Introduction: the ‘Russian trolls’ and academic research

Research on modern ‘Russian propaganda’ has been rapidly growing in recent years. It has examined information disorder activities (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) organised, allegedly, by actors formally or informally affiliated with the Russian state and mostly directed at foreign populations. The focus has been on the study of the activities of RT (formerly Russia Today), the state-owned corporation oriented to foreign audiences, and detecting and proving the existence (and, rarely, assessing the impact) of online computational propaganda tools (Woolley and Howard 2018), including hacking, bot activity, trolling, and mixed-media propagation of fake and misleading information.

The first line in this research comprises investigative reports by US and European defence institutions, parliamentary groups, and think tanks, as well as detailed accounts based on open sources (see Lysenko and Brooks 2018), within the framework of international cyberwar. The main goals are to identify and prove organised efforts, define the extent of threat to national security, and suggest counteraction strategies. Scholars have studied alleged Russian disinformation campaigns on social networking sites through a combination of social network analysis and textual methods, with varying degree of difference between trolls/bots and random users. Also, Twitter has released datasets of at least 3,800 accounts altogether (without, though, publishing the methodology for such identification); these datasets were used for machine learning and journalistic investigations by NBC News and CNN. Other platforms like Facebook and Tumblr also announced blockages of the accounts identified as trolls/bots linked to Russia.

Several research findings are echoed in government investigations such as the Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, known as Mueller Report (2019), and the subsequent indictment by the grand jury of the Court of the District of Columbia (www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download). The indictment states that 13 people of Russian citizenship were engaged in activities that breached the US FECA and FARA Acts related to federal elections and registration of foreign agents. The described actions went further than pro-Russian or pro- Trump posting: they included, as was stated, using stolen identities and spending money on political advertising without registering. Unlike the Mueller report, the indictment did not openly relate these activities to the Russian authorities – who have also
repeatedly denied any relation to them. Despite this, the indictment has led to widening the list of US sanctions against Russian individuals.

A second line of research has approached the subject by foregrounding questions about democratic communication. Karpan and co-authors (2019) closely examined the organisational routines of troll factories in Russia (better known as ‘Olgino trolls’), China, and the Philippines, including an attempt aimed at ‘finding an online army’. Other studies, instead, argue that there is no simple technique capable of detecting a troll (unlike a bot). Today’s sophisticated work of potential trolls is often based on bias, spin (Linvill and Warren 2020), and subversive tactics of ‘justifying their upsetting and threatening statements by characterization of reality as upsetting and threatening’ (Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2019: 233). This makes trolls hardly distinguishable from ordinary users expressing discontent.

Within this line of research, here I follow a regretfully small number of works that offer a more nuanced view of the distortions of Russian-language communication. Kazakov and Hutchings (2019) intelligently point out the ‘questionable assumption that information war is invariably a one-sided affair – Kremlin-initiated activities to be “countered” by Western democracies’. In their view, the argument about a line of transmission of misleading messages ‘from “media outlets” through “force multipliers” to “reinforcing entities”’ reconstructed “in the numerous intelligence-led reports” (ibid.) neglects the underlining instability and fluidity of the communities at which potential disinformation is targeted and genuine grassroots user participation in the ideological Russia-West clash. In his comprehensive reconstruction of contemporary studies of Russia-linked computational propaganda, Sanovich (2017) shows that disinformation directed both outside and inside the country has been, quite unexpectedly, linked to competition for influence within the political elite and has had a non-systemic, trial-and-error nature. Thus, the post-Soviet stereotypes that tell of wide-scale, monolithic, and well-coordinated state propagandistic efforts might be misleadingly simplistic when used to assess today’s situation.

I would add further thoughts to reconsider the dominant cyberwar paradigm prone to focus on external dimensions of Russian propaganda that omits other important dimensions.

First, academic research does not aim to (dis)prove the linkages of disinformation activities, even if identified, to particular people or organisations; ultimately, that is done by courts and international organisations. But, on the other hand, without such proof within academic texts, the researchers’ speculations on ‘propaganda machines’ remain allegations. Of the over 40 academic papers on Russian disinformation I have reviewed, none have contained airtight, solid proof of the linkage of disinformation efforts to particular government authorities in Russia. Actually, it would be surprising if we could find any: searching for proof would go against the research designs and, in general, turn science into investigation. It might endanger the domestic scholars as well, especially in countries with the regimes more restrictive than that in Russia.

Second, one needs to remember that it is way too easy to view pro-Russian information activity as organised and state-induced. One example comes from the same review by Sanovich (2017: 9). He states that Berkman Center at Harvard (Barash and Kelly 2012) detected the first large-scale use of pro-government bots and trolls in 2012 while the paper itself never mentions bots or trolls and states that ‘committed set of users may use the pro-government hashtag . . . perhaps in an organizational or mobilizing capacity’ as a possible alternative explanation of the density of pro-governmental clusters on Russian Twitter (ibid.: 10). Taken together, these considerations show that the scholarly community needs to better elaborate whether, and how exactly, we should incorporate data on disinformation into academic research.

Third, most of the reviewed research assumes but does not demonstrate that disinformation efforts had impact. Actual measurements of impact are rare. Just a handful of works set out to
Information disorder practices

measure impact of trolling on Twitter, by analysing exposure to the discovered trolls/bots, be it by ordinary users with left/right leanings (Badawy, Ferrara, Lerman 2018; Spangher et al. 2018) or by journalists (Im et al. 2019), or the ability to disseminate links to various platforms (Zannettou et al. 2019). Exposure estimates may, indeed, be impressive: tweets plus retweets by spreaders of Russia-linked content could reach 12 million during the 2016 elections (Badawy, Ferrara, Lerman 2018: 262). However, the high impact of trolls/bots on behaviors such as voting and protesting remains largely undocumented. One exception (Zerback, Toepfl, Knoepfle 2020) found short-term impact of exposure on expressed views.

Fourth, there is not enough proof to attribute all misinformation in the 2016 US elections to Russia or to argue that it is widespread in Western public opinion. A widely cited technical report by the European Commission (EC) on selective exposure to fake news during the elections (Guess, Nyhan, Reifler 2018) does not link fake news websites to Russia, while it mentions US-based sites such as the ultra-right Breitbart and the satirical The Daily Currant. Figures on impact are uneven. Whereas the EC report claimed that approximately one in four Americans visited a fake news website during the 2016 elections, a study of electoral Twitter in Michigan by Howard and colleagues (2017) attributed only 1.8 percent of junk/bot news to Russian sources, and another study (Im et al. 2019) stated that a meagre 2.6 percent of US journalists on Twitter were reached by the suspect accounts. These findings may leave room for claiming that, even if the Russian effort existed, its impact was negligible and that ‘the studies . . . do not add any substance to allegations of Kremlin culpability’ (Martin 2017).

Fifth, research on Russian computational propaganda, as my colleagues and I have stated elsewhere (Koltsova and Bodrunova 2019), overshadows both the multi-faceted communication processes evolving in Russia since the early 2000s and their wider political, societal, and historical causes. Going beyond big data studies and ‘engag[ing] with the forms of power and knowledge that produce’ computational propaganda (Bolsover and Howard 2017) are not enough. We need to place the disinformation-oriented efforts into contexts that provide explanations and propose solutions. Shedding light on the communicative climate in the Russia of the 2010s would help expand the Russian disinformation studies by shifting the dominant focus from cyberwarfare to how disinformation and misinformation permeated domestic Russian communication, in which organised pro-establishment efforts only played a part. Next, we reconstruct the structural features of the Russian public sphere that have prevented efficient strategies for addressing the growing wave of disinformation practices.

Media in Russia after 2012: the structural impossibility of public debate and effervescence of Runet

Fragmentation of society and media

By 2011, Russian society and its media system were deeply fragmented. Toepfl (2011) described four clusters in the Russian media and political divisions between them, with social media being a separate cluster with yet undefined political stance. During the 2011–2012 ‘For fair elections’ protests, public affairs media started to polarise politically, and soon impartiality and balance vanished. Even those media that sought to be impartial were labelled oppositional. A major problem was the absence of outlets that would bridge the worldviews of various populations such as cosmopolitan urban, post-Soviet town, depoliticised rural, and ethnic and immigrant social groups (Zubarevich 2011). The newspaper market largely consisted of business dailies that were hardly of interest to the general readership and post-Soviet (now tabloid) titles loyal to the elite and adhering to the ‘traditional values’ of post-Soviet conservatism, including the traditional
family (in which, though, women work but prioritise housekeeping and children) and mistrust of capitalism and democratic rule. National television received 80 percent of the audience and featured public-affairs ‘federal channels’ (state-owned or state-affiliated) and non-political entertainment channels. Journalism experienced generational, political, and deontological divisions (Pasti, Chernysh, Svitich 2012), sometimes to the extent of ‘non-handshakeability’ between staff of liberal-oppositional and state-owned media (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, Nigmatullina 2020). It lacked legal protection and efficient self-regulation, and societal demand for strong independent journalism was weak.

The structural absence of substantial and inclusive public dialogue in the offline media left space for the internet to fill this gap. However, societal cleavages were mirrored by nationwide echo chambers in media and social networks. Russian Facebook was generally perceived as a liberal-oppositional filter bubble while Twitter was occupied by two opposite nationalistic discourses that diverged on seeing the elite as either those who ‘stole the country’ in the 1990s or those who ‘made Russia rise from the knees’ in the 2000s (Bodrunova et al. 2019). Facebook and ‘alternative-agenda’ media in a ‘parallel’ public sphere helped cultivate the 2011–2012 protest consensus (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013; Kiriya 2012). After the Crimea and Donbass conflicts erupted, the choice in online communication was between taking sides or self-silencing, which led to further divergence and even political battles between the uncritical (pro-government or silent) and leadership-critical online publics (Toepfl 2018). Simultaneously, Runet grew in popularity among younger audiences as their major source of news (Vendil Pal-lin 2017). A mirror for the still covertly boiling political antagonisms, Runet could not help becoming a focus of attention for pro-governmental forces.

‘Services to the Fatherland’: youth movements and attempts of state expansion online

In January 2012, a Twitter account @op_russia that called itself ‘representatives of Anonymous in Russia’ published a hacked email archive that, allegedly, contained letters by, among others, Vasily Yakemenko and Kristina Potupchik. The former was the chief of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs and ex–federal commissar of the pro-governmental youth movements called ‘Nashi’ (‘Ours’) and ‘Iduschie vmeste’ (‘Going together’). The movements were perceived as instruments of contentious politics that could be used against the ‘orange revolution threat’ and protest outbursts (Atwal and Bacon 2012). Potupchik was the press secretary of Nashi. The revealed emails contained information on payments to bloggers for postings on LiveJournal and major news portals. The letters also discussed ‘creating unbearable conditions’ for the national daily Kommersant, including organising DDOS attacks, buying out print copies, blockage of the print facilities, and ‘physical and psychological attacks’ on the staff (Karimova 2012); later, the Kommersant general director Demyan Kudryavtsev publicly blamed Nashi for the DDOS attacks, but no action followed. Neither Yakemenko nor Potupchik dismissed the letters as false. Moreover, in a recent interview, Potupchik debunked the organisational mechanics of troll work organised even before the Olgino trolls appeared onstage (Loshak 2019). In April 2019, Potupchik received a Medal of Order ‘For Services to the Fatherland’, Class I, when he was 33 years old.

After 2012, paid practices quickly spread along Runet. In Potupchik’s opinion, the infestation of LiveJournal by ‘youth activists who struggled in comments with oppositionists and were engaged in spamming’ (Loshak 2019) in favour of various political actors contributed to bloggers’ ‘mass exodus’ from LiveJournal (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2015: 74). As Potupchik stated, the ‘youth activists’ followed the liberal community to Twitter and Facebook; on Twitter,
their work was easy enough, while Facebook algorithmically prevented efficient automatisation of trolling. The strategy of trolling on Twitter differed from that on LiveJournal. Instead of active commenting and persuasion of individual users by ‘small networks’ of co-mindful bloggers, interception (‘hijacking’) of popular hashtags and bot-based inflation of popularity were used (Loshak 2019). Bot activity as a crucial distortion in political talk on Russian Twitter was proved by Stukal and colleagues (2017), who detected that, within political topics, ‘the proportion of tweets produced by bots exceed[ed] 50%’ (p. 310). While bots discussed politics with other bots on Twitter, the ‘youth activists’ moved further on to YouTube and Telegram (see later in this chapter).

The early days of Nashi’s internet crusade show two developments that have been largely unnoticed by scholars. First, disinformation that targeted domestic populations in Runet started earlier than in other countries. Second, it was more scattered, personal-project-like, and amateur than the orchestrated performance by the federal channels or the alleged actions abroad.

Activities of youth movements were early signs of what later became overwhelming: politicisation, political polarisation, and fakeisation of Runet. Bots and trolls helped heat it up, but they were not solely responsible. Next, I turn to discussing how changes in the legal regime, the blurring of journalistic standards, the mutual blaming by political actors, and anonymity shaped the polarised, post-truth atmosphere in Runet. Confrontation among polarised online publics prevailed over the decent core of public debate and the search for consensus.

A plague on both your houses: the rise of political Runet in the post-truth age

Tightening the screws in Runet regulation

If not for two factors, the political polarisation of Runet that brought along the growth of political debate could have been a sign of democratisation and growing online freedom.

First, the tightening of the internet legal regime created obstacles for open criticism of authorities and security services as criticism could be now interpreted as ‘extremism’. Before 2012, Runet was relatively unregulated compared to offline media (Vendil Pallin 2017). Since 2012, the regulatory activity has grown dramatically in both quantity and toughness. From 2016 to 2019, there were 355 law initiatives, including the non-yet-implemented Yarovaya package and the so-called law on sovereign internet, and 143 cases of imprisonment for online activities (2019.runet.report/assets/files/Internet_Freedom%202019_The_Fortress.pdf). Regulatory control supported the practice of governmental ‘gardening’ of the leadership-critical segments of the public (Litvinenko and Toepfl 2019). This expression refers to, among other things, silencing radicals and cultivating moderate critics of the federal authorities. By regulating online expression, the authorities seemed to respond to popular demand: in 2014, a Levada Center poll found that 54 percent of the respondents believed internet censorship was necessary (Vendil Pallin 2017: 20). For Western observers, this would be incomprehensible or troubling. However, it is necessary to realise that a plea for censorship did not necessarily mean support for oppression but rather for clear and comprehensive rules (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, Nigmatullina 2020).

As Vendil Pallin (2017) discusses, another form of increased control was through direct ownership of technical facilities by the government and loyalty by domestic internet business. In dealing with global companies, though, this resulted in a change of legislation and blockage of platforms because they refused to store data in Russia. (The biggest victim of this policy was, ridiculously, apolitical LinkedIn.) The policy was framed as ‘measures to increase national
security and safeguard the individual security of Russian citizens’ (ibid.: 29). However, amid low trust in public institutions, it has been impossible to distinguish between protection against malicious content or foreign attacks and politically motivated surveillance.

The second obstacle to democratisation was a rapidly growing atmosphere of fakes, debunking fakes, and mutual blaming by pro-establishment and oppositional/independent media. Projects like Lapschesnimalochnaya (‘Wool-off-eyes-service’) or the ‘Fake news’ programme on TV channel Dozhd’ debunked misinformation (or, allegedly, purposeful disinformation) on federal TV and RT. Oppositional actors also provided repeated chances to be attacked, like Alexey Navalny’s staff, who put a fake ‘United Russia’ manifesto party online and then denied the fake, giving birth to a meme: ‘don’t discuss, just spread and make them repulse’. Dozens of minor fake revelations from both sides have been a poor substitute for substantial political debate. The law package against fake news did not help and was soon used in ambiguous ways. It was introduced on 18 March 2019, the same day the law that prohibited offending civil servants was passed. It immediately prompted a political joke: ‘don’t speak of civil servants – criticizing them enacts the law on their offense while praising them enacts the one on fake news’.

The blurred meaning of independence: online media as ‘state projects’ and ‘foreign agents’

Simultaneous to growing control, distrust of online sources increased for several reasons. Together with the trolling and botisation described earlier, news sources like FAN, Ridus, Pravda.ru, and Tsargrad were revealed as state affiliated. Also, in the early 2010s, several major media experienced editorial reshuffles, allegedly due to pressure on editors and owners. The reshuffles were perceived as ‘units of one bloody chain’ (Morev and Byhovskaya 2012) and led to changes in editorial positions. New online media were established by sacked editors, but the changes in several outlets that had gained trust across the political spectrum, like Lenta.ru or the state-owned but editorially independent RIA Novosti, were felt as a significant loss.

Also, as mentioned earlier, online audiences enjoyed the rise of ‘alternative agenda’ media, like online-only Openspace.ru or hybrid Bolshoy gorod (‘Big city’) during the 2000s. These media developed ‘in parallel’ to openly oppositional Novaya gazeta, or Echo of Moscow, and pursued alternative news topics such as urban life, public health, and high culture. Instead of direct political criticism, they employed social critique and described millennial mindsets and lifestyles, blending the Russian tradition of publizistika with Western values and philosophy. After the ‘bloody chain’, newly created media like Meduza by Galina Timchenko (ex-Lenta.ru) have made the ‘alternative-agenda’ media segment more distinctly anti-regime. However, although it is hard to disprove their revelations, the fact that outlets like Meduza or Proekt by Roman Badanin didn’t disclose their funders made them vulnerable to legitimate criticism. In January 2019, RT published an investigation of the money behind these media, linking them to American and European funders such as the National Endowment for Democracy (US) and the European Endowment for Democracy, as well as to the exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky (russian.rt.com/world/article/593261-hodorkovskii-tsar-rasledovanie). While the investigation by RT was not impeccable, it supported the widely popularised claim that all activities of the Russian opposition were financed from abroad in order to weaken Russia’s international standing. Also, it is important to acknowledge that the way Meduza or Proekt (do not) report on their sponsors blurs the understanding of independent journalism as one based on publicly scrutinised commercial income free from undisclosed donors, including foreign ones. If investigative media outlets in the US or Europe revealed they received financial aid from
Russian (or other foreign) NGOs or government agencies, this would immediately undermine their credibility as independent outlets; one needs to find a clear answer why similar opinions should not be legitimate in Russia.

Another group of new outlets blended information service with activism in a new approach to journalistic standards. Part of the foundation ‘Help needed’, Takiie dela (‘So it goes’) successfully combined ‘person-centered’ reporting with fundraising. Medazona merged reporting with protection of prisoners’ rights. The ‘No-drug city’ foundation became the media project Esi chestno (‘Frankly speaking’). Since 2014, Baten’ka, da vy transformer (‘Dearest, you are a transformer, aren’t you’) has insistently employed personal gatekeeping by particular journalists, calling it samizdat. Meduza united investigations with ‘Chapiteau’, a rubric of fun and quizzes, to attract younger audience.

Given the polarised media market of lost trust described earlier, intentions to create ‘new journalism’ linked to advocacy for disadvantaged social groups and the struggle for human rights were indisputably humanist. The growing popularity of such projects only supported this claim. However, substantial professional discussion was missing on why the standards of objective journalism should be mixed with subjectivity and activism and whether the lack of domestic financing for independent investigative media meant a lack of social demand. The scarcity of debate on how healthy journalism should look like has left the experimental and investigative media unprotected from accusations that it represents undisclosed interests; this ultimately added to mistrust in Runet.

Rutube: fun and mimicry

With time, political YouTube became a sort of alternative television for a part of the Russian audience (Litvinenko forthcoming). By 2009, Vasily Yakemenko had realised that it provided wide possibilities for dissemination of viral content. Several projects on early Rutube, like ‘My Duck’s Vision’ and ‘Thank you Eva’, allegedly received funding from the Nashi movement (Loshak 2019). Their content never directly praised the government; instead, it provided ‘pure fun’ while downgrading oppositional leaders or promoting senior authorities (ibid.). A new wave of attention to YouTube came in 2016: a young female vlogger was invited to give a speech to the State Duma, where an initiative to create ‘a council of bloggers’ appeared but quickly vanished.

By 2017, Rutube channels critical of the political establishment, such as Dmitry Ivanov’s kamikazedead, had hundreds of millions of views. While the federal TV channels were biased in favour of ‘system’ voices, YouTube seemed tilted towards oppositional ones, even if Ivanov blamed YouTube for artificial downgrading critical videos and financial preferencing (bbc.com/russian/news-40674508). As the grassroots critical accounts were growing in power, a certain mimicry in pro-establishment video blogs was noticeable as they tried to look more amateurish to build trust (Litvinenko forthcoming).

Telegram: anonymity as a double-edged sword

After 2015, Telegram Messenger, a mobile application created by brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov, gave a new flavor to the post-truth atmosphere of mistrust of information in Runet. Pavel Durov, the ‘Russian Mark Zuckerberg’ who earlier developed Vkontakte (now VK.com), the largest Russian-speaking social networking site, has struggled for years against surveillance capitalism – both in terms of surveillance and capitalism, like targeted-ad-based business models. However, his cyberlibertarian vision that demanded that the users and authorities trust
Telegram without public scrutiny led to conflicts with both Russian and American authorities. Durov left Russia in 2014, after he was coerced to sell his share of VK.com.

Initially, Telegram was developed as a part of the Telegram Open Network, a ‘huge distributed . . . “superserver”’ (Durov 2017: 1). The application allows anonymous postings and protects data by distributed key storage, which makes provision of the encryption code keys to the security services technically impossible. The application quickly became widely popular worldwide (with over 400 million accounts by May 2020), especially in Iran . . . and in Russia, where Telegram [was] popular among the urban dissenters’ (Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019: 223), including professionals and high-income groups (Salikov 2019). In various political contexts, Telegram gained diametrically different political reputations. Thus, external observers saw it as a tool for the liberation of online political talk in non-democracies (Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019). Perhaps the Russian authorities shared this view, given that they attempted to block Telegram after the company refused to disclose the encryption keys in 2018. It almost failed as the app continued to function. Subsequently, a wave of urban protest ridiculed Roskomnadzor, the federal agency that observes communication. However, some Russian scholars noted that the protective anonymity of Telegram channels made the messenger a substitute for a public sphere for the elite, including politicians, civil servants, journalists, PR practitioners, businessmen, and intellectuals. In Indonesia and Israel, instead, the app gained a reputation of a safe space for ISIS terrorists (Fainberg 2017; Magdy 2016); the Russian police also claimed Telegram was used during the terrorist attack in St. Petersburg in April 2017.

Whatever anti-surveillance idea was behind Telegram, it worked in a twofold way in the Russian public sphere. On the one hand, it filled the niche of protecting anonymity after the amount of legal punishment for online posting grew (Loshak 2019); on the other hand, anonymity significantly boosted the climate of rumours and uncertainty. Also, in 2016, Telegram channels started to be used regularly for leaking political information as, for example, when speculations were rampant for a month on who would be a new chair of the presidential administration.

Since then, the number, popularity, and media impact of anonymous political channels on Telegram rose significantly, blurring the borders between fact and rumour on an unprecedented scale. Moreover, several top channels of political information, like tme_Nezygar’ and tme_Mediatehnolog, raised doubts about their independent nature. Investigations of ownership/authorship linked at least ten of the most popular political channels to the ruling elite (proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/). The alleged owners either fiercely denied or made no comments about the accusations. However, the major issue was not even pro-state content but the ultimate impossibility of distinguishing between pro-Kremlin and oppositional bloggers as content was spun well enough to confuse. The role of Telegram in spreading fake news looks substantial, too, although no reliable research data is available. For example, in 2018, Maria Zaharova, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs chief press officer, officially responded to fake claims by Teresa May published in tme_Nezygar’. Between 2018 and 2020, Telegram channels were often used for so-called vbrosy – targeted leaks or information injections against particular politicians.

By way of a conclusion: the web that failed (again)?

Evidently, there were no solid structural elements in public communication to resist the rise of misinformation and disinformation in Russia in the 2010s, given that TV and mass-market print outlets were biased, business dailies were used by a small segment of the population, social networks had become ‘echo chambered’, and online news media and Telegram channels polarised opinions and remained partly anonymous. This went hand in hand with dramatically
Information disorder practices

low levels of trust in public institutions and communication (Edelman 2020). Online political communities were divided in an unprecedented manner. On one side, there were infiltration networks, state-affiliated news portals, anonymous Telegram channels, RT reporting, and bots discussing politics; on the other side, there were other anonymous Telegram channels, investigative media with unknown donors, and news sites that claimed a moral ground but altered journalistic standards. The atmosphere of blurred information sources and mutual blaming has been more destructive for the Russian media sphere than scattered and non-systematic organised disinformation efforts.

However, the disruptiveness of the media system is only a consequence of the nature, mindset, and traditions of the public. Toepfl (2018) has suggested three types of (semi)authoritarian publics: uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical publics. But, in contemporary Russia, criticism of the leader does not imply substantial policy debate while policy criticism does not challenge the political incumbents. What is lacking is policy-and-leadership-critical publics that would link discussions on policies to the flawed organisational patterns of government and particular policy makers. The causes of this deficiency are multiple, and they demand further analysis. The growth of such publics is further hampered by the lack of general awareness about healthy patterns of public debate based on bridging socioeconomic cleavages rather than on political and moral divisions between post-Soviet, liberal-oppositional, and new advocacy journalism and blogging. The Russian web once called ‘failed’ (Fossato and Lloyd 2008) showed its mobilisation capacity (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013). However, it is on the verge of failing again. This is not due to low mobilisation potential or the absence of creative forms of journalism; rather, it is because of polarisation, distrust, and the historical absence of actors who would be trustworthy and independent enough to resist post-truth and bridge the confronting groups of today’s Russian society.

References


Zerback, T., F. Toepfl and M. Knoepfle. 2020. The disconcerting potential of online disinformation: Persuasive effects of astroturfing comments and three strategies for inoculation against them. *New Media and Society*, 1461444820908530.