Authoritarian states manufacture and amplify scandal as an effective political weapon in the twenty-first century. Authoritarian leaders are able not only to use state-controlled media systems, but now are able to leverage many aspects of the way in which news is spread in the global online sphere to harvest significant political capital from both real and manufactured scandals. In many ways, authoritarian regimes are pioneering the more modern approach of perverting the democratic role of the media to inform even before widespread ‘fake news’ started to appear more recently in the West. This chapter will present a model of politicized scandal in authoritarian media systems. In analysing the origin, design and deployment of political scandal in authoritarian regimes such as Russia, we can understand how both controlled and free media can become weaponized against domestic and foreign targets. This will show how authoritarian regimes have adapted to changing media tastes and formats, particularly in the way in which Russian-style kompromat (Russian for “compromising material”) is moulded into an alluring form of infotainment and pseudo-facts that serve as highly effective weapons against political opponents. In this chapter, I will discuss how the authoritarian use of political scandal parallels aspects of the use of scandal by leaders in democratic systems, particularly by President Donald Trump and his Republican supporters. Through an understanding of the role of scandal in non-free states, we can assess the threat of politicized scandal to democracy in general.

While the concept of scandal is defined throughout this volume, for the purposes of this chapter it is useful to consider that ‘scandal’ does not have an absolute definition. ‘Scandal’ refers to something that is considered morally or legally wrong. However, what is morally or legally wrong is contingent on factors such as the country in which the scandal takes place, the general climate of tolerance, religious values, as well as individual beliefs. For example, reporting that a politician is a homosexual would not be considered ‘scandalous’ by the general public in the United States, but it would likely be in Russia, where there is little public acceptance of homosexuality. In addition, the concept of scandal can also refer separately to the public outrage, divorced from the moral or legal implications, of any particular act. It is the ability to divorce the reality of what happened from a public outcry that creates a powerful propaganda opportunity for authoritarian leaders. In this way, they can harness the politics of outrage through specific media tactics without having to rely on facts. Through the political use of scandals, authoritarian leaders can humiliate and disempower political enemies with manufactured outrage.
**Political scandal and kompromat**

**Why media systems matter**

The same way in which scandal is contingent on different legal and moral codes, the media itself does not play the same role in varying countries. In considering the role of scandal in authoritarian regimes, it is important to reflect on the role of the media in non-free states. In authoritarian states, the media is an explicit tool of the rulers. As described by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963), the authoritarian model of the press means that the media should ‘support and advance the policies of the government in power that this government can achieve its objectives’ (p. 18), with the media in the role of propagandists in the service of authoritarian leaders. The authoritarian model of the media is not entirely useful in that Siebert et al. perceived this model as a system with privately owned media controlled by a system of elites who were loyal to the authoritarian regime. In the case of Russia, there are significant echoes of the Soviet system (Siebert et al. 1963; Oates 2007) in that key media outlets such as major television networks are either directly or indirectly owned by the state. In fact, state-owned media typically play a critical role in setting the media agenda and supporting regimes in non-free states. In the Soviet system, media were simply another government department and there was no private or commercial media.

Understanding the role of media in non-free states is important because democratic media systems are relatively rare: Freedom House (2017a) estimates that only 13 per cent of the world’s population enjoys a free press that works in the service of the citizen and democratic values in general. Freedom House notes that media systems are disempowered through legal, political and economic means for most of the world’s citizens. Rather than serving as a watchdog on power or a voice for the people, media in many countries serve as mouthpieces for the leaders and government repression. At the same time as using these traditional ways of repressing freedom of speech, many authoritarian leaders have found ways to proactively use scandal as a way of both engaging attention and attacking opponents. Russia serves as a key example of this. The country has seen a steady decline of media freedom over recent decades, using tactics ranging from forced ownership changes in media outlets, violence against journalists, a legal system used to punish those who publish news not sanctioned by the Kremlin, and a lack of journalistic professionalism in general (Oates 2013; Freedom House 2017a). The use of politicized scandal in Russian politics flourishes in this system and adds a very useful element to the toolkit of media in the service of repression.

**History of politicized scandal in Russia**

The use of the Putin regime of politicized scandal is unsurprising as the synergistic relationship between scandal and politics has deep roots in the Soviet history of contemporary Russia. In the Soviet model of the media, it was the duty of the media to promote and preserve the Communist Party at the expense of anything or anyone else (Siebert et al. 1963; Oates 2007). Throughout the Soviet period (1917–1991), both those who challenged the Soviet system and those who had fallen out of favour due to power struggles within the Communist Party were subjected to public vilification in the mass media (McNair 1991). During the Great Purges under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin (who ruled from 1922 to 1952), millions of citizens were accused of disloyalty to the state, executed or imprisoned in work camps (Wheatcroft 1999). Part of the ‘Great Terror’, as it came to be known, was the accusation of crimes and denunciation of more prominent individuals in the mass media, typically through staged ‘show’ trials that were extensively covered in the media. As all media were owned by the state, there were no outlets to challenge the regime’s propaganda.
While the use of the mass media as a weapon by the Soviet state against the citizens was well established, significant changes occurred in the media at the end of the Soviet regime (McNair 1991; Mickiewicz 1997). The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, decreed a policy of ‘glasnost’ or transparency in the media, requiring that journalists report more widely on the issues and problems in society. Freed from their stultifying role as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, the media rapidly began to cover scandals both old and new (Mickiewicz 1997; Oates 2006). One of the most popular stories to signal the end of the Communist news narrative was an exposé in the central party paper Pravda (Truth) that revealed how party officials had access to superior goods and services not available to most Soviet citizens (Conine 1986). Other stories went into deeper and darker secrets, ranging from an exposé of how Russian soldiers had shot Polish officers and buried them in an unmarked grave in the Katyn Forest in World War II to how the Soviet system had used mental hospitals as a way to imprison and terrorize dissidents. In the glasnost period from 1986 to the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, scandal was focused on the crimes of the Communist Party. Freed from repressive censorship and fear of reprisal, the Soviet media entered an age of intense interest that came from journalists and citizens alike, with new stories that unlocked past secrets being published at a furious rate. By the end of the glasnost period, there was immense competition from various media outlets to promote different narratives, resulting in a range of approaches and stories for the public. The state lost control of the narrative and the media, to the point that when the Communist Party attempted to regain control of the country and the main television station, journalists defied the armed soldiers and managed to transmit messages of rebellion to the citizens. The Communist Party was thrown out of power, the Soviet Union was disbanded, and 15 new countries were established, with Russia as the largest and most powerful successor state.

The first years of the new Russian state, in which Boris Yeltsin served as president, are a clear example of how media can be powerful in either maintaining or ultimately challenging authoritarian power, yet struggle with the task of state-building in challenging economic conditions. The collapse of the Soviet state, a lack of viable transition plans, as well as massive corruption left the Russian economy in ruins. Within the course of a few years, the euphoria at the end of the Soviet regime turned for the Russian public into deep distrust of the new government, particularly given that the economic collapse had led to hyperinflation, widespread unemployment and deep poverty – all three conditions which had been unknown in the Soviet era. Much of the media, even the state-run media, became deeply critical of the Yeltsin administration. It was clear that any Soviet notion of the media as a tool of enlightenment was failing, particularly after the Russian pro-government party lost badly in the first free parliamentary elections (Oates 2006). The relationship between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament deteriorated so badly that the president disbanded the legislature by force, with around 200 people dying in bloody street clashes in Moscow in 1993. The government soon turned to the authoritarian model again, finding ways to control the media through a range of tactics. At the same time, the Russians were able to improve on the Soviet system by finding a way to use the media proactively to attack its enemies (Oates 2006).

This politicized use of the media was becoming apparent particularly through political television talk shows (Oates 2006). While standard news on state-run Russian television channels showed clear evidence of pro-state bias (European Institute for the Media 2000a, 2000b; Oates 2006), political news shows introduced and popularized the Russian style of kompromat. Short for “compromising material” in Russian, kompromat is the combination of news with blackmail. It can range from hints or allegations, but generally it includes at least some sort of evidence (often faked at least to a degree) that can embrace elements such as images, videos or legal documentation. Sex or pornography is often an element of the most popular kind of kompromat.
It is not the same as ‘fake news’, although it can share the elements of plausibility combined with titillation. It trades on the sensationalization of news that is augmented by scandalous details. While it typically incorporates dramatic elements such as sex and crime that can be found in popular dramas, at the same time the idea that this is ‘news’ elevates the interest and credibility of the story. Kompromat is an alluring combination of alleged facts, spicy details and a facade of actual news that is particularly compelling to the viewer or reader. One of its best features is that the story doesn’t have to hold up in the face of scrutiny. First, it is unlikely that a Russian media outlet will challenge a Kremlin-friendly piece of kompromat that is published or broadcast via another outlet. Second, even if the victim can make a case against the allegations, it is difficult to escape the miasma of the scandal once it is reported. Thus, kompromat is a flexible and useful information weapon for the state.

There is evidence that Vladimir Putin was involved in one of the first major uses of kompromat in the Russian regime. Yeltsin’s administration (1991–1999) was marked by a steadily deteriorating relationship with the media. Despite the ability to control state-run media outlets, Yeltsin’s political capital from leading the 1991 break with the Communist Party eroded rapidly in his time as president. While the Yeltsin administration successfully manipulated the media to ensure critical support for his election and that of the pro-government party (Oates 2006), one of Yeltsin’s most significant challenges was from powerful Russian prosecutor Yuri Skuratov. Skuratov claimed to have detailed and damning evidence of how top Russian officials were siphoning off money to put into foreign bank accounts. When Yeltsin could not convince the Russian parliament to fire Skuratov, a man who appeared to be the prosecutor was shown having sex with two prostitutes on television (Ioffe 2017). This created a sensation and Skuratov was forced to resign. Putin, as head of the Russian security services (formerly the KGB), would likely have been involved in this operation (ibid.). Indeed, Putin appeared on Russian TV to claim that the tape was authentic (ibid.).

The Skuratov affair established many key elements of contemporary Russian kompromat. In a good kompromat operation, Russian media organizations work in tandem with the Kremlin to find ways that are both appealing and effective for discrediting a target. This worked very efficiently to help rid Yeltsin of a dangerous enemy, although the evidence held by Skuratov was no doubt much more important in journalistic terms than a murky video of someone allegedly having sex. However, it was enough to derail a significant threat to the regime. It was a lesson that Putin learnt well.

Putin and politicized scandal

Russia has become steadily less free since Putin was appointed president in 1999 (Oates 2013; Freedom House 2017b). Putin has gone on to win four presidential elections, most recently in March 2018, and enjoys a relatively high popularity rating. It is unsurprising that there is little viable opposition to Putin, in that his administration has systematically attacked, destroyed or co-opted any viable political opponents. His regime has been marked by excessive corruption, erosion of citizen rights and military incursions into neighbouring countries, including the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the backing of separatists in the civil war in Eastern Ukraine.

From the Skuratov affair in 1999, kompromat has been a consistent feature of the Russian media sphere. The Kremlin used corruption kompromat against Moscow Mayor and former Kremlin ally Yuri Luzhkov when he made a bid for presidential power in 1999. Through a popular political affairs show, there were features on Luzhkov’s suspiciously fabulous wealth for a public servant, demonstrating that he was stealing money from the state. These televised reports featured picture montages of Luzhkov, his racing stables, his lavish mansion on the outskirts of
Moscow, and documentation that flashed too quickly on the screen to be examined in depth (see Oates 2006). Luzhkov eventually withdrew his challenge to presidential power (although there have been significant suspicions and reporting in later years about corruption involving him and his current wife; see Harding 2010).

The Luzhkov kompromat did not rely on sex videos (either staged or real) but much Russian kompromat does. In 2010, videos of Russian opposition journalists and politicians who had been filmed separately having sex with the same Russian woman were leaked online. The men had been invited to the woman’s home, where the cameras were in place. In 2016, an opposition political party was damaged when a video emerged of a married party leader having sex with an aide. In this case, the recording was made by a planted camera in a home unknown to either party. It’s particularly chilling that they were recorded in a private home as opposed to being lured to a ‘honey pot’ location (Ormiston 2016). In other evidence that the Kremlin has calculated new ways to ‘up the ante’ in kompromat, several opponents of the regime found themselves facing charges after child pornography was found on their computers. They believe the material was planted by Russian hackers (Higgins 2016). This happened not only to people in Russia, but to those living in the United Kingdom and Lithuania who have opposed the Russian regime.

That is not to say that the politicized scandal at the heart of kompromat is always successful, particularly when it is clumsy or aimed at those with their own media voice. In 2012, a media outlet published a picture of Kremlin opponent Alexei Navalny allegedly posing with exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky. A caption with the picture suggested that forces outside Russia were funding opposition efforts. Navalny then produced the original photo, showing he was actually standing with a different man. Russians, who share a twin love of Photoshop and the absurd, were soon creating and sharing their own doctored images online of Navalny with individuals ranging from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Adolf Hitler to an extraterrestrial.

Despite its occasional failures, kompromat is beautifully flexible. If a story isn’t playing well or if there is too much credible pushback, the perpetrators simply move on without apology or correction. The original story disappears, but it leaves confusion and unease in the minds of the audience. In a broader sense, the politicized scandal found in kompromat has both specific and general utility for an authoritarian regime. In a practical and immediate sense, it is a useful tool to rob those who would challenge the oligarchs for power by making them the objects of ridicule or, at least, making people feel a sense of doubt about them through vague claims or sex-tape set-ups. At the same time, politicized scandal undermines trust in both the political system and the mass media. If you can erode trust in both of these key democratic institutions, it is easier for authoritarian leaders to rule through manipulation and corruption.

The export of kompromat

In 2016, US intelligence officials warned Donald Trump that there were rumours that Russian operatives had gathered compromising material on the future president when he had visited Moscow in 2013 for the Miss Universe pageant (Miller, Nakashima, and DeYoung 2017). Given the widespread surveillance the Kremlin has arranged on even relatively low level political figures, it would be unsurprising if they had attempted a ‘honey pot’ trap with Trump. Honey traps are slang for using attractive sexual partners (typically, but not exclusively, women for men) to lure people into having sex in places with video surveillance. Even without a specific plan for any of the footage, this would be seen as a useful asset by the Kremlin. The more salacious, the better.

The Kremlin has denied that it sought to gather compromising information on Trump during his visits to Russia, as it has denied involvement in the email hacks of the Democratic
Political scandal and kompromat

National Committee (with much less credibility in the former case). But a high-profile businessman such as Trump would be a standard target for such an operation and Kremlin denials are also standard. The revelations around the US campaign highlight kompromat’s move from a domestic to an international tool for authoritarian regimes such as Russia and is part of that country’s expanding global information war, which has focused on news manipulation and disinformation. These efforts have been deployed to counter criticism of Russia over international events. For example, the Russian media tried to find ways to blame Ukraine for the destruction of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, when evidence clearly pointed to Russian military involvement in the downing of the flight and the deaths of all 298 people aboard (Oates 2014). There is clear evidence, too, that Russia is trying to influence the media in other countries. For example, a 2017 study documented how Russian operatives had attempted to sway Swedish affairs through media manipulation, including forgeries and disinformation (Kragh and Åsberg 2017). The Russian government funds a large-scale international broadcast operation in foreign countries, including RT television in English.

Towards a model of politicized scandal

The question at issue is whether kompromat can be understood as a prototype of politicized scandal in a way that makes it useful in terms of understanding the role of scandal in the media more generally. This discussion has demonstrated the key elements of kompromat:

1. It is aimed at discrediting an individual (and by extension an institution such as a political party);
2. The ‘evidence’ is typically visual and often in the form that the target would find embarrassing or even degrading;
3. It mixes news and entertainment, presented in a style that leverages the attention-grabbing nature of entertainment but provides a veneer of authority in a news format;
4. It demonstrates the weaponization of media that eventually discredits and disempowers the democratic role of the media to provide citizens with unbiased information and serve as a watchdog on the state.

All of this allows for the politicization of scandal. The coverage of scandal is – and should be – an important part of the democratic function of the mass media. However, kompromat has two specific elements that conflict with the democratic function of the press. First, it tends to be manufactured, if not by filming people clandestinely, by combining or distorting information in such a way as to create an impression of wrongdoing (or, at the very least, not subjecting themselves to the same scrutiny, such as corrupt leaders accusing others of corruption by using kompromat). At the same time, it subverts the democratic function of the media by using it as a tool for the elites rather than in the service of informing the masses.

If we understand kompromat in a generalized way, we start to see pervasive parallels between the Putin regime and the Trump administration’s attempted use of the mass media. This was immediately apparent when the White House insisted, despite clear photographic evidence to the contrary, that Trump’s inauguration was attended by more people than Obama’s first inauguration (Frostenson 2017). Trump personally (both through his Twitter account and speeches) has lied and failed to respect the value of the media in a democracy (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly 2018). While he, more than the White House itself, has dabbled in character assassination through his Twitter account, two years into his administration there is little sign the White House has been fabricating dossiers on political enemies in the same way as the Kremlin.
However, popular media outlets that are allied with Trump, from InfoWars to Fox News, have been presenting biased and selective information about those who challenged Trump in a way that parallels the Kremlin’s use of kompromat.

At the same time, Trump has employed politicized scandal himself. His false claim in 2016 that a former Miss Universe, with whom he was having a public feud, had made a sex tape was a classic example of kompromat (DelReal and Wagner 2018). For many years, Trump spearheaded a campaign to convince the public that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. In the tradition of kompromat, Trump constantly claimed to have material that proved the president was lying about his birthplace (Johnson 2016). He never produced any and simply dropped the lie during the election campaign by stating another blatant lie that Hillary Clinton had started the birther movement. When challenged, Trump has a tendency to attack the questioner rather than answer the question. That leaves journalists trying to fill in the gaps, but it also means coverage of his outrageous comments draws attention away from critical reporting on him or his lack of policy specifics. By impugning individuals, Trump has been able to dominate the news cycle in both the primary and general-election campaigns, shifting focus from his weaknesses by attacking others. This demonstrates the power of politicizing scandal in a democratic media system. Studies of the election coverage show that this tactic disadvantaged Democratic contender Hilary Clinton, herself a victim of kompromat from a Russian-organized hack of the Democratic Party email system (Ryan, Nakashima and DeYoung 2016).

Kompromat or politicized scandal is not only a tool in authoritarian political and media systems such as Russia. As the Trump campaign and administration demonstrate, politicized scandal can be a powerful weapon in democratic systems too. Trump has been able to use a free media system to perpetuate half-truths and lies about his political opponents. He is supported by some legacy media outlets, such as Fox News, but the ability to perpetuate his own brand of kompromat is a symptom of significant challenges to a democratic media system in the internet age. The flow of both attention and revenue to the online sphere has left traditional media outlets struggling to fund proper journalism. At the same time, rumour, infotainment and kompromat has proven to be more resilient than balanced news stories for many Americans in the digital sphere. In this way, we see politicized scandal as a dangerous element in the current Western media system. Kompromat is a powerful tool that highlights some of the challenges for US politicians, media and citizens in the current media age.

Conclusions

With roots in the Soviet system, Russians have developed and deployed politicized scandal in the form of kompromat, which is a useful and flexible tool that augments the state’s tight control of the mass media. It allows the Kremlin to make targeted attacks on specific enemies with popular and alluring stories. It is difficult, if not impossible, for the victims to recover their reputations and challenge the authoritarian leaders. At the same time, the constant perversion of the mass media from informing the public to serving the needs of corrupt elites means that journalism itself is under threat. People may enjoy the titillating stories, but the constant half-truths and lies means that there is an inevitable erosion of trust in the media as a reliable purveyor of information. Without a free and trusted media, democracy is impossible. Thus, the use of politicized scandal is a powerful tool for disempowering the media and disenfranchising the citizens, while still maintaining power for a small circle of elites.

The experience of kompromat and politicized scandal in Russia is an important lesson for the United States. Trump and his administration also have shown contempt for the ideals of
Political scandal and kompromat

journalism, ready to use the media to project a message of their own choosing and lie constantly to attack political rivals. Trump lies with complete impunity – The Washington Post documented 3,001 false or misleading statements made by Trump by 1 May 2018 (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly 2018). He is by no means the first American president to fail to tell the truth, but he is the first to lie on a scale that would suggest he is embracing an authoritarian model of the media rather than a liberal one. Given the parallels between Putin and Trump’s use of the media as a political weapon to manufacture outrage, it is likely that shades of kompromat and political scandal will threaten US media freedom as it has Russian media freedom over the years. It is also a warning to journalists not to fall into the trap of covering scandals, instead of the news.

Notes

2 The Russian public opinion organization, the Levada Center, found Putin had an 82 per cent approval rating in April 2018; see http://www.levada.ru/en/. The Levada Center is considered to be relatively independent from Kremlin influence.
3 Berezovsky was a powerful Russian oligarch, who eventually was forced into exile in the United Kingdom and was found hanged in 2013.
6 The United States also has propaganda outlets in foreign countries, including Russian-language television targeted at Russian citizens. However, US law prohibits its foreign broadcast information from using the same tactics of disinformation as used by RT and other Russian English-language propaganda. Nor can the US public diplomacy outlets such as Radio Liberty or Current Time (Nastoyashee Vremya) TV be distributed as a regular ‘news’ channel as RT can be in the Western system.

References


