story as Russian disinformation, Politico finally published an admission confirming the authenticity of the key emails from Hunter Biden's laptop that had been the most incriminating (Lizza et al., 2021). The evidence and admission of authenticity were remarkable as it proved that the intelligence agencies, the tech giants and the media had engaged in censorship to bury an authentic story that could have made Joe Biden lose the election, by dismissing it as Russian disinformation without any evidence.

Once the presidential election transpired in November 2020, there were yet again reports from the intelligence community about Russian interference. However, with a Biden election victory, the response to the alleged interference was restrained. Following reports on Russian interference in the subsequent 2020 presidential election, the New York Time yet again relied on unsubstantiated claims from intelligence agencies: "The declassified report did not explain how the intelligence community had reached its conclusions about Russian operations during the 2020 election. But the officials said they had high confidence in their conclusions about Mr. Putin's involvement" (Barnes, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

*Russiagate demonstrated how propaganda against an international adversary can be directed against the political opposition domestically.* Russiagate became a repeat of the Red Scare of the 1920s and the McCarthyism in the 1950s as exaggerated and imagined threats of a foreign adversary was instrumental to coerce conformity within the nation. Trump was a crude symptom of a populist revolt, with populism being characterised by efforts to mobilise the public under the rhetoric of representing the people against a distant, detached and self-serving elite.

By linking Trump to Russia, a rival and despised out-group, Trump's policies were obstructed. Furthermore, the Democratic Party that was

previously suspicious of intelligence agencies has been converted into loyalists and supporters of foreign wars with a conspiracist mindset that seeks protection from the intelligence agencies. The propagandistic glorification of intelligence agencies undermines the ability of the media to hold them accountable. The false report of the North Vietnamese attacking US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin led to the invasion of Vietnam; the fabricated claims of a Soviet brigade in Cuba prevented the ratification of the SALT II Treaty in 1979; the false intelligence about weapons of mass destruction mobilised public opinion in favour of the disastrous war in Iraq in 2003; the fabricated reports on Trump-Russia collusion intensified the stand-off between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

Debunking the false claims of Russiagate has little influence in terms of moderating the anti-Russian propaganda. Efficient propaganda bypasses reason to convince the public, and the powerful stereotypes that were constructed over the Trump presidency will persevere and act as filters for the public to interpret future events. The stereotype of Russian hacking, disinformation and infiltration of the US political system will be immune against revelations that appeal to rational reflection. The narrative of Russia's determination to undermine Western democracies has become an accepted stereotype to interpret world events.

Russiagate has profound implications for both domestic and foreign policy. The dismissal of Trump as a foreign agent rather than a symptom of socio-economic problems has the consequence of failing to develop a response to these challenges. The political Left has traditionally intervened in the free market to redistribute wealth, while the political left has intervened to protect and thus reproduce communities and traditional values. Under the neoliberal consensus of non-intervention in the free market over the past 4 decades, neither the political Left nor the political Right has been able to fulfil their ideological missions. The populist Right under Trump and the populist Left under the Bernie Sanders movements were possibly flawed in their responses to the failures of the neoliberal order, although they were nonetheless responses to actual socio-economic problems. Russiagate succeeded in restoring consensus temporarily as Trump lost the presidency and Sanders fell in line with the Democratic establishment. However, using Russia to prevent challenges to the dominant order in the US and Europe will allow for the cracks in American society to continue to fester away and eventually yet again erode the



stability of the political system. Concurrently, democracy will continue to decline as the political opposition is treated as enemies.

In terms of foreign policy, Russiagate created incentives for unchecked hostilities towards Russia. Some of Trump's most dangerous policies were the confrontation with Russia, although the political-media class was distracted by obsessing over Trump's friendly demeanour towards Moscow to the extent that conflict Russia was met with a sigh of relief. Great anger was caused in Russia as the Trump administration Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, refused to extend the New Start Treaty, unilaterally abandoned the Iranian nuclear agreement, supplied Ukraine with military equipment, attacked Syria in 2017, attempted to topple the government of Venezuela, and engaged in cyber attacks on Russia's power grid. Subsequently, Russia is responding by deploying new weapon systems and inculcating itself against sanctions by continuing to reorient its economy closer with China—the principal adversary of the US.

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# Ukraine and the Civilizational Choice of the Shared Neighbourhood

## INTRODUCTION

In a divided Europe where states are compelled to make a civilizational choice between the West and Russia, the in-group and the out-group, there is inevitably a greater demand for propaganda. The societies in the shared neighbourhood between the West and Russia are deeply divided in terms of their national identity and their relationship with Russia. The geopolitics of pushing Europe's dividing lines further to the East is sold to the public in the language of values. Without reference to competing security interests, the Western narrative suggests it is selflessly responding to the region's aspirations for liberal democracy and joining the Euro-Atlantic community, which entails liberating the region from the authoritarian grip of Russia. Propaganda conceals the objective and measurable reality that constructing a Europe without Russia contradicts a democratic agenda as it requires support for ethno-nationalist groups and suppression of the Russophone population in the region.

Russia's historical and cultural closeness with Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus and other former Soviet republics function as a double-edged sword that divides these societies. Large parts of the societies neighbouring Russia consider their historical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties with Russia to represent a positive fraternal bond that functions as a source of collective strength, while others view it as an imperial

legacy that undermines their sovereignty. Nation-building subsequently becomes a divisive issue in terms of defining “Us” and the “Other”. The “anti-Russian” identity views “Us” as a distinctive ethno-cultural titular group and the “Other” are pro-Russians as a fifth column who preserve an imperial legacy in cooperation with Russia. In contrast, the “pro-Russian” identity view “Us” in terms of a shared civilizational history with Russia and the “Other” as divisive ethno-cultural nationalists who fragments society and often conspire with the West to marginalise Russia in Europe.

While these two legacies and identities are polarised, they can be harmonised under the policy of developing sovereignty and diversifying foreign partnerships without resorting to anti-Russian sentiments and an anti-Russian agenda. Although, the deeply divided societies in the shared neighbourhood between the West and Russia fragment when they are required to make a civilizational choice, and the ensuing domestic instability opens up for proxy conflicts between the West and Russia. Under a zero-sum format for European security, Russia and the West have incentives to support rival factions within these states and use propaganda to delegitimise the political opposition as illegitimate.

The subsequent zero-sum competition between the West and Russia in the shared neighbourhood is propagandised by both sides. The West filters conflicts through binary stereotypes, narratives and language presenting competing interests as a competition between diametrically opposite values—“Our” liberal democracy and European integration versus “Their” authoritarianism and spheres of influence. NATO and the EU expansion is depicted as “democratic enlargement” that expands the “zone of peace”, a positive-sum game as it allegedly also enhances Russian security. By monopolising on the concept of “Europe”, the West uses the concept of “European integration” to describe the process of decoupling Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus from Russia as the largest state in Europe. The West avoids addressing the zero-sum format of the European security architecture, and instead presents the ahistorical assumption that peace derives from merely allowing each state to have the sovereign and democratic right to choose which bloc it should align with. However, liberal democracy is implicitly promoted as a hegemonic norm as the only legitimate choice to align with the democratic West since Russia represents authoritarianism.

This chapter first explores nation-building in a divided Ukraine positioned at the centre of a divided Europe. Ukraine’s domestic polarisation is extremely problematic as the opposition is defined as the out-group,

and various Western powers have fuelled the divisions under the banner of freedom. Second, the Maidan uprising and Western support for the toppling of President Yanukovich in 2014 under the guise of a “democratic revolution”, and the ensuing conflict over Crimea and Donbas has been framed artificially as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. Last, framing the conflict over Ukraine through the democracy-authoritarianism lens has obstructed a domestic and regional settlement.

### NATION-BUILDING AND DEMOCRACY IN UKRAINE

Ukrainian nation-building has been hampered by a lack of distinctive and unifying ideals, myths, traditions, symbols and common ideas that define “Us” and the “Other”. Ukraine and Russia are tied together by Kievan Rus as a common thousand-year-old civilizational cradle and centuries of sharing a state, which broadly defined, created two competing historical narratives and identities. The pluralist Eastern Slavic identity infers that both Ukrainians and Russian are indigenous people of a bi-ethnic, bi-cultural, bi-lingual Ukrainian state, which makes ethno-nationalism a destructive force that unravels Ukraine’s nation-building project. The monist ethno-cultural Ukrainian identity considers Ukrainians to be the sole titular people, which suggests that the Eastern Slavic identity threatens nation-building and sovereignty by preserving the Russification of Ukraine as an imperial legacy (Shulman, 2004).

The key disputes concerning the historical memory create competing policy preferences concerning the role of the Russian language and culture, and relations with Russia as a foreign power. On one hand, the common civilizational origin with Russia can reasonably be considered a threat to Ukrainian sovereignty to the extent it delegitimises Ukraine’s separate history and identity by inferring that its “normal condition” is to share a union or state with Russia (Kuzio, 2001: 115). On the other hand, the Ethno-cultural Ukrainian aim to monopolise on the historical and cultural legacy of Kievan Rus is a source of a radical anti-Russian nationalist mentality that alienates large parts of the Ukrainian population and Russia (Lieven, 2009: 13). However, any reasonable and rational reason for denying sharing its civilizational cradle with Russians expresses itself as historical revisionism and an anti-Russian posture by depicting Russians as solely the descendants of the barbaric Golden Horde. The rejection of a pluralist idea of what it entails to be Ukrainian produces demeaning and

racist rhetoric in which Russians are argued to not be real Europeans or Slavs, rather Russia's alleged Asian origin infers inferiority and a barbaric character that unavoidable results in expansionism (Shlapentokh, 2013).

The contested civilizational origin subsequently creates two incompatible interpretations of the ensuing history. For example, did Poland's and Lithuania's annexation of Galicia-Volhynia in the fourteenth century represent a continuation of Kievan Rus, or did it constitute a Polish-Lithuanian expansionism that divided the peoples of Kievan Rus? Similarly, did the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654 between the Cossacks and the Russian Tsar signify a Russian annexation of Ukraine or was it a reunification of Russians and Ukrainians as the indigenous people of Kievan Rus?

Ukraine is equally divided over their Soviet history, which is either depicted as a supra-national construct that unified the fraternal peoples of Greater Rus or it is denounced as Russian imperial control over Ukrainians. Key historical events in the Soviet era thus fuel deep divisions. Posen (1993) cautioned after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the development of a Ukrainian national identity based on civilizational opposition to Russia would likely unleash a major war. States develop national identities based on narratives of the in-group suffering under or achieving great victories over the out-group. The Holodomor Great Famine of 1932–1933 in which millions died is especially vulnerable to the “politics of genocide” as it clearly identifies and delineates the diametric opposition between “Us” as the victim and “Them” as the culprit. The Eastern Slavic Ukrainians remember Holodomor as a horrific “famine” that inflicted mostly Ukraine, but it was a tragedy also shared by Russia and other Soviet republics. In contrast, the Ethno-cultural Ukrainians often denounce Holodomor as a deliberate Russian “genocide” to destroy Ukrainian nationhood. Posen warned that if the Ukrainian state would ever blame the Holodomor famine on Russia, it would likely lead a civil ethnic war and an inter-state war with Russia:

If Ukraine begins to blame the famine on Russians, this could be quite dangerous politically. If, instead, the famine continues to be blamed on a Communist Party headed by a renegade Georgian psychopath, then this experience will cause less trouble. (Posen 1993: 39)

Similarly, the Soviet Victory Day over Nazi Germany is remembered vastly different. The eastern regions of Ukraine celebrate Victory Day,

while in the western regions of Ukraine it is commonly commemorated as a continuation of occupation and is outright mourned. Were Stepan Bandera and the OUN fascists and Nazi collaborators or freedom fighters? Bandera is hailed as a hero when Kiev is led by ethno-cultural nationalists in Western Ukraine, and condemned as a fascist when Kiev is led by Eastern Slavic Ukrainians. The competing historical memory within Ukraine subsequently translates into incompatible policies concerning central issues like language. While the western regions lean towards eliminating the use of Russian, the eastern regions favour maintaining the status of Ukraine as a bi-lingual state.

The efforts to criminalise the Soviet history and legacy is counter-productive as it alienates a large portion of the population, and it undermines the legitimacy of Ukraine's current borders. The Soviet Union constructed the borders of the modern Ukrainian state by transferring large parts of Russia's historical southern territories to Ukraine. In 1954, Khrushchev even transferred administrative control of Crimea from the Russian republic to the Ukrainian republic to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav that reunited the Russian and Ukrainian people.

Viktor Yushchenko, the former president of Ukraine, complained in 2021 that irrespective of more than 7 years of conflict with Russia, 40 per cent of his countrymen agree with Putin that Russians and Ukrainians are one people (UP, 2021). While this could be considered a legacy of the Soviet Union and limited to older Ukrainians, polls reveal that younger Ukrainians are the most likely demographic group to consider Russians and Ukrainians to be one people (Guzhva, 2021).

## PROMOTING ANTI-RUSSIAN POLICIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The political alignment of Slavic states in Central and Eastern Europe has continuously been a challenge in the organisation of European security, which resulted in the promotion of division and bulwarks under the banner of freedom. Central and Eastern Europe have been defined as the "crush zone" as the region has throughout history been crushed by the power competition between the two European giants—Germany and Russia (Fairgrieve, 1915). The strategic interests of the UK have been to preserve the antagonism between Russia and Germany to ensure a balance of power on the continent, as cooperation between the two European



giants could become an unacceptable threat to the UK, a logic adopted later by the US as well.

After German unification in 1871, the desire among Russians to pursue a similar integration of Slavic lands intensified under the guidance of the Pan-Slavic thinkers such as Nikolai Danilevsky (2013). Dostoevsky (1997: 898) argued in the second half of the nineteenth century that the English pursued a divide and rule policy among the Slavs to marginalise Russia: “England need’s the Eastern Slavs to hate us with all the strength of the hatred she herself bears towards us”.

The Germans aspired to establish an empire in Central and Eastern Europe to wield its economic and cultural power, as outlined in *Mittelenropa* by Friedrich Naumann (1915). Germany’s victory over Russia in the First World War resulted in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of March 1918, in which Germany proclaimed to liberate Eastern European territory from Russia. In reality, “liberation” entailed transferring control over these territories as they became vassals of Germany. Winston Churchill (1931: 88) described the Brest-Litovsk Treaty as gifting Germany with “the granaries of the Ukraine and Siberia, the oil of the Caspian, all the resources of a vast continent”. Although, Germany could not cement its control over Eastern Europe as it was eventually defeated in the First World War.

In the 1930s, Germany reasserted its efforts to control Eastern Europe. Nazi Germany revived the former colonial plans for *lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, which was legitimised under the banner of freedom as Germany yet again positioned itself as the champion of Ukrainian independence (Kamenetsky, 1956: 9). In 1938, a German radio station in Vienna began to broadcast into Ukraine to stir up anti-Russian nationalism. Hitler then allied with Ukrainian fascist groups such as the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), with the Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera leading the National Executive of the OUN since 1933 (Bellant, 1991).

Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the US began to foster relations with anti-Russian and anti-communist groups. The US continues to this day to deny the connection with Bandera and OUN, but US archives and Soviet secret police files confirm that the US began to cultivate Bandera as an anti-Russian ally immediately at the end of the war with Nazi Germany (Burds, 2001: 12). During the Cold War, the US relied on support for nationalist groups in Soviet Republics as alternative sources of authority and loyalty to weaken the Soviet Union.

Western Germany had no prospect of regaining a dominant position in Eastern Europe, as the region was under Moscow's control. Western Germany subsequently pursued Ostpolitik during the Cold War as a policy of peace by building bridges and trust with Moscow. Western Germany could only engage with its Eastern neighbours through Moscow, and Ostpolitik also enabled the Germans to establish some autonomy in its foreign policy. However, in the post-Cold era, Berlin incrementally became the *de facto* capital of the EU, which advanced an exclusive concept of Europe. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (2020) announced a revised vision of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, which entailed a hostile stance towards Moscow in solidarity with its Eastern neighbours:

Unlike Brandt, we no longer have to go via Moscow to talk to our eastern neighbours nowadays. Many partners in Eastern and Central Europe now view Russia very critically – and German foreign policy must take our neighbours' concerns seriously. In addition to offers of dialogue, clear German positions vis-à-vis Moscow are therefore important for maintaining trust in Eastern Europe.

For Poland, NATO is an ideal organisation as Poland aims to distance itself from and marginalise Russia, while US leadership in the trans-Atlantic partnership reduced the invasiveness of German influence. To a large extent, NATO continued the mission as famously stated by NATO's first Secretary-General, Hastings Ismay: to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”. However, as NATO began expanding into former Soviet republics, the ability to sell Western hegemony as a liberal democratic project began to diminish as the populations were not united by the pro-West/anti-Russian sentiments.

The Baltic States set a precedent on how the Russian-speaking populations would be treated after inclusion into the EU and NATO. Yeltsin was profoundly apprehensive about the nation-building policies of the Baltic States as it entailed de-Russification policies by denying basic rights to Russian-speakers, such as the right to vote and to work in government positions.

The EU called on Estonia and Latvia to recognise citizenship for the Russian minority that constituted approximately 30 per cent of their population, although the policies of the EU made Brussels complicit in the discrimination of the Russian minority. The EU supported the closure of the OSCE missions to Estonia and Latvia; the EU and NATO

did not make basic democratic rights for Russian minorities a criterion for membership; the EU referendums for membership was accepted without the participation of “non-citizens”; the European Parliament grants Estonia and Latvia votes for citizens they do not recognise as citizens; and the EU has not attempted to improve the situation for Russian-speakers by for example recognising Russian as an official EU language (Diesen, 2015: 69). By 2021, 5 per cent of Estonia’s population and 10 per cent of Latvia’s population were still “non-citizens”.

The offer of future NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 was preceded by the Western-backed Georgian “Rose Revolution” in 2003 and the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” in 2004, in which democratically elected Russian-friendly governments were replaced with pro-West/anti-Russian governments that aspired for membership in both NATO and the EU. The Rose Revolution was labelled by the West as a “democratic revolution”, despite Mikheil Saakashvili running unopposed and winning over 96 per cent of the votes. President Saakashvili committed severe human rights violations, shut down opposition media, centralised power with “hyper presidential” powers, and attempted to ban all opposition parties that opposed his pro-Western policy agenda (Hale, 2006: 312). However, the EU and US turned a blind eye to Saakashvili’s crackdown on political opposition and severe human rights abuses (Youngs, 2009: 897). Saakashvili was eventually arrested in October 2021 for abuse of power and charges ranging from violence against protesters and media suppression. In Ukraine, Yushchenko policies were profoundly unpopular and he was eventually named the world’s most unpopular leader with an astonishing 2.7 per cent approval rating towards the end of his term (Matthews, 2009).

Yet, at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the military bloc had promised future membership to the two states. The Summit Declaration affirmed that “We agreed today that these countries [Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO” (NATO, 2008). The democratic argument for NATO membership was however not consistent with realities. A Gallup poll in May 2008 revealed that 43 per cent of Ukrainians associated NATO with a threat to Ukraine and only 15 per cent associated it with protection (Ray & Esipova, 2010). Another Gallup poll in 2008 demonstrated Ukrainians favoured Russian leadership above US leadership as 46 per cent of Ukrainians answered it was more important to have close relations with Russia irrespective of it hurting relations with the US, while only 10 per cent supported close relations

with the US even if it harms relations with Russia (English, 2008). In 2011, even NATO had to admit that positioning itself as the protector and democratic choice of Ukrainians had failed: “The greatest challenge for Ukrainian-NATO relations lies in the perception of NATO among the Ukrainian people. NATO membership is not widely supported in the country, with some polls suggesting that popular support of it is less than 20%” (NATO, 2011: 11). While admitting the lack of democratic support, the same NATO report cited Zbigniew Brzezinski’s geopolitical reasoning in *The Grand Chessboard*: “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire” (NATO, 2011: 3).

The declaration at the NATO Bucharest Summit became a watershed moment for Moscow, as it demonstrated that even the most vital Russian security interests would be undermined by the West. Furthermore, it became another nail in the coffin of a Greater Europe as it undermined any potential of a common Russian-Ukrainian “return to Europe”, and instead resembled another Brest-Litovsk Treaty of expanding Western power into Ukraine and pushing Russia into Asia. Former US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates (2014: 162), later acknowledged that relations with Russia had been severely mismanaged: “moving so quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union to incorporate so many of its formerly subjugated states into NATO was a mistake... Trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching”.

The attempts to sell democratisation as pro-Western/anti-Russian policies also run counter to reality in Belarus. The West has since 2020 paraded Svetlana Tikhanovskaya around Western capitals as the legitimate choice for president by the Belarussian people, as she represents democracy and the Europeanisation of Belarus. However, a poll by Britain’s Chatham House (2021) reveals that only 4 per cent of respondents favoured Tikhanovskaya as president, while 23 per cent preferred Lukashenko. The most popular candidate with 25 per cent was Viktor Babariko, who is the former chief of a Russian-owned bank and is jailed for controversial fraud charges. Regarding the desire for membership in political unions, only 9 per cent of respondents preferred a union with the EU while 32 per cent preferred a union with Russia. The most popular option at 46 per cent was to be in a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously, although in a divided Europe it is not an actual option.

## THE MAIDAN “DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION” IN 2014

In 2010, the eastern Ukrainian and Russian-friendly Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential election. Shortly thereafter, Yanukovich enshrined Ukraine’s non-aligned status in law and thus putting an end to the NATO aspirations pursued by his predecessor. Framing Yanukovich as “pro-Russian” implies divisive bloc alignment when he in reality sought to cement Ukraine’s non-aligned status and was also negotiating an agreement with the EU without a zero-sum component.

In November 2013, the EU offered the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to Ukraine and other former Soviet republics in what was a clear breach of the Common Spaces Agreement dedicated to harmonising integration initiatives to avoid new dividing lines. EU officials and representatives referred to the DCFTA to Ukraine as a “civilizational choice” between the West and Russia (Sherr, 2013: 2–3). A few months before the coup in February 2014, Carl Gershman, the president of the National Endowment for Democracy, confirmed the popular sentiment in Washington that “Ukraine is the biggest prize”, which could also bring the fight to within Russia as “Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself” (Gerschman, 2013).

Ukraine and Russia attempted to remove the regional zero-sum rivalry of the “civilizational choice” by replacing the bilateral Association Agreement with a trilateral EU-Ukraine-Russia agreement. EU Commission President Barroso dismissed the idea: “When we make a bilateral deal, we don’t need a trilateral agreement”, and equated Russian influence with imperialism by arguing “the times for limited sovereignty are over in Europe” (Marszal, 2013).

However, the internal divisions of Ukraine imply that it can only survive within its existing borders if it embraces non-alignment and a neutral foreign policy. Henry Kissinger (2014) criticised his American colleagues:

Far too often the Ukrainian issue is posed as a showdown: whether Ukraine joins the East or the West. But if Ukraine is to survive and thrive, it must not be either side’s outpost against the other — it should function as a bridge between them.

The narrative presented to the media was that the EU's Association Agreement was not a zero-sum initiative but a mere trade agreement. In reality, the agreement sought to redirect the Ukrainian economy from Russia to the West. Furthermore, the Association Agreement included military integration by committing Ukraine to "gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy" (European Union, 2013). This would disrupt Ukraine-Russian security cooperation and was likely a stepping stone towards NATO membership.

The EU's civilizational choice imposed on Ukraine initially backfired as Kiev chose Russia as its closest and most important neighbour (Petro, 2013). The EU responded to Ukraine's rejection of the Association Agreement by challenging the legitimacy of its government, which the media soon began to refer to as the "Yanukovich regime". European and American politicians encouraged the protests and riots, and blamed the instability on the government. Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister who would later become the President of the European Council, called for the EU to channel 3 million Euros to "the development of citizens' movements" to oppose President Yanukovich (Rettman, 2014). As Western leaders encouraged the protests and riots on the Maidan, Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt framed it as a clash between a superior and an inferior civilisation: "Eurasia versus Europe in the streets of Kiev tonight. Repression versus reform. Power versus people".

Victoria Nuland, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, estimated in December 2013 as the riots in Kiev were unfolding that the US had invested more than \$5 billion since 1991 to assist Ukraine in achieving "the future it deserves" (Mearsheimer, 2014: 80). The US officially claimed it was working with all sides to reach a peaceful solution, although a leaked phone call between Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, the US Ambassador to Ukraine, revealed a plot to topple the Ukrainian government. The phone call, leaked two weeks before the coup, discussed making Arseny Yatsenyuk the Prime Minister and other details of the make-up of the future post-coup government. Nuland also outlined how the UN can be used to legitimise the process and "glue this thing together" (BBC, 2014a).

While Nuland handed out cookies to the protesters on Maidan, Senator John McCain also went to Kiev and expressed his full support to the anti-government protesters: "We are here to support your just cause... the destiny you seek lies in Europe". McCain was uttering his

solidarity as he stood next to the leader of the Svaboda party, Oleh Tyahnybok. Svaboda has previously been criticised by the European Parliament (2012) as “racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic”, and the original name of the party was the Social National Party of Ukraine with a swastika as a logo. Tyahnybok has denounced “the Moscow-Jewish mafia ruling Ukraine” and “the Moskali, Germans, Kikes [Jews] and other scum who wanted to take away our Ukrainian state” (Whelan, 2013). Svaboda’s deputy chief, Ihor Miroshnychenko, similarly wrote about Mila Kunis: “Kunis is not Ukrainian, she is a Yid [Jew]. She is proud of it, so Star of David be with her” (Whelan, 2013). The fascists were nonetheless whitewashed as freedom fighters as they became a forceful ally against President Yanukovich and Russia. Furthermore, Russia’s concerns about the empowerment of fascist movements in Ukraine were repeatedly dismissed as Russian propaganda.

When protesters were shot on Maidan, the Western political-media establishment immediately and uncritically blamed the government and mounted pressure on Ukraine to pull back its security forces and for Yanukovich to step down from power. However, a leaked phone call between the EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton and Estonian foreign minister Urmas Paet revealed that the EU leadership knew or suspected that the new leadership in Ukraine had ordered the shooting as a provocation. Paet stated that “there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovych, it was somebody from the new coalition” (MacAskill, 2014).

The Western media has largely ignored the investigations and trials of the Maidan massacre, which has resulted in findings that undermine the entire narrative of the government initiating the massacre. The majority of wounded protesters have testified that they were shot from the Maidan-controlled buildings, and the majority of killed protesters were also shot from the direction of Maidan-controlled areas. The trial also found that several protesters were shot before the special Berkut police unit was even deployed (Katchanovski, 2016, 2021).

Kiev eventually agreed to an EU-brokered compromise for a national unity government on 21 February 2014, and European powers signed as guarantors of the agreement. Although, the Western-backed opposition soon thereafter toppled Yanukovich, who fled the country. Instead of calling for a return to the national unity government, Western leaders sent their officials to Kiev to give legitimacy to the coup (Sakwa, 2014).

The US, especially, had an immense influence on the coup and the efforts of selling it as a democratic movement (Carpenter, 2019).

The coup was branded as a “democratic revolution” to bestow legitimacy and moral authority. However, President Yanukovich had been elected in a free and fair election according to the OSCE. In contrast, the Maidan protests did not enjoy democratic majority support from the Ukrainians and even less supported a coup (BBC, 2014b). Furthermore, the coup in no uncertain terms breached the constitution of Ukraine. Although, British Foreign Minister, William Hague, deceived the British parliament by claiming that the overthrow of President Yanukovich had complied with the Ukrainian constitution (Morrison, 2014a). In the media, reports about the Western-backed riots in Kiev was instead blamed on Russia, with the Economist using the title “Putin’s inferno” on its front cover. In a more honest assessment, the Chief Editor of Foreign Affairs Gideon Rose, who appeared on the Colbert Report on the 24th of February, immediately after the coup, used the analogy of stealing Russia’s girlfriend while the Russians were distracted with the Sochi Olympics.

After the coup, the new Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also defined the Association Agreement as a “civilizational choice” towards Europe. Such a civilizational choice implied that undemocratic measures were required to delegitimise and suppress a large part of the Ukrainian population. The first decree by the new Parliament on 23 February 2014 was to call for repealing Russian as a regional language. At Kiev’s city council, there were large neo-nazi banners for white power, the American confederate flag, and the fascist Stepan Bandera (BBC, 2014b). While the *Party of Regions* had been the largest political party from 2007 to 2014, it largely disappeared from the political map after Maidan. The Communist Party was similarly purged with accusations of treason for its benign posture towards Russia.

## CRIMEA

The coup triggered a reaction from Eastern Slavic Ukrainians, which enjoyed the support of Russia. Moscow’s main priorities were to ensure that Russia maintained its strategic naval base in Crimea, and to prevent NATO expansionism that would cement the pro-Western/anti-Russian government in Kiev. A referendum was arranged in Crimea for seceding from Ukraine and reuniting with Russia. The referendum received covert support from the Russian military to ensure the new authorities in Kiev



could not obstruct the vote. Predictably, the vote resulted in 95.5 per cent in favour of reunifying with Russia.

The West challenged the legitimacy of the referendum results by contesting its legality and validity. The Western media repeated the arguments of Washington, which dismissed the argument of self-determination as the referendum was “held at the barrel of a gun” and contested the legitimacy as there was an absence of international observers (US Embassy in Ukraine, 2014). However, independent polls from Western countries corroborate the referendum results that the overwhelming majority of Crimeans desired to rejoin Russia. In a report by Forbes, it was revealed that all polls demonstrate that Ukrainians, ethnic Russians and Tatars are all overwhelmingly supportive of having transitioned from Ukraine to Russia (Rapoza, 2015). International observers had been invited but Western states refused to send them to deny legitimacy for the referendum.

Another argument against the legitimacy of the referendum was the issue of legality, as it did not have support from the new government in Kiev or the UN. This is the strongest argument against the referendum, although the legality is somewhat murky as Crimea had significant autonomy and even its own parliament. Moscow countered the legal issue by referring to the precedent of Western support for the illegal secession of Kosovo in 2008. The West had introduced self-determination as a competing principle to territorial integrity, and implied that the West had the prerogative to unilaterally decide which principle was legitimate and each instance.

President Obama made an eloquent speech that rejected any comparison between Kosovo and Crimea that followed the liberal democracy versus authoritarian frame. Obama contrasted the two referendums by arguing that the referendum in Kosovo was transparent and had the oversight of international observers. According to Obama: “Kosovo only left Serbia after a referendum was organised not outside the boundaries of international law, but in careful cooperation with the United Nations and with Kosovo’s neighbors” (Morrison, 2014b). However, the description of the referendum in Kosovo was entirely fictional as there never was a referendum in Kosovo. Yet, Obama’s false claims were largely absent from the Western media. Stuenkel (2020: 164) observes: “For those who are more critical of the United States, the West’s alarm over Crimea is merely proof that established powers still consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of international norms, unaware of their own hypocrisy”.

The Budapest Memorandum of 1994 is also presented as a key legal agreement breached by Russia, which is one of three identical memorandums that provided Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan with certain guarantees from the US, UK and Russia in return for abandoning their nuclear weapons. However, the agreement was breached first as economic sanctions were imposed on Ukraine in February 2013 to pressure the government to accept a settlement with the opposition, and thereafter the West undermined Ukraine's sovereignty by backing the coup. Matlock (2021), the last US ambassador to the Soviet Union, argues that Washington's argument ignores that NATO expansionism triggers the legal doctrine of *rebus sic stantibus*, in which an agreement becomes inapplicable due to fundamental changes of circumstances.

The Budapest Memorandum called for the signatories to "respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine", and to "refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus security advantages of any kind". The West frequently cites the Memorandum to demonstrate that Russia changed the "the existing borders of Ukraine", although neglecting "economic coercion", "sovereignty" and "independence". When the US placed sanctions on Belarus in 2013, Washington insisted the Budapest Memorandum was not legally binding and that economic coercion did not breach the memorandum as it was designed to protect human rights:

Although the Memorandum is not legally binding, we take these political commitments seriously and do not believe any U.S. sanctions, whether imposed because of human rights or non-proliferation concerns, are inconsistent with our commitments to Belarus under the Memorandum or undermine them. Rather, sanctions are aimed at securing the human rights of Belarusians and combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other illicit activities, not at gaining any advantage for the United States. (US Embassy in Belarus, 2013)

Economic sanctions are used to undermine governments and instigate either change of policies or regime change, to the advantage of the US. However, when all power interests are framed in the language of values, the US can exempt itself from international agreements.

## WAR IN DONBAS

In Donetsk and Lugansk, the people took to the streets and began seizing government buildings in opposition to the coup. What happened in Eastern Ukraine was “the mirror image of what took place in Kiev” a few months earlier, when armed protesters on Maidan seized control over government buildings and demanded changes to the constitution (Milne, 2014). However, the framing by the Western political-media establishment was diametrically opposite. The armed protesters at Maidan were hailed as freedom fighters and the government was condemned for the crackdown. In Eastern Ukraine, the uprising was denounced by the West as a Russian hybrid war, a framing that deprived the Eastern Ukrainians of agency. Subsequently, the US supported Kiev’s “anti-terrorist operation” launched against its own population. Western states also undermine the agency of Donbas by referring to the rebels as “pro-Russian” fighters as opposed to “anti-Maidan” fighters. By comparison, Yugoslav republics were not referred to as “pro-Western secessionists” as it would place the West at the centre of the conflict. Donetsk and Lugansk organised referendums in May 2014 to establish republics, although Moscow did not recognise the referendums and also refrained from sending its regular military into the breakaway republics.

Kiev sent military units to Donbas that were often reluctant to use force against the locals, and desertions became common. Similarly, following the referendum in Crimea, approximately 75 per cent of Ukraine’s naval personnel defected to Russia or quit the Ukrainian navy (Greer & Shtekel, 2020). Consequently, the new authorities in Kiev relied on fascist militias that further empowered the ethno-nationalists. The Right Sector was integrated into the national guard, and the neo-Nazi Azov battalion represent a minority of Ukrainians, although their central role in the coup and against Donbas have given them an outsized political influence. As both President Poroshenko and President Zelensky, their ability to engage with Donbas and Russia was impeded by the threat of far-right groups marching on Kiev. In November 2021, the former leader of Right Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, was appointed as an advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

On 2 May 2014, pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan protesters clashed in Odessa, on the southern coast of Ukraine, resulting in the anti-Maidan protesters seeking refuge in the Trade Unions House. The building was set on fire and dozens of people were burned alive. Videos reveal

how the pro-Maidan protesters were shooting at people attempting to escape the fire through the windows and were clubbed to death after they had jumped from the windows onto the pavement (Sakwa, 2014). The Ukrainian government continues to delay any investigation, and the Western political-media establishment has largely left the event out of the Ukraine narrative.

### MH17

The Malaysian aeroplane, MH17 was a passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur that was shot down over eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, killing all 298 people on board. The event mobilised Western support for anti-Russian sanctions as Moscow was blamed for having supplied a BUK missile system to the rebels in Donbas. The rebels in Donbas probably downed the aeroplane, although the investigation and framing revealed that the event became a central feature of the West's propaganda in the Ukraine crisis.

The Malaysian Prime Minister complained about the politically motivated Dutch-led investigation: "We are very unhappy, because from the very beginning it was a political issue on how to accuse Russia of the wrongdoing... Even before they examine, they already said Russia" (Reuters, 2019). The Malaysian Prime Minister chastised the findings of Russian guilt to be "ridiculous" as "there is no proof. Only hearsay" (Pleasance, 2019). The US and EU imposed sanctions against Russia within two weeks of the accident, which creates pressure that the investigation substantiated the predetermined verdict.

Irrespective of the dispute about the evidence, the entire framing of culpability was simplified and narrowed down to identifying the origin of the missile that hit the flight. The question of intention is imperative as nobody suggests that a civilian aircraft was deliberately targeted. The Donbas rebels were defending against attacks by military aircraft from the new authorities in Kiev. Should blame also be assigned to the government that launched an "anti-terrorist operation" against its own population that contested the legitimacy of the unconstitutional coup, and its Western backers who supported the coup and the "anti-terrorist operation"? Should also the airline share some of the blame for flying over a warzone after the International Civil Aviation Organisation advised airlines to avoid the region? The framing of culpability was instead

narrowed down to identifying who pulled the trigger and who could have supplied the missile system.

The Cold War provided evidence for comparing the language in media coverage of airline disasters. The media overwhelmingly used the term “murder” to describe the accidental Soviet downing of a South Korean plane in 1983, while in contrast, the US downing of an Iranian plane in 1988 used terms such as “technical glitch” (Entman, 2004). Following the MH17 incident, the media referred to the rebels as “pro-Russian separatists” and “Russian-backed rebels” to imply Russian guilt. Newspapers like the Sun merely printed “Putin’s missile” on their front cover. The framing of MH17 was exploited with atrocity propaganda by the US and its allies to portray Russia as ruthless and barbarous (Boyd-Barrett, 2018).

### DEMOCRACY AS THE PURGING EAST UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

The project of liberal hegemony requires heavy-handed propaganda to conceal the contradiction that Ukraine as a frontline against Russia cannot be democratic. In 2019, the anti-Russian policies of Poroshenko contributed to giving the national government its lowest approval rating in the world, merely 9 per cent (Bikus, 2019).

Volodymyr Zelensky subsequently won a landslide victory with 73 per cent of the popular vote in 2019 on the platform that he would negotiate with Donbas and improve relations with Russia. Pressured by right-wing nationalists at home, as well as Washington, Zelensky reversed his election promises claiming he would not talk to “terrorists” and he would seek NATO membership and partners in the struggle against Russia. Zelensky’s approval ratings subsequently collapsed and a poll from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in October 2021 revealed that Zelensky’s approval had been reduced to merely 24 per cent (KIIS, 2021).

As the popularity of Ukraine’s main opposition leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, surpassed that of Zelensky, Medvedchuk was arrested and indicted. Zelensky then also had former president Poroshenko indicted. Furthermore, Zelensky ordered the closure of opposition media. While Zelensky does not have the legal authority to shut down media outlets, Zelensky responded by retroactively annulling the appointment of the head of the Constitutional Court, and disregarding the Supreme Court’s verdict that he should be reinstated (Petro, 2021).

By framing eastern Ukrainians as instruments of a Russian hybrid war, the US can sell the suppression of eastern Ukrainians as advancing democracy. The US openly supports the purging of opposition parties and opposition media under the auspices of fighting Russian hybrid warfare. Michael McFaul (2021), Obama's Ambassador to Russia, employs simple binary heuristics to frame the attacks on the opposition as advancing Ukrainian democracy:

In the global struggle between democracy and dictatorship, and the fight for a peaceful Europe, Ukraine is on the front lines... His [Zelensky's] decision to ban pro-Russia television networks, and to charge their owner and Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk with treason, was a daring act that needs U.S. support.

Never mind that these are long-standing Ukrainian opposition parties and Ukrainian-based/Ukrainian-owned media channels. Denying agency to Russian-speaking Ukrainians, the banning of the Russian language in books, movies and other works is also consistent with the US approach to Ukrainian nation-building. The bold ambition to sever a millennium of Russian-Ukrainian cultural connection to create a new geopolitical reality has made the US an eager participant in a proxy culture war.

The think tank Atlantic Council hails Ukraine's decoupling from the Russian Orthodox Church as an important step towards sovereignty. The US directly contributes to an anti-Russian national narrative as the US Senate passed a resolution in 2018 that defined the Holodomor famine as a deliberate "genocide" against the Ukrainians, while supporting oppressive language laws. The West also engaged in minor initiatives such as changing the English spelling of the Ukrainian capital from Kiev to Kyiv to resemble the Ukrainian spelling instead of the Russian, in a show of solidarity with the ethno-cultural nationalists. Furthermore, the Atlantic Council argues in favour of Ukrainian nation-building and "cultural revival" based on purging Russian culture from Ukraine:

Thanks to centuries of political domination and systematic russification, modern Russia still enjoys enormous cultural influence over independent Ukraine. When hostilities began seven years ago, this became a matter of national security...The Ukrainian authorities have also embraced a number of protectionist policies in order to restrict Russia's soft power penetration inside Ukraine. In 2014, Ukraine banned a range of Russian TV channels,

TV series, and books... Three years later, Ukraine went further and blocked a number of Russian social media platforms. Many of Russia's leading pop stars and celebrities are also no longer welcome in Ukraine. (Pesenti, 2019)

Washington also supports the anti-Russian historical narrative that white-washes Nazi collaborators as freedom fighters. A video posted by the Cold War propaganda channel RFE/RL, argued that Ukrainians are deeply divided about whether Stepan Bandera was a hero or a villain, before leaning heavily in favour of the hero narrative. Every year since 2013, the US has voted against a UN resolution “combatting glorification of Nazism” to protect the ethno-nationalist view that Western Ukrainian fascists collaborating with Hitler against the Soviet Union were heroes and freedom fighters. In November 2021, the US and Ukraine were the only two countries in the entire world to vote against the resolution of combatting the glorification of Nazism.

## A DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The Minsk Protocol was reached in September 2014 to end the fighting between Kiev and Donbas, although the ceasefire broke down. In the subsequent fighting, Kiev suffered great losses in Debaltseve and on 12 February 2015, the Minsk-2 agreement was signed by the leaders of Ukraine, Donbas, Germany, France and Russia—in what became known as the Normandy format.

The Minsk-2 agreement calls on Kiev to first engage Donbas diplomatically to make constitutional reforms to grant Donbas autonomy. However, the Ukrainian authorities did not establish a dialogue with Donbas and the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada refused to accept the bill on elections in Donbas. Kiev's decision to not honour its obligations under the Minsk-2 agreement is that the subsequent political power of Donbas would give Russia enduring influence in Ukraine. The ability of Donbas to prevent future NATO membership is a key reason why Western powers have not pressured Kiev to implement the peace agreement. Charap (2021) explains from the US perspective: “Washington has been understandably reluctant to do this in the past; Minsk represents Russia's terms, imposed using armed aggression. Pushing the victim—a good friend of the United States—to do the aggressor's bidding is contrary to U.S. principles”.

The Minsk-2 agreement was approved by a resolution in the UN, and all the major Western powers have affirmed that there is no alternative to the agreement. Nonetheless, there are no efforts made to implement the agreement. The West instead aims to change the balance of power on the ground by placing sanctions on Russia and arming Ukraine. Concurrently efforts are made to redefine the crisis solely as a Russia-Ukraine, an effort to undermine and renegotiate the Minsk-2 Agreement. The European Parliament (2020) even suggests that Russia has a “particular responsibility for the implementation of the Minsk agreement”, which is a remarkable statement as Russia is not even mentioned in the agreement and is not identified as one of the conflicting parties. The effort of strengthening Kiev vis-à-vis Moscow also includes sanctions against Russia if it violates Ukraine’s “right” as a transit country. After Ukraine’s effort of decoupling from the Russian economy, the efforts by Russia to diversify its transit routes for cheaper and more reliable transit falls under the West’s concept of a Russian “hybrid war”.

The efforts to present the conflict in Ukraine as only a conflict between Russia and Ukraine ignores the domestic conflict between Kiev and Donbas, the regional conflict between NATO and Russia, and NATO’s own subversion of Ukraine. Attempts to present it as a Russia-Ukraine conflict deprive Donbas of agency and relegates NATO to the role of a non-party to the conflict that merely supports Ukraine’s sovereign decisions. Framing it only as a conflict between Russia and Ukraine is conducive to mobilising public opinion and resources against Russia, although it also obstructs the possibility to establish a workable peace. In the spring of 2021, Kiev began to mobilise its military in what appeared to be pressure for renegotiating the Minsk-2 agreement, although Russia responded by mobilising its own troops on the other side of Donbas to deter Kiev from pursuing a military solution. Kiev can only attack the Donbas if they have weapons and NATO behind them. How does NATO respond? To prevent a Russian “invasion”, NATO provides Ukraine with more weapons and support.

Unable to deviate from the narrative that the conflict is merely Russian aggression against Ukraine, any compromise consistent with the principle of indivisible security becomes tantamount to “appeasement”. Without compromise, the only tool in the toolbox is therefore more military and economic pressure Russia into changing its policies. Commentators such as Michael McFaul (2021), Obama’s former ambassador to Russia, suggest that the US should reject any deal that places limitations on



NATO as the military alliance is not a threat. McFaul argues that the real threat to Putin is that a democratic Ukraine will undermine the legitimacy of “Putin’s regime”.

## REGIONAL SETTLEMENT

While the Minsk agreement addresses the domestic component of the Ukraine crisis, complementary pan-European security agreements are required to deal with the zero-sum rivalry in Europe between NATO and Russia.

In December 2021, Russia outlined a list of demands for security guarantees. These sweeping demands included an end to NATO expansionism and the removal of NATO forces that have been stationed in member states that joined NATO after 1997. NATO responded by suggesting that this would undermine Ukraine’s sovereign right to freely choose its partnerships, that Russia cannot have a say over NATO expansion, and that NATO has a principle of not discriminating between new and old member states.

The argument that Russia undermines Ukrainian sovereignty by restricting its ability to choose partnerships is at the centre of NATO’s propaganda in the conflict. Russia did not demand guarantees from Ukraine that it will not accept NATO membership, and instead called on NATO not to offer membership in the first place. This may seem like a minor difference, but conflating the two is at the heart of NATO’s propaganda in the Ukraine crisis. Suddenly, Russia is not demanding that NATO follow existing pan-European security agreements, rather the NATO narrative suggests that Russia is asserting a sphere of influence.

The principle of “indivisible security”, not to expand security at the expense of the security of the other, is repeated in existing pan-European security agreements from 1990, 1994 and 1999. NATO attempts to circumvent this principle by merely suggesting that NATO is not a threat but merely a “defensive alliance”, irrespective of the illegal war against Yugoslavia in 1999 and Libya in 2011.

Furthermore, the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 explicitly states that there shall be no “permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” on the territories of the former Warsaw Pact states. This security agreement runs counter to NATO’s new principle of not discriminating between new and old member states. Evidence indicates that the US did not have the intention of upholding the security agreement with Russia.

When briefed on the negotiations for the NATO-Russia Founding Act, President Clinton seemingly could not believe the lack of firm security guarantees for Russia that would constrain NATO. Clinton reportedly stated:

“So let me get this straight”, this deal is merely an assurance “that we’re not going to put our military stud into their former allies who are now going to be our allies, unless we happen to wake up one morning and decide to change our mind”. (Sarotte, 2021: 267)

NATO exempts itself from pan-European security agreements by suggesting it cannot be a threat due to its liberal democratic credentials. Even if Moscow believed that NATO have no plans of attacking Russia, it must deal with the reality of international relations that intentions change over time and often reflect the international distribution of power. During the Trump presidency, it was commonplace in the US to suggest the president could act irrationally by starting devastating wars. US Senator Roger Wicker casually suggested that the US could engage in a war with Russia over Ukraine, in which even the use of nuclear weapons should not be taken off the table (Kaonga, 2021). Evelyn Farkas (2022), the former US deputy assistant secretary of defence for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia in the Obama administration, and former senior advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander in NATO, penned an op-ed in which she argued that “The US Must Prepare for War Against Russia over Ukraine”:

We must not only condemn Russia’s illegal occupations of Ukraine and Georgia, but we must demand a withdrawal from both countries by a certain date and organize coalition forces willing to take action to enforce it. ... The horrible possibility exists that Americans, with our European allies, must use our military to roll back Russians – even at the risk of direct combat.

Even if Washington rejects the possibility of a direct war with Russia, the growing US military presence along Russian borders can give the US escalation dominance. The concept of escalation dominance refers to the ability to increase military pressure and possibly resort to limited use of force, based on the logic that the stakes can be continuously increased until the other side is compelled to capitulate (Snyder, 1961). With the knowledge that the US could defeat Russia in a war, the US can use its

ability to escalate tensions to compel Russia to capitulate on strategically important issues.

The fundamental principle of a collective security system is that states should not enhance their security in a manner that undermines the security of others. Washington did not champion the principle of sovereign right to choose military partnerships when Cuba hosted nuclear missiles from the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the US was prepared to start a nuclear war to prevent Cuba from exercising this sovereign right. In January 2022, Moscow suggested it could respond to the US militarisation of Ukraine by sending Russian troops and weapon systems to Cuba and Venezuela. The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan responded: “If Russia were to move in that direction, we would deal with it decisively” (White House, 2022), which affirms that the US would act similarly as Russia does to the growing US presence along its borders.

In more recent years, the US has openly sought to undermine Russian-led security and economic regional institutions. The US refuses to cooperate with the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), in fear that it may bestow legitimacy to the military alliance. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton announced that Washington would oppose the development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU): “we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it” (Clover, 2012). The lack of consistent principles is bridged by declaring US military cooperation as democratic and legitimate, while Russian-led initiatives are authoritarian and thus illegitimate and imperial.

## CONCLUSION

The West’s self-deception over the crisis in Ukraine is of immense significance. Russia’s reaction to the coup in Ukraine should not have been a surprise to anyone. Moscow had warned for years that making Ukraine an anti-Russian bastion and a NATO member was an existential threat. Such warnings were repeated in 2008 when NATO promised future membership to Georgia and Ukraine.

The profound consequences of the coup in Ukraine were also largely missed, as it went largely unnoticed that Russia ended its efforts of integrating with Europe. The West largely deceived itself by dismissing Russian security concerns and framing Russian motivations rooted in anti-Western sentiments and desire to restore the Soviet Union. Even after the West rejected Gorbachev’s concept of a Common European Home

in favour of NATO expansion, Russia still had ambitions for gradual integration with the West to create a Greater Europe. The Western-backed coup in Ukraine ended the illusions of any gradual integration with the West and subsequently led to the abandonment of the Greater Europe initiative.

Greater Europe was replaced with the Greater Eurasia Initiative in partnership with China, which entails reducing reliance on the West and reorganising Russia's economic connectivity towards the East (Diesen, 2017). This represented a tectonic shift as Russia abandoned its 300-year-long Western-centric foreign policy, while China gained a strategic partner in its rivalry with the US. The failure "to recognise Russia's objectives resulted in the West embracing counter-productive policies. After Russia abandoned Greater Europe in favour of Greater Eurasia, sanctions merely intensified Russia's economic decoupling from the West.

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# Humanitarian Interventionism: The Road Towards Regime Change in Syria

## INTRODUCTION

The evils of wars are always justified by virtuous objectives such as peace. The language of war is commonly distorted as “finding the reality of war too unpleasant to contemplate, we create a verbal alternative to that reality” (Huxley, 1937). Humanitarian interventions are sold as not being actual wars but in the selfless service of human rights, democracy and peace. The concept of humanitarian interventionism is especially vulnerable to propaganda as accusations of crimes against humanity fuels a moral outcry that can be used to pursue strategic objectives. Humanitarian crimes assign clear roles of a victim, a culprit, and a defender of justice. Humanitarian interventionism can be sold as the prerogative of Western states, and thus a component of an international system based on sovereign inequality.

Propaganda in international politics initially focused primarily on warfare in terms of boosting the morality of one’s own side and depleting the morality of the adversary. The public is also more vulnerable to propaganda during wars as a threatening enemy creates an instinctive impulse towards in-group loyalty required to mobilise the necessary resources. Propaganda has always been an indispensable instrument of war: “once war has broken out, propaganda has proved to be a weapon of no less significance than swords, guns or bombs” (Taylor, 2003: 5).



NATO was succeeding in the pursuit of regime change in Syria by military means when Russia unexpectedly intervened on the side of the Syrian government in September 2015. The proxy war created another point of conflict with the West and thus a key focus in the mutual information war. The geostrategic significance of Syria is immense in terms of being a vital ally of Iran and transit state for Iranian support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, a key adversary of Israel, a transit point of competing energy pipeline proposals, and the host of Russia's Tartus Naval Base in the Eastern Mediterranean. Syria is also an important transit country for two possible pipelines from Qatar and Iran that compete for supplying Europe.

However, the Western narrative of the Syrian War depicts the conflict almost exclusively in the language of values in the wider framework of liberal democracies defending human rights in defiance of authoritarian states. From Moscow's perspective, Russia is putting an end to a US-led string of illegal wars to topple unfavourable governments. Moscow feared there were only two possible outcomes to NATO's regime-change war in Syria: NATO could succeed in installing a pro-Western government in Syria that would end the decades-long close partnership with Russia. Alternatively, NATO would fail and Syria would become a failed state run by jihadist groups that would destabilise the entire region, possibly spreading to Central Asia. Regime change could end in a combination of the two aforementioned scenarios.

Moscow's position is that Russian participation in the conflict has been at the behest of the Syrian government and thus acting in accordance with international law, as a counter-hegemonic objective against the Western regime change through direct attacks and illegal support of radical militant groups. In contrast, the Western narrative suggests it is acting in support of democratic aspirations and human rights, while Russia supports the Syrian dictator who is "killing his own people". The information war therefore focuses on the legality versus legitimacy of military operations in Syria and Western support of rebel groups, and the extent of war crimes committed by the various participants in the conflict.

This chapter first outlines the concept and narratives of humanitarian intervention versus regime change, before exploring the Yugoslav precedent and the relevance for Russia. Second, the chapter explores the strategic objectives of regime change in Syria sold through the prism of civilisation versus barbarism, which is supported by the use of chemical weapons as a strand of *genocide politics*. Last, while the West has invested into constructing credible sources, the Russian intervention is framed

within the wider narrative of a world divided by liberal democracies with altruistic motivations in the international system versus authoritarian regimes undermining all sacred norms and rules. It is concluded that humanitarian interventionism as a justification for decoupling legitimacy from legality will likely decrease following the failed Syrian intervention as a global balance of power reasserts itself.

### REGIME-CHANGE WARS VERSUS HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONISM

Regime change and humanitarian interventionism are overlapping concepts often used interchangeably, although the difference between these two concepts is the source of conflict and propaganda war between the West and Russia. Is regime change a means to humanitarian ends, or is humanitarianism a means to achieve the ends of regime change?

After the Cold War, humanitarian interventionism became central in the West's foreign policy. Humanitarian interventionism was developed within the wider concept of human security in which the referent object shifted from the state to the individual. While security has historically focused on the defence of states, the concept of human security refers to the security of people and communities.

There are two main competing perspectives to interpret the rise of human security to rival traditional state security, which are reflected in the narratives of the West versus Russia. The first perspective is in line with liberal theory, which stipulates that after the Cold War there was an opportunity to embrace a wider and preventative concept of security that placed the individual at the centre. While defeating poverty and other threats to human welfare can be achieved by peaceful means and in cooperation with the national government, there is a need for military means when it is the government that commits the crimes. The second perspective follows the theory of political realism, which suggests that the West was no longer balanced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus had strong incentives to embrace principles that diminish the sovereignty of their adversary. Thus, the new principles from humanitarian interventionism, democracy promotion and the global war on terror have the common denominator of sovereign inequality—the West and its allies maintain their sovereignty while adversaries have limited sovereignty.

Human security presents a direct challenge to international law, which is founded on the principle of state sovereignty to prevent conflicts caused

by overlapping responsibility and authority. On one hand, placing limitations on state sovereignty is reasonable as throughout history more people have been killed by their own government than foreign governments. On the other hand, foreign powers are likely to selectively prioritise human security or state sovereignty based on their national interests. At worst, states have incentives to exaggerate or even create humanitarian crises in foreign countries to legitimise military interventions.

The US and NATO have established a template for regime change justified by liberal democratic norms. NATO first provides political, economic and/or military support to opposition groups within adversarial states, a breach of sovereignty justified by supporting democracy or human rights. If the opposition group is successful in toppling the government, NATO bestows legitimacy on the new authorities by equating the pro-Western stance as a commitment to liberal democracy. If the opposition group is defeated by the government, NATO can militarily intervene under the justification of preventing the government from “killing its own people”.

Zollmann (2017: 219) observes: “The politics of intervention manifest as selective human rights shaming. This entails highly dichotomised propaganda campaigns during which ‘enemy’ countries are marked for ‘humanitarian intervention’”. The assertion that one side is fighting for humanitarian values and the opponent is violating these sacred values creates a powerful frame. The Politics of Genocide entails using words like “massacre” and “genocide” release enormous passion and moral outcry among the public (Herman & Peterson, 2010).

A compromise between state-centric security and human security was achieved with the introduction of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which is an international commitment endorsed by the UN in 2005 to defend human rights. Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorises collective action to preserve or enforce international peace and security, and R2P extends on this authority by also endowing the UN Security Council with the authority to intervene to protect human rights. However, Western powers tend to refer to R2P as establishing a norm that justifies humanitarian interventionism, while ignoring the legal framework that relies on a mandate from the UN Security Council.

### THE YUGOSLAV PRECEDENT

For Russia, NATO's invasion of Yugoslavia in 1999 over Kosovo was a pivotal moment. The consequence of NATO monopoly on security in Europe was that the West could make its own rules and disregard both Russia and international law, and human rights provided the justification. Not only are the Serbs a historical ally of Russia but the Russians also saw clear parallels between Kosovo and Chechnya. One analyst suggested that NATO's actions left "lying in ruins the foundations of international law and political trust which seemed so firm only yesterday" (Matveyev, 1999).

In Moscow, it is taken as a given that the US support for Chechen fighters since the 1990s was an effort to balkanise Russia. While Moscow's claim that the US supported Chechen terrorists has not been sufficiently substantiated, there are ample indicators. American politicians and intelligence officials frequently met with Chechen separatists such as Ilyas Akhmadov, the leader of the Chechen separatist movement. Washington preferred to refer to Chechen terrorists as "rebels" and even legitimised terrorist attacks by blaming Moscow. While terrorism was treated as an evil by the US, the same did not appear to apply following the detrimental terrorist attack on a school in Beslan that resulted in the death of 333 people, including 186 children. Tsygankov (2009: 90) observes that "the American media was full of articles pressuring the Kremlin to negotiate with 'moderates' or to 'give Chechens a land of their own' and supporting a harder American policy towards Russia". The parallels to Kosovo seemed striking as proposals using the language of liberal democracy argued for international intervention in the Caucasus, and US presidential candidate John McCain argued that Western countries should consider recognising "the independence of the North Caucasus and Chechnya" (Klussman, 2008).

The first post-Cold War humanitarian interventionist precedent was set in 1999 when NATO launched an illegal war against Yugoslavia under the justification of protecting human rights in Kosovo. In the lead-up to the invasion, Washington removed the Kosovo Liberal Army from its list of terrorist organisations and lobbied its European allies to do the same, and thereafter armed the terrorist group to fight against the Yugoslav authorities. In the early stages of the war against Yugoslavia, republicans in the US expressed concern about CNN and other media pushing propaganda

for the KLA that only a year earlier was recognised as a terrorist organisation (Radu, 1999). European governments were aware that the CIA was funding and directing KLA fighters in Kosovo to destabilise Yugoslavia and overthrow Milosevic (Beaumont et al., 2001). However, as the propaganda intensified, there was nonetheless growing pressure to side with “us” against “them”. After the NATO invasion, the US placed the KLA in the government of Kosovo irrespective of its involvement in organised crime and harvesting organs of Serbs.

NATO’s greatest struggle was to obtain legitimacy for its use of force. NATO justified unilateral humanitarian intervention in the absence of UN support due to the “threat of veto” from Russia and China, a language that challenged the legitimacy of veto powers for authoritarian states that did not adhere to the same humanitarian values. The war propaganda was organised by depicting NATO as a moral authority that allegedly represented the victims of Yugoslavia and the “world community”. The possible positions on the conflict were limited to the artificial binary response of either supporting NATO bombing or supporting Milosevic’s war crimes.

The narrative was based on false claims as President Bill Clinton argued 100,000 Kosovo Albanians had been murdered and placed in mass graves. Clinton’s speeches were organised around three themes: the government in Belgrade was comparable to Nazi Germany and Milosevic was comparable to Hitler, Milosevic was presented as uncompromising by rejecting all peaceful options, and peace in Europe was imperative for the US (Nohrstedt et al., 2000: 391). The language was designed to conflate Yugoslavia with its leader by referring to Yugoslavia’s position as “he” or “him”. Operation Horseshoe and the misrepresentation of the fighting in Račak revealed how the US and Germany manipulated public opinion during the Kosovo conflict to justify war. The narrative of Serbian barbarism was largely based on presenting killed KLA fighters in Račak as executed civilians, while Operation Horseshoe was a fraudulent Serbian plan for genocide (Judah, 2002; Wolfgram, 2008).

The role of NATO as the defender relied on presenting the Serbs as being uncompromising. According to Henry Kissinger (1999), the US deliberately placed unacceptable demands on Yugoslavia at the Rambouillet conference as “an excuse to start bombing”. Appendix B of the Rambouillet proposal demanded complete surrender and acceptance of NATO occupation of Yugoslavia:

NATO personnel shall enjoy, together with their vehicles, vessels, aircraft, and equipment, free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] including associate airspace and territorial waters. This shall include, but not be limited to, the right of bivouac, maneuver, billet, and utilization of any areas or facilities as required for support, training, and operations. (US Department of State, 1999)

The Serbian National Assembly rejected the proposal and proposed instead a diplomatic solution under the inclusive security institutions of the OSCE and the UN, which would formalise Kosovo's autonomy. Washington and NATO proclaimed the West had exhausted its diplomatic efforts as Belgrade was unwilling to compromise (Nohrstedt et al., 2000: 389).

Once the war began, the barbaric character of the Serbs was contrasted with the benign weaponry of NATO defined by precision bombs and smart weaponry that minimised casualties. The language rationalised and humanised military actions by defining the objective as forcing Milošević "back to the negotiation table" by "reducing" Yugoslav troops in the region, "degrade" its military capabilities, and ensuring a "complete withdrawal" to "prevent" a humanitarian catastrophe (Hammond, 2000: 366). In contrast, the Serbian opponent was described as "Milosevic military machines" committing "genocide". While the invasion was sold as a humanitarian intervention, the greatest displacement of people occurred as a result of the NATO bombing.

The British political leadership also framed the conflict as civilisation versus barbarism, in which diplomacy and compromise were delegitimised by embracing phrases such as refusing to "appease dictators" and the crime of doing nothing (Hammond, 2000: 366). The British Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Alastair Campbell (1999: 36), argued that the media had been indispensable for the war efforts, but implied that the media should not deviate too far from the government narrative as "the media needs to reflect whether it has not provided a kind of template to dictatorial regimes in how to use the western media to their own advantage".

Tony Blair attempted to portray propaganda as a tool only at the disposal of authoritarian governments: "We take freedom of speech and freedom of the press for granted... The Serb media is state-controlled.

It is part and parcel of Milošević's military machine" (Hammond, 2000: 367). Campbell (1999: 32) berated the media for not exposing the "Serb Lie Machine" during "the worst barbarism since the Second World War". The comments implied a subservient role of the media as soldiers in an information war. Campbell argued that "our message did get through" that resilient in robust public support Western propaganda was implied to be a necessity as Campbell argued the "Milosevic media machine... required us to be aggressive too when the Western media got itself into a mind-set that the only show in town was 'NATO blunders'" (Campbell, 1999: 33, 36).

The proclaimed virtuous objectives of NATO justified belligerent means. NATO openly committed war crimes by bombing the media and civilian infrastructure with the use of depleted uranium. British Prime Minister Tony Blair argued that NATO's bombing of Serbian TV station killing 12 civilians was "entirely justified" as their news was labelled war propaganda. NATO had warned it would bomb the TV station unless they aired 6 hours of Western news each day, but the demand was then retracted (Hammond, 2000: 367). The US also bombed the Chinese embassy following China's vocal opposition to the illegal invasion, although Washington maintains it was an accident.

## TOWARDS REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA

When the Cold War came to an end in 1989, the US sought to take advantage of Soviet passivity by eliminating its former allies. After the first Gulf War in 1991, the US Under-Secretary of Defence for Policy at the time, Paul Wolfowitz, argued the US had to take advantage of the peace with Moscow:

With the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity. The Soviets won't come in to block us. And we've got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us. (Sachs, 2018: 25)

Some of the earliest indications of specific US intentions of regime change in Syria date back to 2001. In 2007, the former highest commander of NATO, US General Wesley Clark, revealed that Washington had decided to exploit the September 11 terrorist attacks to pursue a more militaristic foreign policy. General Clark (2007) explained that he was handed a

memo that “describes how we’re going to take out seven countries in five years. Starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and finishing off Iran”.

The propaganda was organised along with the usual binary framing of liberal democratic values versus authoritarianism framing. The invasion of Iraq was initially legitimised by a rogue and irrational state supporting terrorism seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD), although human rights and democracy became the ideological safety net for legitimacy once it became evident there was no WMD.

The propaganda also exploited the September 11 attacks by arguing that Iraq was the central front line against terror. A few months after the US invasion of Iraq, an astounding 69 per cent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein had colluded with Osama bin Laden in the planning of the September 11 attacks (Milbank & Deane, 2003). Meanwhile, the US government kept the relationship between Saudi intelligence and the hijackers secret for 20 years (Viswanatha, 2021). The invasion of Iraq fuelled radical Islamic movements that spread across the region. These radical groups were then supported to different degrees in Libya, Syria and Yemen as proxy forces against the governments of these states.

NATO’s war against Libya greatly influenced Russia’s decision to enter the war in Syria. The US supported various military groups within Libya under the guise of aiding the “democratic opposition”, and then planted false stories of Gaddafi hiring black mercenaries and plans of genocide against unspecified groups (Forte, 2012). The Obama administration sold the war in Libya as an altruistic effort to protect civilians, although the evidence point clearly towards a regime change operation. Obama’s authorised secret assistance to Libyan fighters—including the jihadists who eventually killed Gaddafi in coordination with NATO. The mission of protecting civilians quickly became one where the “coalition” supported the “rebels” as legitimate entities against the illegitimate “tyrannical regime”. After the killing of Gaddafi, the humanitarian situation continued to worsen yet the humanitarian rhetoric came to an end.

Russia did not veto UN Security Council Resolution 1973 for a no-fly zone, which was later seen as a mistake that would not be repeated in Syria. NATO interpreted the UN resolution as a mandate to overthrow the government and kill its head of state (Bellamy & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, the collapse of Libya then resulted in terrorist groups spreading further to Mali, Chad, Niger, Sierra Leone, Burkino Faso and



Nigeria. Once the Libyan government collapsed, the US and UK intelligence agencies transferred arms from Libyan stockpiles to fighters in Syria, which further contributed to the rise of ISIS (Milne, 2015).

### ENGINEERING A “CIVIL WAR”

The origin of the Syrian war in 2011 was sold as an organic grassroots movement of Syrian civilians aspiring for freedom against a repressive regime. By brutally suppressing the peaceful movement, the Syrian government sparked a civil war. The conflict was presented through the binary lens of good versus evil and armed opposition versus a villain. The Syrian government is referred to as “Assad” and the US represents the “international community”. The narrative delegitimised the Syrian government as monsters slaughtering civilians, while the US and its allies were assigned the role of the reluctant but virtuous defenders (Boyd-Barrett, 2021).

However, evidence suggests that the US engineered ethnic divisions and the narrative of a civil war. A recently declassified CIA memo from 1986 outlines an early strategy for fomenting ethnic divisions in Syria to carry out a regime change. The CIA memo outlines:

We believe that a renewal of communal violence between Alawis and Sunnis could inspire Sunnis in the military to turn against the regime... Excessive government force in quelling such disturbances might be seen by Sunnis as evidence of a government vendetta against all Sunnis, precipitating even larger protests by other Sunni groups. Although the regime has the resources to crush such a venture, we believe brutal attacks on Sunni civilians might prompt large numbers of Sunni officers and conscripts to desert or stage mutinies in support of dissidents, and Iraq might supply them with sufficient weapons to launch a civil war. (Van Wagenen, 2022)

In an interview with President Bashar Al-Assad in 2005, the CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour confirmed the pending plans of regime change in Syria:

Mr. President, you know the rhetoric of regime change is headed towards you from the United States. They are actively looking for a new Syrian leader. They're granting visas and visits to Syrian opposition politicians. They're talking about isolating your diplomatically and, perhaps, a coup d'état or your regime crumbling. What are you thinking about that? (CNN 2005)

The Wall Street Journal similarly confirmed that the “Pressure for regime change in Damascus is rising”, and former Pentagon advisor Richard Perle highlighted the opportunity that “Assad has never been weaker, and we should take advantage of that” (WSJ, 2005).

Washington’s propaganda efforts to exploit ethnic and religious divisions focused to a great extent on the Kurdish minority and Syria’s partnership with Iran to fuel fears about Shia Muslims subduing Sunni Muslims (Wikileaks, 2006; Hersh, 2007; Kennedy, 2016). A leaked cable from the US embassy in Damascus in 2006 advocates the active use of “Public Diplomacy” [propaganda] aimed against both the Syrian people and the government. The US embassy recommended to “play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence”, and even though the fear of Iran is “often exaggerated”, the US should work with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to “publicize and focus regional attention on the issue” (Wikileaks, 2006). The US embassy goes on to advocate for sowing distrust towards the government to encourage an uprising, and simultaneously aim propaganda towards the governments about coup-plotting as it “increases the possibility of a self-defeating over-reaction” (Wikileaks, 2006). Farid Ghadry, a Syrian opposition figure in exile proposed the NATO regime change template in 2007, in which the opposition groups in Syria unite: “Then, take people to [the] streets. Some people get killed. The international community gets further angry at the regime. Then, have NATO forces protect a safe zone in northern Syria” (Zabad, 2017: 96).

RAND Corporation, a US think tank aligned closely with the intelligence community, also presented a strategy of dividing Syrian society with “covert action, information operations, unconventional warfare” to pursue a “divide and rule” strategy. RAND advocates that the US should “capitalise on the ‘Sustained Shia-Sunni Conflict’ trajectory by taking the side of the conservative Sunni regimes against [Iran-allied Shiite empowerment movements in the Muslim world]” (RAND, 2008: xvi). The report further linked the war on terror with controlling oil supplies: “The geographic area of proven oil reserves coincides with the power base of much of the Salafi-jihadist network. This creates a linkage between oil supplies and the long war that is not easily broken or simply characterized” (RAND, 2008: 171).

Roland Dumas, the former Foreign Minister of France, informed that the British joined American efforts in planning covert military actions against Syria in 2009 with the use of regional “gunmen”, which was motivated by oil interests and as a geopolitical move against Iran

(Guardian, 2013). Peter Ford, the former British Ambassador to Syria from 2003 to 2006, similarly criticises his own government for the “incoherent and grotesque” policies towards Syria. Ford argues that the war in Syria was started and perpetuated by a Western regime-change agenda, which resulted in using jihadi terrorists as proxies (Hadjimatheou, 2021).

While Russia supported a pipeline from Iran through Syria to the ports of Lebanon, the US and its regional allies favoured the competing pipeline proposal from Qatar through Syria and Turkey. Leaked documents reveal that the CIA began funding anti-government fighters when the Syrian government rejected the Qatar pipeline, years before the Arab Spring. Robert Kennedy Jr, the son of the late US Attorney General Robert Kennedy, observes that.

Secret cables and reports by the U.S., Saudi and Israeli intelligence agencies indicate that the moment Assad rejected the Qatari pipeline, military and intelligence planners quickly arrived at the consensus that fomenting a Sunni uprising in Syria to overthrow the uncooperative Bashar Assad was a feasible path to achieving the shared objective of completing the Qatar/Turkey gas link.

The media narrative in the West followed the humanitarian narrative of the belligerent aggressor, the victim and the benign saviour. The narrative of altruistic humanitarian motivations by Western powers relied on uncritical reporting as the US and other NATO allies had become responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths in several failed wars in the region, and they partnered with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to fight for democracy and human rights in Syria. Some exceptions emerged as the New York Times reported: “some in Mr. Obama’s war council have noted, if protesters succeed in Syria, Iran could be next” (Sanger, 2011).

US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, argued already in July 2011 that Assad had “lost legitimacy” (Epstein, 2011), which were followed by official demands of regime change. President Obama argued that the US did not merely have the right, but the responsibility to intervene militarily as the champion of liberal democracy:

We are the United States of America, and we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to what happened in Damascus... because we believe that the rights of individuals to live in peace and dignity depends on the responsibility of nations. We aren’t perfect, but this Nation more than any other has been willing to meet those responsibilities. (Obama, 2018: 987)

The Hitler comparisons were also made by Secretary of State John Kerry as he announced “This is our Munich moment”. Kerry framed US motivations solely as support for human rights: “This is not the time to send a message where doing nothing is far more risky than responding” (BBC, 2013).

President Obama, speaking at the UN General Assembly in September 2015, scolded those who support “tyrants like Bashar al-Assad, who drops barrel bombs to massacre innocent children” (Obama, 2015). The statements were aimed to appeal to emotions rather than rational reflection. The conventional bombs used by the US causes no less damage than “barrel bombs”, not to speak of US bombs with depleted uranium, phosphorous and cluster munitions. In a war for the hearts and minds of Syrians, it is also unclear what the strategic purpose would be to drop bombs for the purpose of massacring innocent children. Although, similar statements were made about Russia, which allegedly targeted schools and hospitals. Such statements are consistent propaganda techniques that imply “Our” atrocities are accidental and “Their” atrocities are deliberate.

The argument that the West supports the “moderate opposition” in Syria shifted the focus from legality to legitimacy as there is no legal space in international law for fighting proxy wars with moderate fighters. Yet, the claim that the gunmen were moderate was also deceitful. It soon became evident that NATO powers were cooperating with Al-Nusra and other terrorist groups in both Syria and Yemen. It was also confirmed by American officials that most of the rebel arms flow from Saudi Arabia and Qatar was shipped to the radical Islamic jihadists (Sanger, 2012). A New York Times article confirmed that the CIA had spent more than a billion dollars to arm and train rebels against the Syrian government, with much of the weapons ending up in the hands of the jihadist group Al-Nusra that fought alongside CIA-backed fighters (Mazzetti et al., 2017). A Pentagon report from August 2012 confirms that US military planners anticipated that jihadists would seek to establish territorial control in Eastern Syria:

If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in Eastern Syria (Hasaka and Deir Ezzor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran)” (Judicial Watch 2015).

The conflict in Syria continued to be framed as a “civil war” between the Syrian government and “moderate rebels”, even though the US State Department estimated in June 2016 that there were more than 40,000 foreign fighters in Syria from 100 countries (Siberell, 2016). A US Defence Intelligence Agency report defined the Syrian war as a proxy conflict in 2012 in contradiction to the official narrative (Judicial Watch 2015). The struggle of protecting the narrative from reality was also problematic among US allies. The Dutch media revealed that their government was financing jihadist terror groups in Syria, and the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, obstructed the Parliament to establish an independent investigation. The extent a group was “moderate” was to a great extent defined by geography as they were deemed terrorists in Iraq until they crossed the border into Syria. The effort of presenting the opposition as a unified force under the banner of the “Syrian Democratic Forces” also proved difficult as CIA-armed groups began to fight Pentagon-armed groups in Syria (Bulos et al., 2016) .

The Syrian government has fought the war brutally and has undoubtedly committed many crimes. Yet, in the prolonged war crimes were committed by all sides and propaganda requires the establishment of a clear moral dichotomisation. Former Defence Secretary James Mattis proclaimed that “We are the good guys... We do everything humanly possible consistent with military necessity”, which was strongly rebuked by Amnesty International (2019) reporting on US war crimes from indiscriminate shelling.

Although the US military aggression against Syria was the leading source of the war, the media portrayed US inaction as the cause of war. The US and its allies are presented by the media as passive actors on the sideline in the Syrian conflict, and arguing that an active role is required for peace. According to the media watchdog FAIR:

Anglo-American press coverage of the Syrian situation has grossly misled readers about their own governments’ role in the catastrophe, and has urged audiences to accept greater Western military intervention in the country without examining the implications of such a move. (Shupak, 2018)

## GENOCIDE POLITICS: ASSAD “GASSING HIS OWN PEOPLE”

Chemical weapons became the moral position that eliminates the grey and divides clearly into a black-white narrative. While the mantra of Assad “killing his own people” builds on the narrative of a civil war, and Assad “gassing his own people” further delegitimised opposition to US policies in Syria morally repugnant. Furthermore, President Obama set a red line in 2012 in which he committed the US to intervene directly if chemical weapons were used. The West’s commitment to attack the Syrian government if it uses chemical weapons creates an incentive system for the opposing militant group to draw in the West and for Western powers to legitimise interventionism.

However, the flawed narrative of gas attacks by the Syrian government has not been scrutinised by the media. The public was also presented with the false logic that if chemical weapons were used then the Syrian government had to be the culprit (Simons, 2016). The chemical attack in Ghouta in August 2013 was immediately blamed on the Syrian government. The Obama administration was making false claims that only the Syrian army had access to sarin gas, which is contradicted by the US Defence Intelligence Agency’s classified report that affirmed that al-Nusra had access to sarin gas (Hersh, 2014). A former senior US intelligence official opined that the Turkish government saw the American red line as an opportunity, as several Turkish officials “believed they could get Assad’s nuts in a vice by dabbling with a sarin attack inside Syria – and forcing Obama to make good on his red line threat” (Hersh, 2014).

A study by Richard Lloyd, a former UN weapons inspector, and Theodore Postol, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), revealed that the ballistic data of the rockets filled with sarin gas demonstrate that they could not have been launched from the territory controlled by the Syrian government (Lloyd & Postol, 2014). Furthermore, the rockets used were not consistent with those belonging to the arsenal of the Syrian government. Instead, the sarin attack appeared been orchestrated by the Syrian rebels.

Another chemical attack occurred five years later in August 2018, in Douma. The attack did not make any strategic sense as the Syrian government had completed a difficult urban war with conventional weapons to gradually retake control over Douma, and then at the last stage allegedly launched a chemical attack once the main fighting was over and the

government was finally asserting its control. One of the few journalists on the ground in Douma, Robert Fisk (2018), reported that the civilians in the video from the alleged gas attack had not been exposed to chemical weapons.

Instead of investigating these irregularities, the media largely imposed ideological conformity to the dominant narrative. Case in point, in an interview with the BBC, British Navy Admiral Lord West expressed his severe doubts about the Syrian government being behind a chemical attack in Douma. The BBC news presenter Annita McVeigh thus interrupted and criticised the admiral for undermining group loyalty: “Given that we’re in an information war with Russia on so many fronts, do you think perhaps it’s inadvisable to be stating this so publicly” (BBC, 2018).

While the alleged chemical attack in Douma did not have much tactical purpose, it had the predictable effect of triggering a Western military intervention and international shaming of Russia for supporting the Syrian government. The alleged chemical weapons attack also mounted pressure on Trump to launch a military strike on Syria, which he appeared reluctant to do as he had for years argued against US military involvement in Syria.

The reluctance of Trump to launch an attack would have been interpreted as being beholden to Russia, although Trump’s attack on Syria in response to the alleged gas attack also fuelled a conspiracy theory to fit within the Russiagate investigation. On the show of Rachel Maddow, one of the largest TV shows in the US, co-host Lawrence O’Donnell opined that it was possible “Vladimir Putin orchestrated what happened in Syria this week – so that his friend in the White House could have a big night with missiles and all of the praise he’s picked up over the past 24 hours” (Selk, 2017).

The alleged gas attack in Douma was investigated by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is the leading authority on the use of chemical weapons as the intergovernmental organisation implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention. The OPCW released a report that blamed the Syrian government for the gas attack, until evidence emerged that the US in cooperation with senior OPCW officials had censored the initial results and released new results that were not supported by the findings. The scandal becomes pivotal in the information war between Moscow and Washington as Russia alleges that the US is infiltrating and corrupting the OPCW as a credible source

to legitimise military interventions, while the US argues that the Russian accusations are aimed to delegitimise the authority of the OPCW.

Wikileaks (2019) posted leaked documents revealing that the initial conclusions in the OPCW were fundamentally different, before the senior officials at the OPCW altered the report. The initial report could not conclude there had been a chemical attack, and “the symptoms observed were inconsistent with exposure to chlorine, and no other obvious candidate chemical causing the symptoms could be identified” (Wikileaks, 2019). The leak revealed that a senior official at the OPCW, the Chief of Cabinet, asked to “remove all traces” of the document that suggested the gas cylinders had been planted as opposed to dropped from the air (Wikileaks 2019). The US government and media had insisted that the gas cylinders had been dropped from the air, which was an important argument to blame the government as the rebels did not have an airforce.

Two investigators from the OPCW, Brendan Whelan and Ian Henderson, sounded the alarm that their findings were manipulated. Whelan, the mission’s scientific coordinator, expressed his concerns in an email to the OPCW Chief of cabinet: “After reading this modified report, which incidentally no other team member who deployed into Douma has had the opportunity to do, I was struck by how much it misrepresents the facts” (Maté, 2020). One of the directors at the OPCW internally criticised the censorship, although cautioned Whelan against speaking up as it would support the Russian narrative—which indicates a political orientation of the OPCW:

I fear there is little one can do, since the report is final and out – unless one wants to feed in the Russian narrative and that I would never do, as they really are not bona fide friends of this organization, that’s for sure. (Maté, 2020)

One of the whistle-blowers also noted the pressure to show loyalty towards the organisation by manipulating the findings: “First floor [management] says that for the OPCW’s credibility we have to have a smoking gun” (Steele, 2019). The sentiment of the whistle-blowers was that the Americans were imposing “unacceptable pressure and a violation of the OPCW’s declared principles of independence and impartiality” (Steele, 2019).

The first director-general of the OPCW, Jose Bustani, hailed the integrity of the dissenting inspectors. Bustani, who himself had been



removed from the leadership in the OPCW in 2002 due to his opposition to the US preparations for the invasion of Iraq, cautioned against the organisation losing its independence and impartiality from US influence. Bustani argued that the credibility of the institution demanded transparency by openly addressing and investigating the concerns raised by OPCW whistle-blowers. The testimony of Jose Bustani was blocked at the UN Security Council by the US, UK and France—the same three countries that bombed Syria following the alleged chemical attack in Douma. Furthermore, Bellingcat which played a key role in the propaganda efforts against Syria, began to discredit the leaks and smearing the whistle-blowers (Hitchens, 2019). Peter Ford, the former British ambassador to Syria, argues that the OPCW has been corrupted by misreporting and stifling whistle-blowers for NATO states to continue making the argument that “Assad gasses his own people” (Cunningham, 2021).

### SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Propaganda relies to a great extent on group psychology and a key component is thus to establish the experts and information gatekeepers to herd the group. Controlling the narrative largely depends on controlling the sources of authority, such as institutions and experts as they can establish the beliefs and stereotypes that the masses use to filter information from the conflict. The dichotomisation of the Western narrative versus making excuses for the Syrian regime became a corrective mechanism to punish dissent.

The media choice of expert groups to cite also indicate deliberately dishonest reporting. A favourite source of the media has been the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which implies it is a human rights organisation with a local presence. However, the Guardian exposed already in July 2012 that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is a blog run by one man, Rami Abdulrahman, who is located in Coventry, UK (Skelton, 2012). Rami Abdulrahman's day job is to run a clothing store with his wife in Coventry, although in his spare time became a leading source of information for the Western world regarding events on the ground in Syria.

Another alleged humanitarian organisation in Syria is the White Helmets. The White Helmets was founded by former British Officer, James Le Mesurier, who had been part of NATO's interventionism in Bosnia and Kosovo before joining private mercenary groups. He

became the vice-president for special projects” in the Olive Group, which recruited private mercenaries for US contractors in Iraq (Chacko, 2019). In 2013, Le Mesurier founded the White Helmets, a mercenary army that worked under the guise of a humanitarian organization. White Helmets is frequently cited as an independent source, although it is funded by both the US and UK governments.

Former British Ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford, criticises the British media for whitewashing the White Helmets, which Ford accuses of having been involved in beheadings, staging chemical attacks and faking rescues (Hadjimatheou, 2021). The renowned journalist Robert Fisk (2018) also reported that the White Helmets had been involved in the suspicious chemical attack in Douma, before leaving the city in buses with the jihadi fighter. The White Helmets became an important proxy for the US in Syria. The US director of the Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team at the State Department acknowledged the political imperative of funding the White Helmets as it is “one of the most important things we can do to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of civil authorities in liberated areas of Syria” (Blumenthal, 2019: 211). Western politicians and Hollywood celebrities praised the White Helmets for its humanitarian work, and the group was almost nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 (Blumenthal, 2019).

## RUSSIA INTERVENES

When Russia intervened in the conflict in 2015, it followed the framing of the international system characterised by a rivalry between liberal democracies and authoritarian states. The dichotomy of civilisation versus barbarity was evoked by US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, who accused Russia of “barbarism” due to its support for the Syrian government: “What Russia is sponsoring and doing is not counter-terrorism. It is barbarism”. Power inferred a dichotomous struggle between civilisation and barbarity with claims such as: “Instead of helping get lifesaving aid to civilians, Russia and Assad are bombing the humanitarian convoys, hospitals and first responders who are trying desperately to keep people alive” (Loveluck & Sly, 2016). The rationality for Russia to bomb humanitarian convoys, hospitals and first responders do not appear in the accusations.

The binary framing of the international community seeking to protect Syrians versus the Russians protecting a brutal dictator was followed

by the Western media. Support for the Syrian government is rooted in self-interest such as economic gains or power politics, while the interventionists are motivated by values. Even though Russia is on the side of international law by assisting the Syrian government and the Western powers violate international law in the effort of toppling the government, it is Russia nonetheless that is portrayed as illegitimate by upholding the “primitive, cynical notion of sovereign democracy” (Bohm, 2012). In the language of a civilisational teacher and a barbaric student, the West attempts to hold Russia “accountable” and Russia is asked to “explain itself”.

Evelyn Farkas (2018), the deputy assistant secretary of defence for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia during the Obama administration, opined that “Russia is abetting mass murder in Syria”. In a language of perpetrator versus defender, Farkas cautions that Russia “has gotten away with its bloody air operations” due to the “insufficient resolve on the part of the United States and its allies”, and advocated that the US must respond by “ramping up sanctions, and increasing military and diplomatic pressure” to “protect Syrians”.

When it was becoming evident that the US was losing its proxy war in Syria to topple the government, a new strategy emerged to maintain influence over the country. The strategy entailed occupying strategic territory and stealing Syrian oil and agriculture, and using the conflict to exhaust Russia. The new phase of the conflict thus deviates further from the initial narrative of human rights concerns. The US representative to Syria, James Jeffrey, clarified that the objective of the US in Syria was to create an enduring conflict to weaken Russia: “My job is to make it a quagmire for the Russians” (Brennan, 2020).

Dana Stroul, the Democratic co-chair of the Syria Study Group, outlined in November 2019 four strategic interests and forms of leverage for the US in Syria. The first was that the US military presence “owned” one-third of Syrian territory that is resource-rich in terms of hosting the hydrocarbons and agriculture, which would give the US influence over any future political settlement. The second was the international political isolation of the Syrian government that entailed preventing foreign embassies from returning to Syria. The third was the economic pressures through sanctions, and the fourth was the blocking of reconstruction aid to ensure that the government-controlled territory remains a “rubble” (CSIS, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Propaganda is inclined to legitimise war on humanitarian grounds, and the discourse of war is thus framed in the language of peace. Humanitarian interventionism imagines elevating the value of the individual in the international system, which appeals to mankind's instinctive inclination for justice. Humanitarian interventionism is vulnerable to propaganda as it divides conflicts artificially into "good" victims, "evil" perpetrators, and selfless defenders. Much like all war propaganda, the aim is to dehumanise the opponent and clothe oneself in the language of virtue. Benign rhetoric with moral justification disguises the strategic interests of the interventionist, conceals the selective application of human rights, creates incentives for producing victims to legitimise intervention, and obscures if human rights is a means or an end. The powerful binary framing of good versus evil results in facts having little ability to correct the narrative. Thus, arsonists can masquerade firefighters.

Unipolarity enabled the West to use military force with impunity and remove unfavourable governments, in which humanitarian interventionism serves as an important justification to decouple legitimacy from legality. The era of humanitarian interventions can be expected to end as a new balance of power has asserted itself in a multipolar world, which reduces the demand for norms and values that translate into sovereign inequality. NATO's defeat in Afghanistan represented a wider ideological collapse as President Biden denounced "forever wars" and contrary to evidence claimed that the objective was never "nation-building". This was a momentous development as it implies a departure from the former dogmas, which caused great resentment by the liberal interventionists. The failed regime-change operation in Syria will also make it more difficult to construct a "coalition of the willing" in the future as the certainty of US victory has diminished, and propaganda favours being on the "winning team". Furthermore, continued US presence in Syria that includes stealing the energy and food from Syrians suggests that the claim of pursuing humanitarianism and fighting terrorism will be difficult to defend.

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## Conclusion: Anti-Russian Propaganda of a West in Relative Decline

Propaganda over long periods of time produces greater conformity, and Western dominance and liberal ideology in opposition to Russia have endured for decades if not centuries. Propaganda is more effective at preserving the status quo when there are widely accepted myths and ideas to legitimise power relations (Ellul, 1965: 200). However, anti-Russian propaganda must now adapt to new realities as the international distribution of power and role of liberalism change. The unipolar order has ended and the new strand of liberalism has a declining appeal, which is fragmenting the West as the in-group and changing the dichotomous relations with Russia as the out-group.

The subject-object/teacher-student format for relations between the West and Russia is no longer sensible, as Moscow has no ambitions to Europeanise Russia. The Western-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014 eliminated the final illusions in Moscow that an incremental integration with the West was possible. This occurred at the same time as when China began to openly challenge the US-centric economic architecture. Moscow subsequently abandoned its Greater Europe initiative, a reconceptualization of Gorbachev's Common European Home, and instead embraced the Greater Eurasian Partnership in cooperation with China. Anti-Russian sanctions do have a pedagogic function of disciplining “bad behaviour”, rather it reaffirms and intensifies the process of reducing

economic reliance on the West. Russia has subsequently abandoned its 300-year-long Western-centric foreign policy since Peter the Great.

Russia's historical impulse to emulate the West to develop and modernise has come to an abrupt halt. The geoeconomics of Greater Eurasia is largely neglected in the fog of propaganda. When Russia sought to fully integrate with the West it was a peace offensive, while the pivot to the East is dismissed as a rejection of modernity and democracy. Case in point, the effort *Wall Street Journal* reported on Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership as "Russia's turn to its Asian past", which meant becoming the "beneficiary of that Mongol empire. They admire its ruthless centralism, its desire for conquest, its ability to maintain law and order" (Trofimov, 2018).

The portrayal of Russia as a backward barbarian seeking to conquer Europe contributes to self-delusion in the West. Rather than seeking greatness through territorial conquests, Russia is establishing itself as a geoeconomic power. In cooperation with Eurasian partners, Russia is making great progress in establishing technological sovereignty in the fourth industrial revolution and establishing itself as an energy superpower, developing competing transportation corridors across Eurasia, and new financial instruments. The geoeconomic strategy of Russia is not inherently pro- or anti-Western, instead, it aims to make the West matter less for Russia.

Framing the complexities of the world through the lens of liberalism versus authoritarianism is also failing. The West rose to greatness on a balance between liberalism and conservatism, between the focus on individual rights and the adherence to the collective in the form of the nation, Church, family, traditional culture and other conservative ideals. While the liberal nation-state was a vehicle for pluralism and success, the excesses of liberalism have resulted in the liberalism decoupling itself from the nation-state. As Russia aims to restore conservative values and institutions that were destroyed and desecrated by the communists, the West's effort of creating "Western Man" liberated from his own past cannot be a model as it is seen to follow the mistakes of the Bolsheviks attempt of creating "Communist Man" liberated from religion, traditions, the family, the nation and his own past. Putin (2013) suggested that the West is no longer is a model that is attractive to Russia: "We see that many Euro-Atlantic states have taken the way where they deny or reject their own roots, including their Christian roots which form the basis of Western civilization".

Classical conservatives and populists in the West are also increasingly rejecting the view of the world being divided between liberalism and authoritarianism, and instead sees the world as a national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism divide. Through this prism, Russia transitions from being an adversary to becoming an ally (Diesen, 2021). The efforts to instil bloc discipline by denouncing classical conservatives and populists are agents of Russia only contributes to further polarising Western societies. Mações (2019) cautions:

The efforts to establish common ground on conservative ideals would entail Europe adapting to Russia by abandoning liberal internationalism in favour of political and social conservatism. The implications of this development can hardly be overstated as it would be 1989 in reverse.

People instinctively desire to belong to the in-group and bandwagon behind what is expected to be part of the winning team. The US is losing much of its soft power, which is imperative in creating a dichotomy between “Us” and “Them”. Much like stars, empires often shine the strongest before they die. Empires drain resources from the core to fund the periphery, and the moral authority and legitimacy similarly decline due to the coercion required to uphold an empire. The reliance on propaganda to bridge the contradictions of being a democracy and an empire has also resulted in a steady decline in the trust of the media. With the continued decline of the wealth, freedom and reputation of the US, it will to a lesser extent be sought to be emulated.

The West only existed as a united entity with international cohesion during the bipolar era to balance the Soviet Union, and then in the unipolar era to establish collective hegemony in the pan-European space. In the multipolar era, the interests of the US and the Europeans become increasingly divergent. US benign leadership in Europe decreases as the US has less to offer and simultaneously demands more. The US is shifting its resources and priorities to the Indo-Pacific while demanding that the Europeans maintain geoeconomic loyalty and dependency by not buying Russian energy or weapons, Chinese technologies, and following unilateral US sanctions on countries such as Iran. The Europeans attempt to maintain their value to the US and strengthen Western unity by for example making NATO an anti-Chinese alliance, although for the Europeans to remain relevant they need to assert strategic autonomy and

diversify away from their excessive reliance on the US. A survey by European Council on Foreign Relations in 2019 asked respondents: “Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and Russia?” The overwhelming majority of all 14 European countries surveyed answered “neither”, while in Slovakia, Greece and Austria there were more people who wanted to take the side of Russia than the US (ECFR, 2019). Similarly, within Europe strategic interests are dividing the north and south, and the east and west.

Anti-Russian propaganda and claiming a monopoly on representing universal values cannot bridge the fragmenting interests of the West. Russia is positioning itself as a Eurasian balancer in which hostile policies towards Russia merely push it closer towards China. Continuity is sought by the West with frequent proposals for using propaganda to fuel Russian fears of China to divide the two Eurasian giants, although these efforts will almost certainly fail and there does not appear to be a plan B. The Europeans are increasingly inclined towards reconsidering the hegemonic pan-European security architecture developed in the 1990s, while even the US has systemic incentives to accommodate Russia in Europe and Central Asia to limit the power of China.

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