



ISSN 2500-9486  
DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.  
Defence Strategic Communications

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# FOREWORD

Freedom of speech is the keystone of liberal democracy. Without it, the fruit of pluralism that fortifies democratic governance shrivels on the vine. For many—not all—theorists and practitioners, Strategic Communications is intimately bound up with a democratic vision of the world: it pursues a path of persuasion through rational argument; it seeks out the moral high ground. Surprising then, that so little time is devoted to understanding what we mean by free speech when seen from the perspective of Strategic Communicators. After all, much effort is invested in exposing disinformation while processing it through a security lens. Yet this information-disinformation binary overshadows discussions of how freedom of speech is both the strength and inevitable weakness or vulnerability of democracies.

As an academic field emerges, so it becomes more self-reflexive while attempting to grow its theoretical and conceptual base. This is no less true of Strategic Communications, a relative newcomer to the variety of ways of describing political communications. Barely more than a decade has elapsed since Barack Obama entered the White House, only to call for clarity surrounding a new term that had begun to find currency in more than one government's lexicon. The President would conclude that Strategic Communications could best serve America's national interest by closing the 'say-do gap' and recalled the old dictum that actions speak louder than words.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, 2009

Magic bullets have a habit of appearing when other kinds of bullets have been found wanting. They are a fantasy conjured up to fill a conceptual gap. The failure of Western military might to overcome cultural ties and deeply rooted narrative understandings in Afghanistan and Iraq suggested there had to be another way of resolving the conundrum of persuading other populations that the liberal democratic way of the West was the optimum way to the good life, or at least to a better one. In an image-drenched media landscape, 9/11 demonstrated that simple semiotics were both effective and cheap when ranged against the price of tanks and fighter jets. Strategic Communications, which recognised that actions and events could be moments of shared meaning—symbols of crystallised grievance and unfulfilled desires—was subsequently placed in the hands of government communicators and media agencies. These experts drew on theories of change; they sought to prove their theories by refining marketing techniques that once had sold products to the commercial marketplace of goods but would now offer policies to the political marketplace of ideas. And so a practitioner-led field has continued to draw on theories and applied techniques from behavioural science, political communications, cultural anthropology, and marketing.

Those charged with operationalising Strategic Communications draw on these fields as they cluster their work around government-to-government engagements, addressing social and economic grievances in populations, and countering political challenges from non-state actors that are frequently rooted in precisely such grievances. This leaves all too little time to focus on the overarching debates that are needed to locate practice in its intellectual home. Consequently, a nascent academic field is playing catch-up, busily attempting to reverse-engineer deep foundations under an expanding superstructure. Practice, tested daily in a dynamic world of politics and geopolitics, will inevitably outpace academic theorising.

But what is the connection between liberal democracy and free speech—a connection valued by many Strategic Communicators? Western states today are characterised by their liberal democratic systems of governance. They are *democratic* in so far as majority power is constrained; it is not absolute. The power to govern (executive) and the power to enact laws (legislature) are institutionalised under an elected party leader, Prime Minister, or President who is subject to change. And the electorate in a representative system of democracy has the right to vote out their government through elections after a constitutionally designated period served in office.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, *Free Speech*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), Part 1

They are *liberal* because each individual is given a ‘degree of intellectual, spiritual and occupational freedom’.<sup>3</sup> Freedom is a key concept in Western thought. In 1941, US President Franklin Roosevelt spoke of four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from want.<sup>4</sup> Freedom of information and free speech are central to democratic behaviour because every citizen should have the opportunity to hear a variety of ideas and opinions to better inform their decisions over how they wish to lead their lives, and how they intend to vote to bring that about, even if some viewpoints they hear are not to their liking. Conflicting ideas are encouraged in the so-called marketplace of ideas where they can be tested, then argued against, adapted or adopted. This allows not only the freedom to express any opinion but also the freedom to hear the opinions of others, should one wish to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Some thinkers go further. For the philosopher Ronald Dworkin, ‘free speech is a condition of legitimate government’.<sup>6</sup> There are different views on the centrality of this condition—as one would expect in any democracy. Nevertheless, four main strands sit within Western intellectual thought.

One, free speech and free listening enrich individual existence. More formally, they are key components of what might be called individual sovereignty. Two, free speech serves the pursuit of truth. In 1919, one American Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, argued: ‘the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas [...] the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market’<sup>7</sup>—the marketplace of ideas again. Three, good government requires freedom of speech. It has been called the lifeblood of democracy since it circulates ideas and replenishes the body politic with evidence and fact. But it does more than that. It offers checks and balances on government actions. The right to know and the right to question—with the intention of bringing into the open bad practice—are paramount. They underline too the value of a free press. And four, free speech teaches us tolerance and how to live with and overcome apparently irreconcilable differences from other people in our society and community. It suggests that we have to find a way of working out our differences constructively.<sup>8</sup>

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3 Alan Ryan, *On Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 948.

4 Richard Stengel, *Information Wars* (London: Grove Press, 2019), p. 19.

5 See Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN, 1948; also First Amendment to the US Constitution.

6 Nigel Warburton, *Free Speech* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 5.

7 See ‘Abrams v United States’ dissenting opinion in Keith Werhan, *Freedom of Speech: A Reference Guide to the United States Constitution* (Westport CONN: Praeger, 2004), p. 33.

8 Timothy Garton Ash, *Free Speech* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017)

Liberal democracy, however, is under pressure and in retreat. Freedom House observes that the last 14 years have shown a continuous decline in democracy and pluralism. Of 195 countries profiled this year, only 83, fewer than half, were adjudged free, 63—partly free, and 49—not free.<sup>9</sup> Freedom of speech becomes a casualty of this decline. Liberal democracy is rivalled from within by proponents of illiberal democracies—nationalists and populists who introduce illiberal regulations and manipulate democratic government, and on the periphery by false democracies that wrap authoritarian government in the pretty packaging of democratic elections that are not truly free. Furthermore, from the outside by authoritarian and totalitarian systems of governance, which stand in direct opposition to democracy.

Talk of disinformation has become common in Western societies today. It is spoken of by politicians and echoed and amplified by media outlets—traditionally, press, TV, and radio—but also via a number of social media platforms that are intrinsically involved in playing back the partisan opinions of those who participate in so-called echo chambers, either deliberately or unwittingly. And so disinformation, to which by definition we attribute malintent, on the one hand undermines the idea of pluralism and freedom of expression; but on the other hand, both dis- and misinformation can be seen as reinforcing the projection of individuals expressing their opinions—malintent being a component of the former and not of the latter.

There has been a tendency to see disinformation penetrating democracies from outside—as systematically and even industrially produced, flooding Western media with opinions and so-called alternative facts to muddy the waters and cloud the skies. This has the immediate consequence of nurturing self-doubt among populations. Evidence supplied by experts, which may once have been respected, is now undermined and distrusted. Russia engages in this approach. Its output simultaneously supports multiple positions ranged around the same controversy, so further opening rifts that naturally exist in societies but are heightened at particular moments in history. This may indeed support the idea of free speech while at the same time represent a form of political subversion through confusion. If not the latter, why do it? Russia's motives remain contested. Some picture Moscow engaged in a systematic process of destabilising states once part of the Soviet Union, and more widely Western states, by creating

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<sup>9</sup> [Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy](#), Freedom House.

uncertainty and self-doubt in democracies whose self-confidence is already at a low ebb in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not to seize and occupy terrain with its concomitant responsibility for population control, rather the aim is to heighten insecurity to such a level as to encourage self-censorship around critical points of conflict, thus strengthening Russia's hand geopolitically. That is something of a misreading, argue critics who discern a more nuanced historical trajectory. Strategic theorist Ofer Fridman, more contentiously, has likened Moscow's approach to a Putinesque vision of 'Make Russia Great Again' in the perception of its adversaries,<sup>10</sup> employing a strategic opportunism born of a desire to wash away the humiliation of lost empire and to take advantage of the re-emergence of Great Power politics.

Disinformation, however, should not be perceived so narrowly. It is under certain circumstances an external force boosted by useful idiots. It is also a threat that spreads within the state, initiated by fellow members of the same society in pursuit of their political ambitions. A further problem arises from otherwise well-intentioned citizens who abandon the struggle to teach the value of free speech and vacate a space to the benefit of those who wish to undermine and corrupt it. Bad speech should be answered with good speech, not no speech. And good speech must be grounded in evidence-based truth telling. Externally and internally generated disinformation is, however, not the only source of destabilisation of Western societies today. A struggle to reshape how the West sees itself, and the language it uses to express it and achieve change is being played out, affecting all levels of society, and more recently eliciting a push back.

Some critics see the West caught in a struggle between liberalism, developed over centuries, and the postmodernism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. By which they mean that free speech is caught between two revolutionary and reactionary pressures. From the far right, populist movements fighting to preserve their view of liberalism but willing to close down freedom of speech. And from the far left, progressive social activists who claim exclusive rights to determine the moral agenda as they seek to restrict and consequently close down freedom of speech. Such is the view of Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay who root the new threat to free speech and democratic pluralism in postmodern critical theory.

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10 Ofer Fridman, IISS webinar: *Russia's Use of Cyber Coercion*, 03 December 2020.

Their targets are social justice movements which, they argue, have captured the intellectual and political initiative by using critical theory (the authors prefer “Theory”) to attack liberalism. In a challenging and controversial polemic, they identify a three-step progression. From the late 1960s, postmodernism emerged from French philosophers and critical thinkers, quickly grew in popularity on the political Left as Marxist thought was acknowledged to have failed, but by the early 1980s its inherent deconstruction, relativism, and even nihilism were seen to have run their course. By the 1990s postmodernism, still popular on university campuses, had morphed into a newly applied postmodernism where a fresh wave of proponents, using the values and means of New Left political activism, sought to set a number of theories—postcolonial, queer, critical race—to work to deconstruct social injustice in society and ‘reconstruct a better world’.<sup>11</sup> And by 2010, continuing scholarship had shaped new disciplines of Social Justice research which would become influential—black feminism, intersectional feminism, critical race (legal) theory, queer theory—and seek to change the world by dominating multiple discourses. All this, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay, has led to struggles to dominate public discourses through social movements such as Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ alliances. Their belief in the primacy of group identity and identity politics are underlined, not the individualism and universalism cherished by liberalism; for the postmodernists knowledge is gained through lived experience. This leads inexorably to many members of society being excluded by gender or by the colour of their skin from acquiring that knowledge which allows them to participate in what these authors view as exclusionary politics, which in turn constrains free speech and free listening.

Their fierce polemic will, no doubt, prompt a robust response from activist quarters. But not before the authors have summarised their case as: ‘Postmodern Theory and liberalism do not merely exist in tension; they are almost directly at odds with one another. Liberalism sees knowledge as something we can learn about reality, more or less objectively; Theory sees knowledge as completely created by humans—stories we tell ourselves, largely in the unwitting service of maintaining our own social standing, privilege and power [...]. Liberalism values the individual and universal human values; Theory rejects both in favour of group identity and identity politics.’<sup>12</sup>

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11 Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories* (London: Swift Press, 2020), p. 46.  
12 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Citing a Harris Poll survey of Americans carried out in November 2020, the celebrated author Lionel Shriver wrote heatedly: '92 percent of respondents said that their civil rights are under siege. When asked which rights seemed most threatened, "freedom of speech" topped the list. The sermonising control freakery emanating from American universities—strict language policing, witch hunting for minor, often purely linguistic ideological infractions, the whole ugly no-platforming cancel-culture ball of wax—is a big turn-off for the overwhelming majority of Americans, who find such intolerance frightening.'<sup>13</sup> Cambridge University in December 2020 ended a long-running dispute when it voted to reject proposed guidelines for faculty staff to express 'respectful' opinions. Instead, it was agreed, free speech should recognise 'tolerance' not 'respect' for a variety of points of view. One alumnus declared: 'to burn respect into statutes and protocols is absurd, or worse. Such an impulse tips over the line into thought control. A free mind is obliged to respect only the truth.'<sup>14</sup> Fear of controversial subjects or ideas being suppressed and their proponents penalised was for the time being put to rest.

These are confusing times for Western societies. Truth versus Untruth is less a debate and more the casualty of an explosion in information flows enabled and valued by a new form of late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism—information capitalism. Exposure to these flows, at once both scattergun and algorithmically targeted, makes it difficult for anyone to read any systemic pattern from which we might derive guidance. There are simply too many kinds of information flows contained within an eruption of social dissent that boils up every few generations: they also appear frequently at odds with one another. Similarly, multiple acts of aggression in geopolitics play into political ruptures and fragmentation around identity politics and trigger struggles to demarcate local no-go zones for discursive control and prohibition. Conversations around 'what is true' or 'what is fact' push to the extremes of frameworks of how we individually perceive the world around us, and how we would encourage others to perceive it. French President Emmanuel Macron's verdict on Brexit as 'the child of European malaise and lots of lies and false promises' amid what EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier calls a 'dangerous, unstable and unjust world' only begins to scratch the surface of the dilemma.<sup>15</sup>

13 Lionel Shriver, 'Can Biden Escape the Grip of Woke Fanaticism?', *The Times*, 19 December 2020.

14 Stephen Fry, *Campaign for Cambridge Freedoms*. [Accessed 03 January 2021].

15 'Sturgeon Rains On Johnson's Brexit Parade', *Financial Times*, 2–3 January 2021, p. 1.

Marginalised and disenfranchised Muslim groups in France face fresh confrontation with the state. Draft legislation to combat Islamist separatism awaits a parliamentary vote framed as ‘not a text against religion, not against the Muslim religion [...] a law of emancipation against religious fundamentalism’. Such framing speaks to France’s particular brand of secularism—*laïcité*—which separates religious belief from the state. But by positioning the new proposition in such a way as ‘to reinforce the principles of the republic’ and to ‘break up counter-societies’ through ‘a great law of liberty’, it only inflames some Muslim groups to question ‘whose liberty?’. Parallel forms of education, welfare, and worship have emerged in French Muslim and Arab communities, and their freedom to speak and listen is held to be at stake.<sup>16</sup> These are complex ethical debates.

Why should this conversation matter to Strategic Communicators? It is because many who engage in theorising this emerging field, cement its foundations in social constructivism as a body of scholarship—itsself concerned with the primacy of language in the power to shape and shift discourses. In this sense Strategic Communications attempts to navigate a difficult path through divergent schools of thought in International Relations study; namely, realism, liberalism, and social constructivism. Moreover, if such accusations hold true, that what began as academic theorising has broken out of universities and been absorbed into popular discourse and institutionalised in the public sector (government, education) and in private sector firms, then it is important to understand the broader canvas on which social and political changes are unfolding in Western populations—the intended audiences of many Strategic Communications campaigns. If such trends do indeed represent a force for undermining liberalism, then practitioners must learn to see the communications landscape as more complex than made up of hostile foreign influences that breach sovereign borders. Disinformation, otherwise, runs the risk of becoming disinformationism, and that would constitute an academic field with too myopic a view of itself.

Were the West not so fragmented, perhaps there would be little concern for disinformation serving the disruptive intentions of malign actors. Less fear for citizens being confused and their democratic rights becoming undermined. In this issue of *Defence Strategic Communications*, Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir calls for a richer

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<sup>16</sup> ‘The Republic Strikes Back’, *The Economist*, 12 December 2020, p. 36.

understanding of disinformation and its effect on Western populations if we are to move beyond the cul-de-sac in which disinformation research currently finds itself. James Farwell surveys two landmark volumes on Propaganda and Public Diplomacy and tackles the troublesome question of where atrocity propaganda fits into this discussion. Mexican drug cartel culture offers an insightful lens through which to inquire who proudly stands by the use of political violence as a communicative tool and who commits atrocity but chooses to remain silent. Journalist Ian MacWilliam examines jihadist media strategies in the post-Soviet region of Central Asia. He explores how Islamic State produced Russian-language media to recruit some 9,000 fighters for the Syrian conflict theatre via Russian and Central Asian language networks. Monika Gill investigates Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and builds a bridge between Iran's strategic narratives and the military ownership of communications for this powerful state force. While Milàn Czerny focuses on how Russia employs 'selective law enforcement' as a means of controlling the Russian Internet, and how selectively applied regulations act as a tool of Strategic Communications. Finally, how do liberal democracies perceive and present arguments around climate emergency? That is the important question Quentin Wight poses as he analyses how discourses are variously framed within government and by extra-governmental elites inside the UK's climate governance field. All in all, we offer you another rich issue of *Defence Strategic Communications* to provoke fresh thought around this challenging, and growing field of research and practice.

As the historic Covid year of 2020 draws to its inexorable close, we wish you a safe and healthy 2021 free of the suffering that has afflicted so many people around the world.

Dr Neville Bolt  
Editor-in-Chief



# CONTENTS

<b>Islamic State and Jihadist Media Strategies in the Post-Soviet Region</b> Ian MacWilliam.....	15
<b>Selective Law Enforcement on the Runet as a Tool of Strategic Communications</b> Milan Czerny.....	53
<b>Capitalism, Communications, and the Corps: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and the Communications Economy</b> Monika Gill.....	87
<b>‘Climate Emergency’: How Emergency Framing Affects The United Kingdom’s Climate Governance</b> Quentin Wight.....	121
<b>The Long Decade of Disinformation</b> A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir.....	169
<b>The Rise of Atrocity Propaganda: Reflections on a Changing World</b> A Review Essay by James P. Farwell.....;	187



# ISLAMIC STATE AND JIHADIST MEDIA STRATEGIES IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION

Ian MacWilliam

## Abstract

The Syrian war is the first of the modern Islamist “jihad” conflicts to have attracted large numbers of recruits from Central Asia and the post-Soviet region. Some 9,000 men and women from the post-Soviet republics travelled to Syria, including 4,000-7,000 Central Asians, many of them recruited in Russia. Why did the Islamic State’s caliphate attract such large numbers? Information manipulation was central to IS strategic planning and a primary factor in its unprecedented global recruiting success. IS produced Russian-language media content to build support among post-Soviet Muslims. At the same time, emerging communications networks are building ties between “Russian-speaking” Muslims and the Middle East. Jihadist media engagement in Russian and in Central Asian languages, exploiting these new networks, was a key factor in attracting Central Asians to support the caliphate.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Islamic State, violent extremism, radicalism, jihad, disinformation, Central Asia, Caucasus, Russia, post-Soviet.*

## About the Author:

Ian MacWilliam has been a journalist and media development specialist for over 25 years, including ten years with the BBC and reporting for major British and US newspapers, particularly from the former Soviet region and South Asia. He was based for eight years in Central Asia and Moscow.

## Introduction

The former Soviet region was among the most significant suppliers of foreign fighters for the Islamic State (IS) during its rise and brief ascendancy in Syria and Iraq. The group attracted worldwide attention with its sudden expansion in 2014–15. By 2017, a total of as many as 8,700 fighters had travelled to Syria and Iraq from post-Soviet states, including Russia, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian republics.<sup>1</sup> While estimates vary, some 4,200 of this number were citizens of the Central Asian republics, both men and women, who travelled to the Middle East to support jihadist organisations.<sup>2</sup> Other estimates put the total of Central Asian citizens between 6,000 and 7,000, including women and children.<sup>3</sup> Some thousands more attempted to go but were detained in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this largescale adoption of an extremist cause by citizens of the ex-Soviet region are poorly understood, but many experts in the region suggest that Islamic State and other jihadist propaganda played a key role in attracting thousands of recruits from across this vast region, which had little previous history of involvement in jihadist campaigns.

Central Asia<sup>5</sup> often escapes international attention, but the region came into sudden prominence in 2017, when a series of terrorist attacks took place, carried out by ethnic Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. A New Year's Eve shooting in an Istanbul nightclub was followed by a metro bombing in St Petersburg and a truck attack in Stockholm in April, and finally another truck

1 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, (New York: The Soufan Center, October 2017), p.11.

2 Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, see table, p. 12–13.

3 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2019), p. 20–21.

4 Noah Tucker, Edward Lemon, and Alex Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States: Identifying Communities Vulnerable to Mobilization to Violent Extremism in Central Asia*, Navanti Group, internal report, 11 March 2019.

5'Central Asia' here refers to the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

attack in New York in October. Four years earlier, in 2013, the Boston Marathon bombing had been carried out by two brothers of Chechen background with Kyrgyzstan links, an early reminder that jihadist attitudes have been spreading among Muslims from the former Soviet region, just as they have in Western Europe and America.

This study argues that, with the Syrian conflict, radical Islamism in Central Asia and the post-Soviet region has become more widespread than is generally acknowledged. Why is it that Syria became the first modern ‘jihad’ to attract such large numbers from this region? Specifically, this study will focus on two questions:

- How did jihadist Russian-language media operations expand from an early handful of Chechen websites to a regional media operation?
- How influential was this media operation in the massive expansion of Central Asian recruitment to Islamic State and other jihadist groups?

For Islamic State, information manipulation was central to its strategic planning, and a primary factor in its unprecedented global recruiting success. In addition to its messaging in English and other European languages, IS produced Russian-language media content to build support among Muslims across the post-Soviet region. It will be argued that the emergence of networks of Muslim contacts across the post-Soviet region, and their growing links to the Middle East, combined with media engagement in Russian and Central Asian languages to attract thousands of post-Soviet Muslims to support the IS caliphate.

## **Methodology**

This question will be addressed by reference to a range of primary and secondary sources, including individual interviews, social media content, and contemporary press coverage from the region. While a number of datasets exist of IS media content in Arabic and in English, there are few systematic surveys of jihadist media in Russian and Central Asian languages. (The author is aware of only one such survey, described below.) In the absence of broader surveys, this paper will examine four issues of an Islamic State Russian-language online magazine to illustrate key ideological messaging aimed at Russian-speaking IS fighters. The study is an attempt to pull together information from a variety

of disparate sources to examine how a small number of Chechen webpages grew into a significant regional media operation, which then exercised a decisive influence in the recruiting of thousands of post-Soviet Muslims to violent jihadist organisations.

Torok has outlined a framework for considering the impact of social media on the process of radicalisation, drawing on the analytical framework of Michel Foucault, with a focus on power relationships as expressed through language and discourse.<sup>6</sup> Torok posits that the online environment acts as an effective social institution which isolates individuals in their ideological processes; and that this online environment is a critical mechanism used by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to alter thoughts and behaviours with the aim of recruiting supporters.<sup>7</sup> Jihadist propagandists consistently deploy specific discursive schemas in social media—such as martyrdom, the victimisation of Muslims, or the ‘glory of Islam’—as a tool to shape the thinking of audiences and potential recruits.<sup>8</sup>

In particular, Torok argues that targeting the affective dimension is crucial for inciting extremist views.<sup>9</sup> In such a setting, extreme beliefs can be reframed as the ‘normal’ beliefs of true Muslims.<sup>10</sup> IS’s most significant media innovation was in fact the extensive use of emotive visual imagery, exploiting one of the basic principles of behavioural economics, well known to the big tech companies, that mass audiences engage more readily with visual content. In this analytical framework, IS social media acted as a ‘theatre’ in which IS could present itself as the fulfilment of the ultimate jihadist fantasy. Jihadist social media content aimed at Russian-speaking audiences conformed to this analysis and proved a highly effective tool for reaching out to new audiences across the vast post-Soviet region.

The role of post-Soviet, or ‘Russian-speaking’ Muslims within Islamic State has often been overlooked in international coverage.<sup>11</sup> Russian-speakers were one

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<sup>6</sup> Robyn Torok, ‘Developing an Explanatory Model for the Process of Online Radicalisation and Terrorism’, *Security Informatics*, 2013, Volume 2 № 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robyn Torok, ‘ISIS and the Institution of Online Terrorist Recruitment’, Middle East Institute (Washington DC) website, 29 January 2015.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Russian-speakers’, ‘Russophone’, and ‘post-Soviet’ are used here to refer to Muslims from Russia and the other ex-Soviet republics who joined in the Syrian conflict, but these terms are not ideal. Russian was a second language for many of these fighters, and among younger Central Asians in particular, the knowledge of Russian is declining.

of the largest contingents of foreign fighters, and Russian was one of the most widely spoken languages among the fighters. Two consecutive IS ‘ministers of war’—Umar ash-Shishhânî and Gulmurod Khalimov—were Russian-speakers. Estimates of their numbers vary widely. Two frequently cited tallies of foreign fighters are those of the Soufan Center in New York and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London (ICSR). According to the Soufan Center in 2017, an estimated total of 8,700 people from former Soviet states had joined IS in Syria and Iraq. This included an estimated 4,200 citizens of the five Central Asian states.<sup>12</sup> ICSR’s tally, updated in 2019, gives an estimated range of approximately 10,700–13,200 people from the former Soviet republics joining IS, including some 4,000 women and children. Of these, approximately 5,800–7,100 were citizens of the five Central Asian republics—roughly equivalent to the estimated 6,600 Western Europeans who joined the IS jihad.<sup>13</sup> Both sets of figures agree that citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were the largest contingents among Central Asian fighters.

After seven decades of Soviet-imposed atheism, the Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union were largely secular in culture when the Union collapsed in 1991. A religious revival since then has restored Islam as an important regional cultural factor, but the Muslim ex-Soviet republics have generally been seen as societies of moderate religious sensibility. A number of local conflicts have caused instability among local Muslim societies, notably the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its civil war from 1979; the Tajik civil war of 1992–97; and the Chechen conflict from 1994. While religion played a role in all three conflicts, none attracted many regional recruits from outside the affected populations. The Afghan war—the first of the modern international jihadist conflicts—attracted Arab and other Muslim fighters in the 1980s, but only small numbers from the post-Soviet region after the Soviet collapse in 1991. More recently, the Iraq war and sectarian insurgency of 2003–11 became a major focus of international jihadism, but few, if any, post-Soviet Muslims took part. The limited numbers of foreign Muslim fighters in that conflict were nearly all from Arab countries.<sup>14</sup> Yet only a few years later, thousands of post-Soviet Muslims flocked to join the putative jihad in Syria.

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<sup>12</sup> Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, p. 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II*, p. 20–21.

<sup>14</sup> Ned Parker, ‘Saudi’s Role in Iraq Insurgency Outlined’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 July 2007.

The response to the Islamic State and the Syrian conflict indicates a significant shift in attitudes towards Islamist political movements. The Syrian conflict has helped to build transnational ties among those espousing jihadist ideologies, strengthening regional networks linking Central Asians, Caucasians, and other Muslims among the ethnic populations across Russia. A large proportion of Central Asian fighters were recruited not in their home republics, but as migrant workers in Russia—often through interaction with Chechen recruiters<sup>15</sup>—or among the diaspora in Turkey. Post-Soviet jihadist networks have become regional, with deepening ties to the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. The long-term consequences are not yet clear, but the Syrian war may one day become for Russian-speaking jihadists what the Afghan war became for Arab fighters: a crucible of the wider jihadist movement, a formative experience that gave them their first taste of the excitement of combat, built lasting bonds of ideological brotherhood, and turned many into renegade citizens unable to reintegrate into their home societies.

What role did Islamic State propaganda play in capturing the imagination of Central Asian and other Russophone Muslims? The factors that lead individuals to join extremist groups are complex and highly personalised. It is generally the interplay of several factors that leads an individual to join such a group as a solution to personal tensions. In the extensive academic literature, however, it is generally acknowledged that IS's skilful use of new media techniques was a key factor in the group's worldwide appeal and hence in its unprecedented global recruiting success. (Between 44,000 and 53,000 men and women and children were attracted to the banner of the caliphate from more than 70 countries.)<sup>16</sup> Personal recruiting activities, amplified by skilful media outreach, became powerful drivers in the uptake of the global jihadist message.

### **Data limitations**

As so often with Central Asia, a shortage of reliable data presents a challenge for any regional study. IS media production in Arabic and English has been closely analysed and a number of datasets of media output are widely available, but this is not the case for content in Russian or Central Asian languages. No systematic survey was made of Russian-language media traffic at the height of Islamic

15 Emil Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Engagement with Violent Extremist Groups in Russian Federation* (Bishkek: United Nations Development Program, 2016), p. 3.

16 Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II*, p. 5.

State; and only one survey of jihadist social media in Russian and Central Asian languages is known to the present author, carried out in late 2018, when the caliphate was nearing defeat.<sup>17</sup>

Language was a critical factor. Russian is the lingua franca of post-Soviet Islam. Few people understand Arabic, so IS's extensive Arabic-language media production was inaccessible and held little appeal. However, Russian-speaking IS commanders in the field—often Chechens—began producing videos and social media content in Russian to publicise their campaigns. With IS backing, these early efforts developed into a full-scale Russian-language media operation. Without this, much of the Iraqi/Syrian conflict would have remained opaque to post-Soviet audiences.

Islamic State content produced for the post-Soviet region eventually included an online magazine in Russian; official press releases; Arabic-language videos dubbed into Russian; videos produced directly in Russian; and unofficial videos produced by individual commanders and fighters. Separate from IS content, videos and other material were also produced by two al-Qā'eda-linked Central Asian groups (the Imom al Bukhorii Brigade and the Tavhîd va Jihod Brigade) often in Uzbek or Tajik. Social media commentary was also widely posted and reposted by individual supporters across the region.

Videos and other content were circulated widely on the main international social media sites —VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and others—during the IS heyday from 2013 to about 2016. This has now mostly been removed from mainstream English-language sites. Jihadist content has continued to circulate on new and more obscure platforms, as the jihadists play cat and mouse with the tech companies under increasing international pressure to take down extremist material.<sup>18</sup> Telegram began to remove violent extremist content only in November 2019.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018: A preliminary survey of groups, digital dimensions and state responses*, The SecDev Group (Ottawa), and Public Foundation Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (Bishkek), 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Natasha Lomas, 'Tech giants told to remove extremist content much faster', *TechCrunch*, 20 September 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Counter Extremism Project press release, 'Extremist Content Online: ISIS Moves to Hoop Messenger and TamTam Following Telegram Takedowns', 10 December 2019.

## Recent literature

Many studies have been written on the Islamic State's strategic use of media engagement in general,<sup>20</sup> but little on its Russian-language production. While violent extremist organisations (VEO) in the Caucasus have been studied at length, work on jihadist mobilisation in the Central Asian republics has begun to develop only recently, as a result of the IS experience. A number of general works are available on Islamist movements in Central Asia. Naumkin<sup>21</sup> produced a valuable historical overview of Central Asian radical movements from a Russian perspective, while Yemelianova<sup>22</sup> edited a comprehensive collection on emerging radical forms of Islam across the post-Soviet region. More recently a number of authors, including Central Asian academics such as Emil Nasritdinov, have written about susceptibility to radical strains of Islam in the home republics and among labour migrants in Russia. Little has been written, however, about the content of VEO strategic communications and how potential recruits engage with this content. Nasritdinov<sup>23</sup> and Nasritdinov et al.<sup>24</sup> have provided useful detail on youth audiences' resistance or vulnerability to extremist messaging in Kyrgyzstan. Lemon has argued that the Tajik government's response to radical Islam misunderstands the cause, and has increased insecurity for its citizens.<sup>25</sup> In an important debate, Heathershaw and Montgomery questioned whether extremism is as widespread in Central Asia as often claimed, arguing that the growth of Islamic religious sensibilities must not be equated with the spread of religious extremism.<sup>26</sup> Matveeva and Giustozzi, however, argue that extreme forms of Islam are certainly spreading across the region, and this should be recognised and addressed.<sup>27</sup>

George Washington University's Central Asia Program (CAP) has focused on Islamic themes, including IS messaging. Tucker, in a series of CAP monographs, concludes that the plethora of online misinformation and disinformation

20 Miron Lakomy, 'Cracks in the Online "Caliphate": How the Islamic State is Losing Ground in the Battle for Cyberspace', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, No 3 (2017): 41–53, see Notes 1 and 2, p. 51.

21 Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia; Between Pen and Rifle* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

22 Galina Yemelianova (ed.), *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2010).

23 Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*.

24 Emil Nasritdinov, Zarina Urmanbetova, Kanatbek Murzakhaliyov and Mаметбек Myrzabaev, 'Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism: Analysis Across Five Domains', Central Asia Program (CAP) paper No 213. (Washington: George Washington University, January 2019).

25 Edward J. Lemon, 'Daesh and Tajikistan: The Regime's (In)Security Policy', *RUSI Journal* Volume 160, No 5 (2015): 68–76.

26 John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, 'The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics', Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, London, 14 November 2014.

27 Anna Matveeva and Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Central Asian Militants: Cannon Fodder of Global Jihadism or Revolutionary Vanguard?' *Small Wars & Insurgencies* Volume 29 No 2 (2018): 189–206.

originating from jihadist groups, Russian propaganda sources, and Central Asian governments, has created a toxic brew that has further confused both local citizens and outside observers about the extent and impact of jihadist influence in the region.<sup>28</sup>

An overview of available literature leads to the conclusion that the influence of radical ideologies in Central Asia varies from republic to republic, and that the specific influence of media engagement is still poorly understood. Consequently, policy responses to address the situation have been uncertain or absent, despite the mobilisation of so many local citizens as foreign fighters in Syria.

### StratComs of the Caliphate

The Islamic State has been the most innovative of recent VEOs in its exploitation of new media techniques, setting new standards that will be emulated by future extremist groups. Videos of Western hostages, of grisly beheadings and other extreme violence, captured the world's attention with their shock value and were elaborately commented upon in international media reports.

Islamic State's origins lie in an insurgent group founded in Iraq by the Jordanian, Abû Mus'ab az-Zarqâwî, in 1999. It reached its zenith in 2014–15 under his successor, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, briefly controlling an area larger than Jordan, with a population of 4–8 million.<sup>29</sup> Zarqawi himself pioneered the use of violent footage to attract attention, circulating on the internet some of the earliest beheading videos. The most intensive period of media production was in 2014–16. Kurdish and other forces, supported by US aerial bombing, eventually extinguished the territorial caliphate early in 2019, but insurgent attacks continue until today, supported by continuing propaganda activity.

As the Islamic State grew, its media strategy evolved with the development of a series of specialised media production offices, under the overall direction of a central 'information ministry'.<sup>30</sup> The earliest of these offices was Al-Furqân Media, the central propaganda bureau, which issued official caliphate statements.

28 Noah Tucker, 'Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging', Central Eurasia Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) Briefs, George Washington University, Central Asia Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, February 2016. [№ 11](#) (Tajikistan), [№ 12](#) (Uzbekistan), [№ 13](#) (Kazakhstan), [№ 14](#) (Kyrgyzstan), and Tucker and Rano Turaeva, [№ 15](#) (Turkmenistan); see also Tucker, 'Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia', CERIA Brief [№ 6](#), February 2015.

29 Vaughan Phillips, 'The Islamic State's Strategy: Bureaucratizing the Apocalypse through Strategic Communications', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Volume 40 [№ 9](#) (2017): 732.

30 For Islamic State's media structure, see Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts*, (West Point: US Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center, October 2016), p. 13 (diagram).

Another, Al-Hayât Media Center, produced online magazines in various languages, including the Russian-language magazine, *Istok* [The Source].<sup>31</sup> An auxiliary ‘newswire’ service, the ‘A’mâq News Agency, provided day-to-day military news and propaganda,<sup>32</sup> some of which was translated into Russian. Most Russian-language videos originated with a less well-known office, Al-Furât Media Centre, which served as the main propaganda and recruitment arm for the post-Soviet region. It seems likely that Al-Furât was developed unofficially by Chechen and other Caucasian fighters, who were active online from their earliest days in the Syrian conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Analysis of a number of datasets of IS media output has provided an accurate picture of the group’s propaganda. These analyses refute the common perception that output was largely focused on ‘ultraviolence’. The perception in the international media was skewed by an overemphasis on English-language content, which was only a very small proportion of overall output.<sup>34</sup> IS propaganda in reality presented a range of themes, including governance, *da’wah* [proselytising], *hisbah* [moral policing], and promotion of the idealised life of the caliphate.<sup>35</sup> Winter, in his media dataset, found three recurring themes as foundations of the Islamic State brand—‘warfare’ (the military successes of the caliphate), ‘victimhood’ (the oppression of Muslims by the infidel world), and ‘utopia’ (the ideal Muslim state being built by IS).<sup>36</sup>

The Islamic State’s most significant media innovation was its focus on the use of powerful visual imagery. Prior to IS, jihadist media output, primarily from al-Qâ’eda, had been largely text-based, or long theological and political disquisitions by internet ‘sheikhs’. IS exploited one of the key lessons of social media—already well known to the big tech companies—that mass audiences engage more readily with visual content. Emotive images of Muslim suffering in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan emphasised the victimhood of Muslims in the face of attacks by Western powers, Shî’a militants, and other infidels.

31 Harleen Gambhir, *The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS’s Information Warfare*, (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2016), p. 22.

32 Rukmini Callimachi, ‘A News Agency with Scoops Directly from ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity’, *The New York Times*, 14 January 2016.

33 Joanna Paraszczuk, ‘“Leave Nusra, Join IS” Uzbek Militant Urges In New IS Video’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, 20 June 2015.

34 Aaron Y. Zelin, ‘Picture or It Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Official Media Output’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015): 85–97 (85, 89).

35 Zelin, ‘Picture or It Didn’t Happen’, p. 90.

36 Charlie Winter, ‘The Battle for Mosul: An Analysis of Islamic State Propaganda’, in Ofer Fridman et al. (eds), *Hybrid conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics*, (London: Lynne Rienner, 2019), p. 172.

The power of visual imagery, a basic principle of advertising and behavioural economics, became IS's most effective propaganda tool.

### **Jihadist media strategies in the post-Soviet context**

While post-Soviet Muslims constituted one of Islamic State's largest contingents of foreign fighters, it is not clear how seriously the Arabic leadership of IS took the matter of outreach to their Russian-speaking audiences. Media production for Russophone audiences was driven largely by Chechen and other North Caucasian elements within IS, initially targeting their Caucasian compatriots, but their jihadist messaging then spread to widening circles of Muslims across the post-Soviet region. This ripple effect was facilitated by interlinking networks of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups across the region, which grew in step with the rapid development of new media technology taking place during the years of the Islamic State's rise. To visualise these networks, one must understand something of the makeup of post-Soviet Muslim society.

While they share a common overlay of Soviet culture, Muslims of the post-Soviet region are ethnically and culturally disparate. The Soviet Union was a multi-ethnic empire that encompassed three areas of Muslim population, each with its own long history and traditions—the Caucasus, the Volga-Urals region of Russia, and Central Asia.

Geographically the smallest of these three, the Caucasus, is the most variegated, encompassing one of the world's most complex clusters of ethnic and linguistic groups, inhabiting the valleys and plains north and south of the Caucasus mountains. The internal Russian republic of Daghestan alone has several main ethnic groups, while a variety of smaller, largely Muslim ethnicities inhabit six other internal Russian republics on the northern flanks of the Caucasus—Chechens, Ingush, Karachay, Cherkess, Kabardins, Balkars, Adyghe, and others.

With strong Sufi traditions, many Caucasians have historical and familial ties to Syria and the wider Middle East, dating from migrations there during the Ottoman period. The Chechens also have a powerful martial tradition and a long history of fighting Russia in an attempt to maintain their independence. Two Chechen wars against Moscow (1994–96 and 1999–2000) created a jihadist underground in the North Caucasus, which provided the main body of 'Russian' foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict, and which became a key conduit for the participation of other Russian-speaking Muslims.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Alisa Fainberg, *Spread the Word: Russia Social Media on the Service of Jihad* (Herzliya, Israel: International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Spring 2017), p. 9 and 37.

The Muslims of the Volga-Urals region are primarily Tatars and Bashkirs living in the internal Russian republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. These Turkic peoples have an Islamic tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages, when indigenous tribes converted to Islam. Closely integrated in mainstream Russian society, relatively few Tatars joined IS. Fainberg notes that Tatars and Bashkirs were largely absent from jihadist social media propaganda.<sup>38</sup>

Central Asia has a distinct Islamic tradition that extends back to the east Persian intellectual flowering of the tenth century, when Bukhara rivalled Baghdad as an Islamic cultural centre. In the Timurid Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Central Asian scientists made important advances in mathematics, astronomy and architecture.

In addition to this threefold cultural division, Central Asian recruits can be subdivided into two further categories—those recruited in their home republics, and those recruited outside, mostly in Russia, where some four million Central Asians, mostly men, work as labour migrants.<sup>39</sup> The Central Asian audiences most responsive to the jihadist message were in fact those working in Russia, where recruitment was substantially greater than in the Central Asian republics themselves. Lemon (2017), for example, found that over 80 percent of fighters in a dataset of Tajik IS members were recruited while working in Russia.<sup>40</sup> Most authorities conclude that migrants were more susceptible to Islamist proselytising because of their separation from a settled home life, the overall insecurity of their situation, and the fact that many experience racial and cultural hostility from mainstream Russian society.

Elsewhere, there has also been extensive recruitment among the large Central Asian migrant diaspora in Turkey.<sup>41</sup> With its established networks of settled Chechen and other Russophone Muslims, Turkey became the primary access route to Syria for most of those from the ex-Soviet region.

For those Central Asians who travelled from the home republics, Olimova notes that the largest group of supporters originated in border areas which had suffered most when the Soviet breakup in 1991 imposed national borders

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38 Ibid., p. 9.

39 Russian government estimate in 2014, cited in Christian Bleuer, 'To Syria, not Afghanistan: Central Asian jihadis "neglect" their neighbour', *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, 8 October 2014.

40 Edward Lemon, 'The Varied Roads from Central Asia to the Islamic State', *Impakter.com*, 28 February 2017.

41 Author interviews with Sirojiddin Tolibov and Noah Tucker, 2019.

almost overnight between the newly independent republics.<sup>42</sup> This was most evident in the densely-populated Ferghana valley, a historic and cultural centre with a long tradition of religious conservatism, whose multi-ethnic population found itself divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The new borders created barriers to trade and travel as economic policy diverged between repressive Uzbekistan, liberal Kyrgyzstan and, a Tajikistan beset by civil war. Communities and families were divided, and markets were cut off from their economic hinterland. The result has been huge and persistent social and economic hardship.

Ferghana has featured prominently in the history of Islamist movements in Central Asia. It was the home of Central Asia's first post-Soviet Salafist movement, Adolat, which emerged immediately after the collapse of Soviet power. Adolat's leaders were soon driven into exile in Afghanistan, where they resurfaced in 1998 as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). During the 1990s, the Islamist Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement spread in Ferghana, promoting its message of a revived caliphate that would abolish the borders between Muslim peoples—a message with an obvious local attraction. Hizb-ut-Tahrir was brutally suppressed, with thousands of followers ending up in Uzbek prisons. Ferghana has also been the scene of ethnic violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1990 and again in 2010, caused in part by the region's economic stress. With such a history, it is little surprise that Ferghana became one of the main sources of regional recruits for the Syrian jihad.

Tucker, Lemon, and Zito have produced the most detailed overview of radicalisation 'hotspots' in Central Asia.<sup>43</sup> Like Olimova, they highlighted Ferghana communities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana region of southern Kyrgyzstan, many displaced by the ethnic violence of 2010, were particularly prominent among foreign fighters in Syria—70% of all Kyrgyzstan citizen recruits in 2016 were former residents of the largely Uzbek Osh region in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>44</sup> The great majority of fighters mobilised in the republic of Kyrgyzstan were in fact ethnic Uzbeks. Relatively few ethnic Kyrgyz went to join the jihad for a variety of reasons (discussed below).

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42 Saodat Olimova, 'Угроза радикализации в странах Центральной Азии: социальное измерение (на примере Республики Таджикистан)' [Threat of Radicalisation in the Countries of Central Asia: Social Dimensions (Example of the Republic of Tajikistan)], *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 27 December 2015.

43 Tucker, Lemon, and Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States*. See sections on each republic.

44 Ibid. See Kyrgyzstan – Hotspots section.

For the republic of Uzbekistan itself, little reliable data on IS or jihadist recruitment has been available from the notoriously opaque government. Ethnic Uzbeks were the biggest contingent of Central Asian fighters in Syria, but most experts agree that relatively few were recruited in Uzbekistan. Many ethnic Uzbeks came from Kyrgyzstan, as mentioned above. As for Uzbekistan citizens, one study by a Tashkent institute estimated that, of a contingent of some 1,000 Uzbekistani nationals fighting in Syria in 2018, only about 70 were recruited in Uzbekistan, while the remainder were recruited as migrants, either in Russia or Turkey, or were already radicalised fighters for extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as the IMU.<sup>45</sup>

In Kazakhstan recruitment hotspots were largely in and around the remote copper mining town of Zhezkazgan in central Kazakhstan, and the oil industry cities of Aktobe, Atyrau and Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan near the Caspian Sea.<sup>46</sup> These are all areas of notable inequality where newly rich investors with links to the elite have bought up old Soviet industries, but the local population have seen little benefit. In interviews local residents suggested that a sense of ‘injustice’ was a significant factor in leading recruits to travel to the IS caliphate, and that they hoped to find a more just form of governance in the presumed ideal Islamic state.<sup>47</sup>

These recruitment patterns were reflected in social media traffic. While Russian-language IS media, dominated by Caucasians, produced relatively little content aimed specifically at Central Asian audiences, Uzbek and Tajik field commanders of two Uzbek brigades allied to al-Qâ’eda began to broadcast videos and social media commentary in Russian, Uzbek and Tajik. Relatively little material was published for Kazakh audiences, apart from some early videos in 2013. Likewise, very few recruiting videos appeared for the Kyrgyz market, a reflection of the relatively small number of ethnic Kyrgyz recruits. As for Turkmenistan citizens, little is known for certain about their involvement.<sup>48</sup>

Who were the individuals who responded to these jihadist recruiting messages? Those who travelled to Syria were generally young adults, not naïve adolescents. Fighters in Lemon’s Tajik dataset had an average age of 28, with over half

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45 Ibid. See Uzbekistan – Hotspots section.

46 Ibid. See Kazakhstan section.

47 Ibid.

48 Tucker and Turaeva, CERIA Brief No 15, (Turkmenistan).

aged from 24 to 29.<sup>49</sup> Almost half were graduates with degrees from secular universities. Several specialists point out that recruits frequently had little religious knowledge before joining radical groups and had often lived a largely secular, even irreligious life. Yarlykapov, studying Muslim labour migrants in the Yamalo-Nenets region of Russia's far north has found the experiences of those who went to Syria 'confirm the view that recruits to Islamic State are mostly people without deep roots in Islamic tradition who have undergone rapid and superficial Islamization, which makes it easy for recruiters to manipulate them.'<sup>50</sup>

While the vast majority of recruits were men, a substantial number of women also 'made *hijrab*' to the Caliphate, often accompanying their husbands, with varying degrees of willingness. Cook and Vale concluded that in 2018 about 13 percent of Central Asians who went to Syria/Iraq were women.<sup>51</sup> Tucker, Lemon, and Zito cite incidences of whole family groups who travelled directly from the Central Asian republics, and also of women who travelled alone, unaccompanied by husbands or male family members.<sup>52</sup>

### **Evolving media networks**

IS's central media offices had a limited capacity to produce Russian-language products—few official press statements released by the central Al-Furqân Media office were released in Russian.<sup>53</sup> Videos, however, were the most influential media products. Most IS Russian-language videos bear the logo of Al-Furât. The origins of Al-Furât can be traced to Tarkhan Batirashvili—better known as 'Umar ash-Shîshânî ['Umar the Chechen]—an ethnic Kist Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, who became IS's top military commander in 2014.

Umar ash-Shîshânî came to Syria in late 2012 as a representative of the fading Caucasus Emirate militant group. He launched a website, FiSyria, in April 2013 to publicise the activities of Russian-speaking fighters in Syria and to connect with potential recruits in the North Caucasus.<sup>54</sup> Later that year he switched allegiance to IS and his website became an Islamic State propaganda site.<sup>55</sup>

49 Lemon, 'The Varied Roads'.

50 Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Divisions and Unity of the Novy Urengoy Muslim Community', *Problems of Post-Communism* (2019; article published online 20 August 2019), p. 6.

51 Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II*, p. 2.

52 Tucker, Lemon, and Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States*. See 'Demographic Vectors—Women' paragraphs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan sections.

53 Zelin, 'Picture or It Didn't Happen', 90.

54 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 10.

55 Joanna Paraszczuk, 'IS Boosts Russian-Language Propaganda Efforts', *RFE/RL*, 6 July 2015.

In September Shishani's men launched the first IS media page on the VKontakte social media platform in Russian under the name ShamToday.<sup>56</sup> Extremist content posted on VKontakte (VK) and the other major Russian platform, Odnoklassniki (OK), would become for a time the most effective method of online distribution across the post-Soviet region. ShamToday was overseen by a Chechen, Sayfullakh Shamsky (aka Ilyas Deniev), until he was killed in Iraq early in 2015.<sup>57</sup> Under Shamsky's direction, the site became a full-fledged media operation, gaining more than 12,000 followers in a year, expanding to YouTube and other platforms, and setting up mirror accounts. IS supporters also set up many private accounts and chat groups in 2013–14 and reposted jihadist messages.<sup>58</sup> These online fans—sometimes dismissed as 'armchair mujahidin' [диванные муДЖАХИДЫ]—became a significant factor in the vast online distribution networks of IS and jihadist propaganda.

For Central Asians, including migrants in Russia, Odnoklassniki became the key platform for Syrian news and jihadist content. Smaller than VK, OK is the most popular social media platform among Central Asians generally. For all migrants a mobile phone is essential to keep in touch with their families, and the internet and social media are the primary ways to while away time on construction camps scattered across Russia. Anvar Nazirov, a political analyst in Tashkent, interviewed in mid-2015, commented: 'All Uzbeks who joined ISIS say they became acquainted on Odnoklassniki. Not through Facebook, not through Twitter, but through Odnoklassniki.'<sup>59</sup> Other Central Asian specialists say that IS recruiters were active on other social networks, but OK, being the most popular among Uzbeks, became the site where many first encountered radical ideologies because social networks gave people in a repressed and highly controlled society the possibility to express their thoughts freely.<sup>60</sup>

While most specialists writing about radicalisation in Central Asia cite the importance of online messaging in attracting individuals to jihadist groups, offline or face to face recruiting was also important. First person accounts gathered by researchers indicate that IS recruiters targeted Central Asians in construction labourers' residential compounds in Russia, both online and in

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<sup>56</sup> Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 16–17.

<sup>59</sup> Author's translation. Cited by Uzbek Service of RFE/RL, 'Вербовка узбеков в ряды ИГ все чаще происходит в «Одноклассниках»' [IS Recruitment of Uzbeks happens increasingly on "Odnoklassniki"], 11 June, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

person.<sup>61</sup> Other accounts speak of young migrants working in Russia who met recruiters in gyms and sports clubs. Face to face recruiting was also often dominated by Chechens. Construction companies in Russia commonly employ Chechens because many Chechen security companies provide the *krysha*—the ‘roof’, or protection from extortion—without which big companies cannot operate in Russia.<sup>62</sup> Online and offline engagement thus combined to spread the jihadist message far and wide to Muslim migrants working in Russian cities and in industrial communities in the remotest parts of Russia.

IS used VKontakte and Odnoklassniki actively for a year (2013–14) before VK blocked ShamToday in September 2014 and began taking down other jihadist accounts.<sup>63</sup> OK also responded to growing pressure to close extremist accounts, but less strictly than VK. Fainberg writes that pages and groups promoting IS could still be found on OK as late as 2017.<sup>64</sup> By 2015, IS and other jihadists were migrating to Telegram as their favoured social platform because of its combination of open public channels with secure secret chat functions that were virtually impossible to decrypt.<sup>65</sup> As the social media landscape evolved, the Russophone wing of IS adapted its communications strategy, consolidating its efforts in mid-2015 by creating the Al-Furât Media office, which then became the focus for most IS Russian-language media production.

### Widening post-Soviet focus

When Umar ash-Shîshânî was appointed the Islamic State’s most senior military commander in 2014—regarded by the Pentagon as its ‘minister for war’<sup>66</sup>—the appointment strengthened the Russophone role within the group. The caliphate’s Russian media outreach was also strengthened as Al-Furât opened a website and accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. FiSyria was subsumed into Al-Furât, and the new media office significantly increased content available to Russian-speaking Muslims by subtitling and distributing existing Arabic-language IS videos.<sup>67</sup>

61 See Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova and William Tobey, *Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?* (Cambridge, MA: Russia Matters, December 2018), p. 14.

62 Interview with Vera Mironova, 31 January 2020.

63 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 17–18.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

65 Rebecca Tan, ‘Terrorists’ love for Telegram, explained’, *Vox*, 30 June 2017.

66 Staff and agencies, ‘Isis admits “minister for war” Omar the Chechen is dead’, *The Guardian*, 13 July 2016.

67 Paraszczuk, ‘IS Boosts’.

The most prominent figure in Al-Furât was Islam Atabiev (aka Abû Jihâd), an ethnic Karachai from the Russian Caucasus republic of Karachai-Cherkessia. A close associate of ash-Shîshânî he was entrusted with managing IS's Russian-language propaganda and became a senior figure of the Russian-speaking faction.<sup>68</sup> He was placed on the UN sanctions list in 2015 for 'actively conducting propaganda, calling to commit terrorist attacks and spreading extremist ISIL [IS] ideology'.<sup>69</sup> Shishani the military leader and Atabiev the propagandist formed a powerful dual force, substantially increasing Russophone influence within IS. Shishani's frequent appearance in jihadist videos amplified his role as a charismatic commander, attracting Russian-speaking recruits from across the region, including Tatarstan and Central Asia.<sup>70</sup> Atabiev's media skills thus played a key role in shaping IS's propaganda outreach across the post-Soviet region.

Ash-Shîshânî was killed in 2016, probably by an American air strike,<sup>71</sup> and replaced as chief military commander by another post-Soviet militant, Gulmurod Khalimov, a decorated colonel of the OMON special forces in Tajikistan, who had dramatically defected to IS the previous year.<sup>72</sup> Khalimov thus became the most powerful Central Asian in the Islamic State, and was featured in propaganda content across the region. He was eventually killed by an airstrike in Mosul in 2017.<sup>73</sup> Al-Furât's media production took on a wider regional focus than FiSyria and ShamToday. While the earlier sites focused largely on a Caucasian audience, Furât sought to attract followers in other post-Soviet states, translating material and producing original content in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Georgian, and other languages.<sup>74</sup>

Some of the earliest IS videos to feature Central Asian fighters had in fact appeared in 2013, before Al-Furât was established, when two videos were circulated showing a large group of Kazakh fighters, and Kazakh children in military training. A third shocking video appeared to show a young Kazakh boy executing two men accused of being Russian spies with a pistol at point

68 'Эксперты исключили выход кавказских группировок из ИГ после смерти аш-Шихани' [Experts exclude the exit of Caucasian militant groups from IS after the death of ash-Shishani], *Кавказский Узел* [Caucasian Knot] website, 15 July 2016.

69 UN Security Council Sanctions List; entry for *Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiev*.

70 Or Orkhan Djemal, cited in 'Эксперты исключили', Caucasian Knot website.

71 'The Guardian, 'Isis admits'.

72 *Gulmurod Khalimov* entry, Counter Extremism Project website.

73 *Ibid*.

74 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 27.

blank range.<sup>75</sup> Thereafter, however, videos aimed specifically at Central Asian audiences were less common until Al-Furât began seeking a wider post-Soviet audience.

A number of Central Asian videos produced early in 2016 appear to reflect a drive to find more recruits among Central Asians and may also reflect competition for recruits with the al-Qâ'eda-linked Uzbek brigades, which were attracting attention with their own media content by this point. These videos appealed to the strong family culture of Central Asia.<sup>76</sup> One thirty-minute video in Uzbek with Russian subtitles showed an older Uzbek fighter in his sixties calling upon Uzbeks to come to the caliphate. Another, shorter video features two Kazakh fighters and their sons urging Muslims to come to Syria.<sup>77</sup>

While IS Russian media production was dominated by Caucasians, a number of Central Asians also appeared as 'media mujahidin'. Little is known about most, but a 28-year-old Tajik, Parviz Saidrakhmonov (aka Abu Daoud at-Tojġki), illustrates the type.<sup>78</sup> He left a troubled personal life in Dushanbe to work in Russia, became enamoured of jihad, and turned up in videos in Syria. He was close to two prominent Dagestani preachers in Atabiev's circle, and was photographed with Gulmurod Khalimov, IS's Tajik top military commander. Abu Daoud appears in photographs working on a laptop in an IS 'media centre', implying that he worked as a producer and media activist. In 2015, he was reported on social media to have been 'martyred'—but it is suspected he may have faked the reports himself.<sup>79</sup>

Central Asians are still active on jihadist social media. One media activist calling himself Farûq Shâmî was actively posting militant videos and commentary from Syria in early 2020 on a Russian website and on a number of mainstream social media platforms.<sup>80</sup> Possibly from Tajikistan, Shâmî appears to be ethnically Uzbek but delivers his video commentaries in Russian.

75 Tucker, CERIA Brief № 13 (Kazakhstan), p. 3; See also Radio Azattyk, «150 казахских джихадистов в Сирии взорвали социальные сети» [“150 Kazakh Jihadists in Syria” Shakes Up Social Media], *RFE/RL Kazakh service*, 21 October 2013.

76 Paraszczuk, 'IS Central Asian Recruitment Drive a Family Affair', *RFE/RL*, 5 April, 2016.

77 Ibid.

78 Paraszczuk, 'Have Tajik IS Militants Faked Their Own "Martyrdoms"?', *RFE/RL*, 1 July 2015.

79 Ibid.

80 Shâmî posts his videos on [Muhajeer.com](http://Muhajeer.com). WARNING: SOME GRAPHIC CONTENT. A post on Reddit refers to him as coming from Tajikistan.

One dataset of jihadist social media in Russian and Central Asian languages captures a picture of media engagement in the region in the final days of the IS caliphate.<sup>81</sup> This study surveyed content over three months (August–October) in 2018. The analysts found no active IS social media accounts in Russian or local languages during the study period—presumably a sign of the tech companies’ success in removing IS accounts, as well as of the caliphate’s impending military defeat.<sup>82</sup>

Other VEOs were still active: some 140 active accounts from ten regional Islamist actors were identified on open social media sites. The most active were the Syrian group, Hayât Tahrîr ash-Shâm (HTS), the two Uzbek brigades in Syria, and Hizb-ut-Tahrîr (HuT). All were still posting content on the main social media platforms, especially Telegram, but also Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, VKontakte and WhatsApp, though engaged in a constant battle against blocking and takedowns.

HTS—formerly Jabhat-an-Nusra, the official branch of al-Qâ’eda in Syria—was running an extensive network of news sites and media projects, including projects in Russian and Central Asian languages.<sup>83</sup> The Tavhîd va Jihod (TvJ) Brigade was running an effective propaganda network with 45 active social media accounts, mostly in Uzbek.<sup>84</sup> The Imom al Bukhorii Brigade, though larger than TvJ, had a somewhat smaller media presence, with 14 active accounts.<sup>85</sup> Hizb-ut-Tahrîr, meanwhile, present in Central Asia since the 1990s, was found to be running a ‘media empire’ online and on paper, publishing content translated from Arabic into Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz, actively distributed via websites and social media.<sup>86</sup>

Extremist content continues to be accessible on social media in Central Asia to the present, including videos and talks by radical preachers, although it is more discreet, sometimes hidden amongst more traditional religious content to avoid being taken down.

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81 *Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018*, p. 13–25.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 20–21.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

## Case study—Istok

The online magazine, *Istok* [Исток—‘The Source’] is perhaps the media product that provides the most complete illustration of the ideological motivations of Islamic State’s Russophone leadership. The magazine was produced by the Al Hayât Media Centre, one of IS’s central media offices, not by the semi-official Al Furât Media Centre, which suggests that the political and religious views promulgated in *Istok* were centrally approved. A total of four issues were published between April/May 2015 and April/May 2016, comprising a total of 180 pages and 31 individual articles. The magazine was illustrated with high-quality colour photographs—often romanticised images of jihadist fighters—but the content was heavily textual, most articles being several pages long. This is unlike the tabloid style one might have expected from IS, with its focus on youth-oriented media content, but consistent with a more Russian editorial approach.

The authorship of articles is not indicated, but internal comments suggest that the editorial team was largely Caucasian. Judging by stylistic similarities, many of the longer articles may have been written by the same person. One may speculate whether the voice behind these articles might be that of Islam Atabiev, IS’s main Russian-language propagandist. Whoever the authors, the magazine reveals something of the obsessive, apocalyptic mindset within the leadership of IS’s Russophone wing.

*Istok*’s target audience is believers within the movement, exhorting them to avoid factionalism and to prepare for martyrdom. Dates are almost entirely absent: religious and jihadist authorities are cited without indicating whether they are contemporary or historical. There is no recognition of the temporal chasm between the seventh century and the present. This lack of temporal awareness contributes powerfully to the jihadist fantasy ‘theatre’ aspect of IS propaganda. The audience is encouraged to see itself as living in the Islamic heroic age of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, engaged in the apocalyptic battles of the early caliphate.

There is a surprising lack of gore. The bloodied knives and beheadings reproduced in the English-language IS magazine, *Dâbiq*, are almost entirely absent. *Dâbiq* and IS’s grisly videos were designed to shock and frighten Western audiences, but *Istok* was for an audience of fellow believers, who needed cajoling, not terrorising.

*Istok* reiterates constantly the main discursive schemas of the IS jihadist narrative: a worldview divided between an in-group of true Muslims and an out-group of infidels; the unjust and infidel Western powers are waging an everlasting war on Islam; all true Muslims must wage unceasing jihad; security for Muslims lies only in the IS caliphate, to which all true Muslims should make *hijra*; and the highest moral achievement of jihad is martyrdom in the way of Allah.

*Istok*'s 31 articles can be grouped thematically under the following seven headings:

- *Life as a mujāhid* (8 articles)
- *International affairs* (6)
- *Jihad politics* (5)
- *Martyrdom* (4)
- *Jihad history* (3)
- *Women* (3)
- *Governance* (2)

If we return to Zelin's and Winter's datasets of IS media output (*see above*), they identified six dominant themes between them as the chief concerns of IS propaganda messaging: governance, moral policing [*hisba*], proselytising [*da'wa*], warfare, victimhood, and the idealised caliphate (or utopia). While the specific themes of any individual dataset will vary, these six Islamic State schemas, which are central to maintaining and promoting the global IS brand, also feature repeatedly within *Istok*.

**Life as a mujāhid:** The magazine's production team undertook to promote the life of the mujāhid, the 'holy warrior', as one of its central concerns. Eight articles provided religious or spiritual advice to boost the morale of the common fighter, including a long address from the IS leader, Al Baghdādi, in *Istok* № 2.<sup>87</sup> This address in itself covers all the key themes and complaints of the jihadist narrative, with a constant emphasis on the duty of waging warfare: 'O Muslims, Islam has not been a religion of peace for a single day. Indeed, Islam is a religion of battle.'<sup>88</sup> In a resounding statement of victimhood, Baghdādi warns against all the multifarious enemies of the Muslims. He warns against trusting Christians, Jews, and Americans; he warns against the *rāfida* [rejectionists], the secularists,

87 'Выступайте в похода, легко ли это вам будет или обременительном' [Set out on the journey, whether it is easy for you or burdensome], *Istok* № 2, p. 4.

88 *Ibid.*

the godless, and the apostates, and he condemns the Saudi royal family, ‘slaves of the Crusaders and allies of the Jews’.

Three articles about the mujâhid life give romanticised accounts of life at the front, one aspect of the idealised caliphate schema. Another, apparently written by a young fighter, encapsulates the victimhood schema with great passion, saying that young people feel intensely the ‘humiliation’ of modern Muslims, and arguing that IS followers are not merely ‘uneducated fanatics, losers and adolescents from difficult families’, as the infidel media would have it. They are ‘brothers, fathers, and sons of those raped by the infidel soldiers’, who seek revenge, who will eradicate the ‘satanic Sykes-Picot borders’ and revive the glories of the Muslim empire.<sup>89</sup> This intensely emotional article demonstrates clearly the appeal to the affective dimension among IS’s younger audiences.

**International affairs:** Six articles, including two long addresses by the official IS spokesman, Abû Mohammad al Adnâni, refer to the terror attacks in Sinai and Paris, the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, the weakness of America and other tyrant governments, the divisiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood, the superior qualities of the Islamic State’s caliphate, and the state of Islam in Europe. Here the themes of the idealised caliphate and the victimhood of Muslims in the face of worldwide aggression are repeatedly evoked. Islamic State’s rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood for the soul of the global Islamist movement stands out as an ongoing and significant concern.

**Jihad politics:** Five articles on jihadist politics discuss frankly the problems of factionalism and infighting. ‘Conspiracies’ figure prominently, and tensions are hinted at between local Syrian fighters and fighters from the Caucasus. Warfare and the need to defeat rivals to establish the IS caliphate as the true home of the Muslims are recurring schemas.

**Martyrdom** is a constant theme. Four articles tell improving tales of the courage of *mujâhidîn* who go to their deaths killing unbelievers. The ideal of martyrdom is perhaps the most commonly cited theme across the four issues of *Istok*, interwoven with other schemas, such as warfare, jihadist history, and the mujâhid life.

**Jihad history** articles present episodes from the lives of the early caliphs, and

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<sup>89</sup> ‘Кто мы? Откуда и куда?’ [Who are we? From where and where are we going?], *Istok* № 4, p. 29–32.

an account of the Prophet's *hijra* [migration] from Mecca to Medina. The ideal caliphate motif appears again with the message that all Muslims should migrate to the land of true Islam.

**Women** appear rarely in *Istok*, but three articles do touch on female topics, all reflecting the theme of moral policing. One tells of the execution of a Caucasian woman, Elvira Karaeva, described as a spy for Russia. This factually incorrect account is told as a warning to others— particularly women—who might consider acts of disloyalty.<sup>90</sup> Another article presents a justification for the use of captured women, such as the Yazidis, as slave-girls or concubines, claiming this to be more honourable than the prostitution found in infidel lands.<sup>91</sup>

**Governance**—the provision of public services—was a key theme in IS Arabic-language messaging, but only two articles in *Istok* focus on this theme, one explaining the work of the caliphate's 'vice and virtue' police, and another praising the Sharia traffic police in Raqqa.

If we compare *Istok*'s main schemas with Zelin's and Winter's dominant themes (reflecting the concerns of Islamic State's central leadership and propaganda arms) it is notable that the Russian-language propagandists were most concerned with what might be characterised as the 'power' themes: warfare, victimhood, and the ideal caliphate, with a particular interest in martyrdom. They were less concerned about the 'service' themes—governance and moral policing—and not at all concerned about proselytising, which is not mentioned in the Russian magazine. One may speculate about the reasons for this difference in emphasis, but perhaps it reflects the hard power world of *Istok*'s Caucasian progenitors, who emerged from the brutality of the Chechen and Caucasian confrontation with the Russian state, where survival in the face of overwhelming force was the harsh and dominating reality of daily life.

### **Efficacy of jihadist media strategies**

How effective were extremist online media communications as a radicalising factor in the post-Soviet region? Writing in 2014, Bleuer notes: "The role of social media in recruiting is often mentioned as an important factor for IS and

90 'Караева Эльвира, Агент Спецслужб России' [Elvira Karaeva, Special Agent of Russia], *Istok* № 4 (April 2016), p. 22–25. For a detailed account of this case, see Jasmine Opperman, 'Elvira Karaeva: The story of the Russian Spy That Wasn't', *Daily Maverick*, 13 May 2016.

91 'Наложницы или Блудницы?' [Slave-girls or Prostitutes?], *Istok* № 2 (July 2015), p. 33–36.

other groups in Syria and Iraq, despite this hypothesis being untested.<sup>92</sup> The hypothesis is still largely untested today and remains an important gap in the research.

The town of Aravan in the Ferghana valley experienced one of the highest levels of migration from Kyrgyzstan to Syria. Despite being in Kyrgyzstan, it has an ethnic Uzbek majority population, cut off from its neighbours in Uzbekistan by national borders. In a detailed study of Aravan, focus groups revealed something of the interplay of jihadist propaganda with other radicalising factors.<sup>93</sup>

The influence of social-media and other propaganda is not independent of these other factors. In the emerging world of media saturation, online and offline communications are no longer separate strands of engagement. They form a continuum of personal engagement. Individuals engage offline and continue the conversation online, and vice versa. Personal acquaintance, new contacts, and patterns of influence operate seamlessly in both spheres. In discussions with Aravan residents about the mechanisms of radicalisation, ‘very few cited the influence of general online propaganda, but many mentioned the influence of direct online connections via messenger applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram that facilitated recruiting ties between Aravanis already in Syria and their friends, neighbors, or classmates at home.’<sup>94</sup> Discussions made clear that ‘online communications had played a key role in embroiling the Aravan community in the conflict’—not, however, via traditional social media, but through media usage that reflected offline personal relationships and facilitated direct communication between individuals.<sup>95</sup>

Social media have acquired a particular importance in Central Asia and other ex-Soviet republics where traditional, state-dominated media outlets have always been inherently untrustworthy. Social media platforms, which link individuals with friends and family whom they trust, have become a valued source of news and information in a confusing world of competing information outlets, conspiracy theories, and ‘fake news’. Bleuer speculates about the reasons for the influence of IS propaganda amidst the cacophony of online information that now reaches populations in Central Asia. ‘Central Asians, especially those

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92 Bleuer, ‘To Syria, not Afghanistan’.

93 See Noah Tucker, ‘What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruiting Ground? Lessons from Central Asia about Vulnerability, Resistance, and the Danger of Ignoring Perceived Injustice’, Central Asia Program, Paper № 209, George Washington University, July 2018, p. 7.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

in Russia, are enthusiastic users of social media', he notes. IS entered the post-Soviet online media space armed with the latest new media techniques and strategies, whereas earlier extremist groups, such as al-Qâ'eda and the Afghan Taleban, were much less visible. Critically, pro-IS messages were expressed in Russian, on platforms that were popular among Central Asians.<sup>96</sup> Messages and videos from al-Qâ'eda and the Taleban were mostly in Arabic, Pushto, or Persian, and unlikely to be seen or understood by Central Asians. Smaller Central Asian groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, based in Afghanistan, have never had a significant media presence and have little appeal in Uzbekistan itself. IS understood a basic rule of the media age: the most visible product attracts the greatest attention.

### Central Asian language engagement

Online discussions about Syria in Central Asia were dominated by the topic of Islamic State, but there were other producers of extremist content. Those who travelled to Syria in the greatest numbers were ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks so discussions in Uzbek and Tajik were as common as those in Russian. Uzbek was by far the most actively used of Central Asian languages. IS began developing Uzbek-language media channels from 2013. Uzbek members established the KhilofatNews media service, video studios, and video-sharing accounts on YouTube and Vimeo, as well as social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Odnoklassniki. Within a year, however, by November 2014, most of these media outlets had ceased to function.<sup>97</sup> The reason for this is unclear, but it was probably connected with VKontakte's efforts to close down extremist sites, which began at this time.

While IS ceased to produce Uzbek-language content, the two main ethnic Uzbek groups in Syria became active producers of videos and social media content in Uzbek. The Imom al-Bukhorii Brigade and the Tawhid va Jihad Brigade, were close to al-Qâ'eda and therefore rivals of IS. Many al-Bukhorii fighters were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who had spent years in exile in Afghanistan.<sup>98</sup> Led by an Uzbek commander known as Sheikh Salahâddîn al-Uzbeki until his assassination in 2017,<sup>99</sup> the brigade ran a YouTube channel that uploaded the commander's speeches.

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<sup>96</sup> Bleuer, 'To Syria, not Afghanistan'.

<sup>97</sup> Tucker, CERIA Brief No 12 (Uzbekistan), p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Tolibov, July 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Caleb Weiss, 'Al Qaeda affiliated Uzbek leader assassinated in Syria', *Long War Journal*, 30 April 2017.

Tavhid va Jihod consists largely of Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan and was led by a charismatic ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan known as Abu Saloh [aka Sirojiddin Mukhtarov].<sup>100</sup> In 2015, the brigade ran two websites, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel, on which it posted high-quality videos of battles and speeches by its leader.<sup>101</sup> The group still hosts a significant online library of religious texts in Uzbek.<sup>102</sup>

Despite the presence of these other significant Central Asian actors in Syria, discussion in Central Asia itself continued to be dominated by talk of Islamic State. Official discussion of extremism, whether from Russia or the Central Asian governments, was couched almost entirely in terms of the IS threat, ignoring the more active messaging from the ethnic brigades taking place in Uzbek. IS thus remained the focus of popular awareness in Central Asia, giving the impression that it dominated the Uzbek jihadist movement, even though many Uzbeks who travelled to Syria joined not IS, but the rival al-Qâ'eda-affiliated brigades.<sup>103</sup>

Compared with Uzbek, local language media in the other Central Asian languages showed much less development. While some 1900 Tajikistan citizens joined IS,<sup>104</sup> Tajiks had no dedicated media outlet in their own language. Tajik-language social media commentary and videos were actively circulated, however, publicising the actions of Tajik fighters, and particularly the most famous Tajik commander, Gulmurod Khalimov.

Unlike Uzbeks and Tajiks, Kazakh jihadists in Syria produced few recruiting videos themselves and no 'celebrity' commanders came forward to promote their exploits online.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, most citizens who travelled to Syria were ethnic Uzbeks. Ethnic Kyrgyz also went, sometimes from Russia, but they were not a significant target audience for IS and there was no independent Kyrgyz brigade in Syria. In mid-2015, Al-Furât Media released one video of a single Kyrgyz jihadist, speaking in Kyrgyz and Arabic, who called on Muslims to emigrate to the caliphate. Filmed in a sun-dappled woodland setting, the video contained

100 Interview with Tolibov, July 2019. (Abu Saloh is accused of responsibility for the 2017 terrorist attack in the St Petersburg metro and also an attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in 2016.)

101 Paraszczuk, 'Uzbeks Arrested for Allegedly Trying to Join Al-Qaeda Group in Syria', *RFE/RL*, 6 November 2015.

102 Interview with Tucker, July 2019.

103 Tucker, CERIA Brief *№ 12* (Uzbekistan), p. 3.

104 International Centre for the Study of Radicalization estimate is 1899–2000 (2019); Soufan estimate is 1300 (2017).

no violent scenes and no weapons.<sup>105</sup> It seems likely that few Kyrgyz fighters suitable for propaganda videos were available to Al-Furât to produce more such appeals.

Nasritdinov perhaps sheds light on IS's lack of interest in Kyrgyz recruitment. In a detailed discussion, he reaches the conclusion that Kyrgyz migrants in Russia were generally less susceptible to radicalisation than their Uzbek or Tajik fellow migrants.<sup>106</sup> Along with other experts, he concludes that the Kyrgyz government's relatively liberal religious policy played an important role in this. Religious Kyrgyz are less likely to feel they are being oppressed by a godless state so have less reason to feel angry. Kyrgyzstan's official Islamic religious establishment is also actively involved with migrants in Russia, helping to maintain stabilising community, family, and religious ties.<sup>107</sup> Nasritdinov cites the experience of Kyrgyz migrants who were aware of recruiters visiting and of jihadist propaganda online, but who said the message did not attract them. This discussion would seem to present valuable lessons for other Central Asian republics as their own engagement with the phenomena of jihadism and future extremist groups evolves.

## Conclusion

A full assessment of the impact of jihadist media strategies on Central Asia and the wider post-Soviet region is not yet possible. The Islamic State's territorial caliphate has been eliminated, but IS fighters continue to launch attacks in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Many Russophone Muslims—men, women, and children—remain in detention in Syria. Conflict in the Middle East has become part of the daily information experience for post-Soviet Muslims who are active online. The internet and social media gave the 'jihad' in Syria and Iraq a prominence it would not have had when the Caucasus and Central Asia were sealed inside the controlled information space of the Soviet Union. Extensive post-Soviet and diaspora networks now link Central Asians with other Russian-speaking Muslims in Russia and in Turkey. The internet has brought the distant near.

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<sup>105</sup> Zelin, 'Al-Furât Media Center presents a new video message from The Islamic State: Message to Our People in Kyrgyzstan', *Jihadology*, 25 July 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*, p. 10–14.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

The Caucasus and Central Asia have always been regions of intersecting influences, for reasons of simple geography. The Caucasus lies on the fault line between Christianity and Islam, at the junction of the Turkic, Persian, and Slavic cultural spheres. Central Asia lies in the Eurasian heartland, lodged between competing civilisations—Turkic, Arabic, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and European. Since the end of Soviet isolation, Muslims from Central Asia have been rebuilding ties with the Islamic Middle East. The arrival of conservative religious ideologies and groups—Hizb-ut-Tahrîr, Tablighî Jamâ‘at, Salafism, Islamism—is part of this larger reintegration with the Muslim world.

This process is taking place along a complex pattern of interlinked emerging networks, integrating once disparate and isolated ex-Soviet regions with the wider world along several vectors—post-Soviet networks linking Russophone Muslims; religious networks linking Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East; trade and ethnic ties between Central Asia, Turkey, and Dubai. The evolution and intensification of these networks is facilitated and accelerated by online communications. Just as globalised infotech has revolutionised industry, entertainment, and the media, the formation of new jihadist networks has also been enabled and accelerated.

Seen in this broader context, can it be said that jihadist media engagement was the key factor driving and enabling extremist recruitment from the post-Soviet region on a hitherto unknown scale? The underlying answer is that these emerging communications networks made the Syrian struggle an intrinsic and intimate part of many post-Soviet individuals’ personal, cultural, and information concerns—on the basis of which they chose to travel to Syria. Logistically, the Russia-Caucasus-Turkey networks also made it relatively simple to travel to Syria.

If we compare Afghanistan, the first of the modern transnational jihadist wars, nothing in the news reports that reached Central Asia in the post-Soviet 1990s made that endless conflict appear romantic or idealistic to young Tajiks or Uzbeks in Central Asia, and only a trickle of exiled diehards of the IMU elected to fight there. The still largely impenetrable southern borders also meant that travel to Afghanistan was difficult and dangerous.

Syria was a different matter. By 2014, with hourly updates via smartphone and easy access to the warzone prearranged by compatriots on the ground, Syria became the first modern jihadist conflict that engaged large numbers of

Russophone Muslims at a visceral, emotional level. While jihadist adventurism is as baffling for most Central Asians as it is for Western European or American audiences, for the minority who turned to radicalism for a variety of personal reasons, Syria became an irresistible call to action. Without the daily influence of emotionalised media messaging in Russian and local languages, it is unlikely that IS or the Syrian war would have caught the imagination of so many individuals across the region.

Jihadist media were not the cause of the extremist support. That can be found in the underlying drivers of radicalisation. Most specialists emphasise that online engagement per se is not the cause of extremism, but for people of the digital age, increasingly there is no clear division between the online and offline worlds—communication, social interactions, political and emotional engagement, all happen in a seamless information space saturated with internet accessibility. The online information space has, however, been a significant facilitator and amplifier of the extremist message, enabling the instant global dissemination of Islamist ideas to thousands of individuals at the click of a mouse. Yarlykapov (2019), researching the appeal of the ‘ghostly caliphate’ in the Middle East to Muslims working thousands of kilometres away in remote communities in Siberia, has noted the ‘tremendous effectiveness of the propaganda of ISIS’, delivered via modern communications.<sup>108</sup> Nasritdinov et al. likewise note that the internet, with its highly visual culture of traumatic images, ‘has become the main platform for fundraising, plotting, and recruiting and mobilizing people’.<sup>109</sup> Easily accessible via mobile devices, ‘it was the main channel through which some of our more radically minded interlocutors obtained information that interested them’.<sup>110</sup>

In the same way that earlier advances in communications, from the railway to the telephone, enabled early extremist groups to organise more effectively, recent advances in information technology have vastly facilitated the reach and mobilisation of modern extremist organisations. IS was the first VEO to exploit this new technological facility on a mass scale. The SecDev survey of 2018 concludes that research on the overall impact of social media on extremist recruitment is still inconclusive, and that evidence for its role among Central Asian recruits is largely anecdotal. Social media, it concludes, may play an

108 Akhmet Yarlykapov, ‘Islamic State propaganda in the North Caucasus’ in Fridman *et al.*, p. 221.

109 Nasritdinov *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*, p. 12–13.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

amplifying or supportive role in recruitment, with the primary pathway being ‘the direct relationship between recruiter and recruit’.<sup>111</sup> That said, the fact remains that without social media, many of those direct relationships would not have been established. In a pre-internet age, thousands of Central Asians would not have sought to join a ‘jihad’ in the Middle East. Social media are enabling the emergence of new forms of networking, replacing older forms of organisational membership.<sup>112</sup> Extremist organisations skilled in this new networking are ideally placed to exploit them to engage individuals scattered across the vast territory of the post-Soviet region.

In areas such as Central Asia, where traditional media are weak and access to reliable information is often limited, online modes of engagement are now embedded in the information culture. As a result, Islamic State’s strategic communications have had a profound impact on the lives of thousands of post-Soviet individuals and families. This experience suggests strongly the need to understand better the dynamic interplay between radical ideologies and media engagement in the post-Soviet context, so the region can be better prepared for the future extremist movements that are bound to emerge.

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<sup>111</sup> *Violent Extremism in Central Asia*, p. 24.

<sup>112</sup> McDonald, *Radicalization*, p. 18.

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# SELECTIVE LAW ENFORCEMENT ON THE RUNET AS A TOOL OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Milàn Czerny

## Abstract

The Russian government's policy regarding the internet is often assessed in binary terms. Writers on the topic suppose that the authorities are either on the path to fully controlling the Russian internet (RuNet), or that they are unable to do so, thus suggesting that the technology poses a serious threat to the Kremlin. However, taking into account Russia's legal culture and its widespread practice of 'selective law enforcement' allows us to gain a more nuanced picture of the Russian authorities' strategic use of the online sphere. This article examines the selective application of internet regulations as a tool of strategic communications directed at different online audiences. We show that selective enforcement of the law allows authorities to delineate the boundaries of permissible political speech, shaping citizens' online behaviour while avoiding the potential backlash that could arise from imposing large-scale restrictions on internet users in general.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Russia, RuNet, information control, internet regulations, Russian law*

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## Introduction

An analysis of the literature dealing with Russia's information legislation reveals that the Kremlin's control over the internet through legal regulations is generally assessed from two different perspectives. On the one hand, certain analysts have raised concerns that Russia's adoption of numerous internet regulations over the years will inevitably lead the Kremlin to follow in China's footsteps by engaging in large-scale filtering of content, blocking dissenting voices, limiting access to Western social media platforms, and isolating the Russian internet (RuNet) from the global internet. The Washington-based analyst Nathalie Duffy characterises Russia's establishment of a legal framework to regulate RuNet as 'an initiative to create a domestic equivalent to the "Great Firewall of China" around web content'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, some Western scholars believe that Russia's legal regulations would enable the government to detach 'the Russian Internet from the global infrastructure' and to empower 'the Kremlin to cut off the country's Internet from the rest of the world'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, others deem Russia's imposition of legal regulations to be merely 'futile efforts': 'the government has not been able to establish absolute control over Russia's information space' nor 'completely silence independent voices contradicting the Kremlin's official narrative'.<sup>3</sup> Maria Kravchenko, a researcher at the Russian non-governmental organisation SOVA, stresses that the Russian government has failed to 'stop distribution of information' and to filter content as users can access material deemed illegal through 'multiple other channels'.<sup>4</sup>

While these contradictory views paint opposing pictures of the government's ability to control RuNet, both perspectives presuppose that the Russian government is seeking to implement regulations systematically to block internet access for all dissenting voices. This assumption obscures the reality that 'the Russian legal realm is much more law in action than law on paper'.<sup>5</sup> This is

1 Nathalie Duffy, 'Internet Freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia: The Noose Tightens', *American Enterprise Institute*, 12 January 2015, p. 30.

2 Julien Nocetti, 'Russia's "Dictatorship-of-the-law" Approach to Internet Policy', *Internet Policy Review*, 4(4), (2015), p. 2; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, 'The Digital Dictators. How Technology Strengthens Autocracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 February 2020; Mari Ristolainen, 'Should "RuNet 2020" Be Taken Seriously? Contradictory Views About Cybersecurity Between Russia and the West', *Journal of Information Warfare*, 16(4), (2017): 113–13.

3 Natalya Kovaleva, 'Russian Information Space, Russian Scholarship, and Kremlin Controls', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 4(1), (2018), p. 158.

4 SOVA Center for Information and Analysis is a Moscow based non-profit organisation that deals with issues related to xenophobia in Russia, relations between the churches and secular society, and government misuse of counter-extremism measures; Maria Kravchenko, 'Russian Anti-Extremism Legislation and Internet Censorship', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 46(2), (2019), p. 164.

5 Aryna Dzmityrieva, 'How the Law Really Works: The New Sociology of Law in Russia', *Economic Sociology—The European Electronic Newsletter*, 13(2), (2012), p. 18.

to say that, in Russia, rather than laws being implemented consistently and universally, they are selectively enforced against a limited number of individuals or organisations for the benefit of extra-legal interests.<sup>6</sup> Selective application of the law allows those in power to single out a target that can be made into an example. This not only contains the immediate threat (if there is one) but sends a clear message to sympathisers that unless they keep their own online behaviour in check they risk experiencing similar treatment. This practice helps the regime delineate the informal rules of political conduct in Russian society without resorting to overt, large-scale repression. Beyond a limited number of authors who have raised questions about Russia's selective enforcement of its internet regulations, this practice has received scant attention in the literature.<sup>7</sup> This article seeks to provide a richer interpretation of the intent of Russian internet regulations by examining when they are implemented, how they are enforced, against whom, and how this helps the Russian government.

The sources available to answer these questions are the legislation itself and court decisions accessible in public databases. It also relies on reports produced by the independent Russian NGO Agora, a widely recognised organisation dealing with Russian legal issues, which tracks the enforcement of legislation.

Selective enforcement of internet regulations in Russia constitutes a fundamental tool of Strategic Communications for the Kremlin. Strategic Communications can be defined as 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.<sup>8</sup> Russian authorities exert control over online information to ensure domestic stability and the regime's legitimacy. We will analyse the selective application of legislation as a tool of strategic communications directed at three different audiences active on RuNet: internet intermediaries,<sup>9</sup> non-systemic opposition voices, and common citizens.<sup>10</sup>

6 Håvard Bekken, *Law and Power in Russia: Making Sense of Quasi-Legal Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Vladimir Gel'man, 'The Politics of Fear: How the Russian Regime Confronts Its Opponents', *Russian Politics & Law*, 53 (5/6), (2015): 6–26; Yelina Kvurt, 'Selective Prosecution in Russia-Myth or Reality', *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 15(1), (2007): 127–68.

7 Andrei Soldatov, 'The Taming of the Internet', *Russian Social Science Review*, 58(1), (2017): 39–59; Jaclyn A. Kerr, 'The Russian Model of Internet Control and Its Significance', *Lawrence Livermore National Lab*, (2018): 1–7.

8 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019) p. 46.

9 Internet intermediaries are service providers that enable people to use the internet by giving access to, hosting, transmitting, and indexing content, products, and services. This includes search engines and social media platforms.

10 The term 'non-systemic opposition' in Russia refers to activists who seek a radical change of the regime and engage in political protests while holding no official office. By 'common citizens' I mean individuals who might take part in certain protests around local issues or declining living conditions but are not public figures; they do not engage in more organised political actions or seek to hold an official role.

## The evolution of Russia's regulation of RuNet

In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was widely believed that the internet was too dynamic a technology to be controlled, and that trying to do so would be like 'trying to nail jello to the wall', in the words of America's former President Bill Clinton.<sup>11</sup> However, in the years that followed, states began to assert their power over the online-sphere through various means. China managed to build a resilient centralised network to ensure control over communication; France was one of the first countries to impose legal regulations in the internet realm (see the *Yahoo Case* of 2000).<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, virtually all states have asserted some degree of control over the activities of internet users located in their territories. The European Union (EU) implemented the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018 to regulate users' data and the privacy of European internet users. The United States—once a fierce proponent of internet freedom—is trying to assert its control over foreign platforms such as TikTok by threatening to ban them or impose a change in ownership.<sup>13</sup>

Russia represents a specific case in this worldwide trend of growing control over the digital arena. To grasp how RuNet is shaped by the authorities one must look at how legal regulations are enforced in practice rather than at the 'law on paper'.<sup>14</sup> To understand this pattern and the driving forces behind the adoption of regulations in Russia, it is necessary to follow the evolution of the government's approach to the internet.

Russia was not among the first to impose legal regulations on the internet. The initial lack of early control led to the establishment of multiple connections between RuNet and the global internet; users became accustomed to accessing foreign online services. In the early 2000s, rather than trying to ensure control over the online space, the Russian state supported the development of IT businesses and the country's greater integration into the global digital economy by constructing cross-border fibre-optic cables and encouraging internet use.<sup>15</sup> The growing number of citizens who had access to the internet, enjoyed a large degree of online freedom. Russia online was characterised by its dynamic

11 Bill Clinton, 'Clinton's Words on China: Trade Is the Smart Thing', remarks at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 8 March 2000.

12 Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet: Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 1–10.

13 Justin Sherman, 'Trump's Un-American Failure to Protect Internet Freedom', *Wired*, 22 October 2020.

14 Dzmityriyeva, 'How the Law Really Works'.

15 Marcus Alexander, 'The Internet and Democratization: The Development of Russian Internet Policy', *Demokratizatsiya*, 12(4), (2004): 607–27.

blogosphere, online political debates, cultural discussions, and communications with Russian-speaking bloggers in Ukraine, Armenia, and Israel.<sup>16</sup> Following the *Kursk* submarine disaster and the Beslan tragedy in the early 2000s, the Kremlin increased its control over all information channels, but RuNet largely remained a ‘networked public sphere’ and ‘an alternative to broadcast and print media’.<sup>17</sup>

However, toward the end of the decade, the government began to characterise the internet as an arena of ‘information war’ waged by the West that posed an existential threat to Russian society and to the Putin regime.<sup>18</sup> To combat the use of information ‘to influence the public psyche and destabilise a country from the inside’, the Russian government laid the foundations for increased regulation of the internet. In December 2008, after weaponising the internet during the Georgian war, the Kremlin created ROSKOMNADZOR (the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media) to monitor and implement Russian legislation in the field of communications and information technologies.<sup>19</sup> Initially, this organisation remained passive, as President Dmitry Medvedev, nicknamed the ‘blogger-in-chief’, promoted the use of social networks and the development of the digital economy.<sup>20</sup> However, once Medvedev’s term in office was over, there was a clearly discernible shift in government regulations regarding the internet.

Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 led to large-scale protests in Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square. Tens of thousands of users relied on Facebook pages created by leaders of the non-systemic opposition for mobilisation and coordination.<sup>21</sup> Social media were also considered central in the so-called Arab Springs taking place around the same time.<sup>22</sup>

16 Natalja Konradova, Henrike Schmidt, and Katy Teubener (eds), *Control + Shift: Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006).

17 Masha Lipman, ‘Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin’s Russia’, *Current History*, 104(684), (2005): 319–24; Bruce Ething, Karina Alexanyan, John Kelly, Robert Paris, John Palfrey, and Urs Gasser, ‘[Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization](#)’, *Berkman Center Research Publication*, (2010), p. 33; Gregory Asmolov and Polina Kolozaridi, ‘The Imaginaries of RuNet: The Change of the Elites and the Construction of Online Space’, *Russian Politics*, 2(1), (2017), p. 18.

18 Ofer Fridman, ‘The Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: Conceptual Roots and Politicisation in Russian Academic, Political, and Public Discourse’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2(2), (2017): 61–86.

19 Ronald J. Deibert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, ‘Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War’, *Security Dialogue*, 43(1), (2012): 3–24; Russian Federation, Presidential Administration, ‘[On Public Administration Issues in the Field of Communication, Communication Technologies and Mass Media](#)’, Decree № 1715, Moscow, 3 December 2008.

20 Daphne Skillen, *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 50.

21 Asmolov and Kolozaridi, ‘The Imaginaries of RuNet’.

22 Ibid.

Protests inside and outside Russia marked a turning point in the development of the government's policies towards the internet.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, social movements relying on social media and support from the United States through Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's promotion of the Internet Freedom Agenda, heightened the politicisation of online information as a fundamental threat to the stability of Russian society and the Russian government.<sup>24</sup> This politicisation, according to Ofer Fridman, was aimed at 'preparing the ground for corresponding legislation intended to minimise the perceived threat of external influence on Russian society'.<sup>25</sup>

In the summer of 2012, Konstantin Malofeev, a proponent of Russia's 'anti-Westernism', and lawmaker Elena Mizulina promoted Federal Law № 139-FZ.<sup>26</sup> This piece of legislation called for the creation of a registry of websites containing materials deemed harmful to children's 'health and development'. ROSKOMNADZOR currently requires Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to permanently block access to sites registered on this 'blacklist'.<sup>27</sup> This law was Russia's first step towards greater regulation. As noted by internet governance scholar Milton Mueller: 'emotional appeals to the children have deliberately been exploited as the entering wedge for a broader reassertion of state control over internet content'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in December 2013, Federal Law № FZ-398 was adopted to expand the blacklist.<sup>29</sup> It permitted material deemed extremist or threatening to the public order, such as calls for unauthorised protests, to be included in the registry. The law granted the authorities the power to block such content without a court order; now only a request to ROSKOMNADZOR from the Prosecutor-General's office is sufficient to blacklist websites identified as dangerous under the new definition.

The beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014 and heightened tensions with the West further reinforced the government's politicisation of online information

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23 Anna Klyueva, 'Taming Online Political Engagement in Russia: Disempowered Publics, Empowered State and Challenges of the Fully Functioning Society', *International Journal of Communication*, 10, (2016): 4661–80.

24 Hillary Clinton, 'Conference on Internet Freedom', speech at the Hague, 8 December 2011.

25 Ofer Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare": Resurgence and Politicization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 149.

26 The State Duma, On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development and Other Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation, Federal Law № 139-FZ, Moscow, 28 July 2012.

27 An ISP is a company that provides internet access to users by routing internet traffic, resolving domain names, and maintaining the network infrastructure.

28 Milton Mueller, *Networks and states: The global politics of Internet governance* (MIT Press, 2010), p. 190.

29 The State Duma, *On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information*, Federal Law № 398-FZ. On Amendments to the Federal Law, Moscow, 28 December 2013.

as a major threat to social and political stability.<sup>30</sup> This was reflected in the 2015 National Security Strategy and the 2016 Information Security Doctrine, both of which stressed the risks posed by online information to Russia's 'sovereignty, political and social stability', and 'constitutional order', claiming that some countries were seeking 'to achieve their geopolitical objectives by using information and communication technologies'.<sup>31</sup> Further regulations were thus adopted to respond to this perceived threat of external influence. In 2019, Vladimir Putin signed Federal Law № 90-FZ, which clarifies how to cut RuNet off from the global Internet in the event of an external threat, Federal Law № 31-FZ, which opposes the dissemination of unreliable information, and Federal Law № 30-FZ, which prevents the spread of material deemed disrespectful to the State and to bodies exercising state power.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, while Russia adopted a largely hands-off approach to RuNet in the 2000s, in the 2010s the government increasingly began to regard the unregulated online space as a source of vulnerability that Western powers could exploit to destabilise Russian society. It was this shift that has led many to believe that Russia seeks to 'gain complete control over the Russian population's access to, and activity on, the Internet'.<sup>33</sup> However, because of the connections established early on between RuNet and the global Internet, Russia's technical capacity to isolate has been questioned.<sup>34</sup> But focusing enquiry solely on Russia's technical ability (or lack thereof) to impose large-scale censorship or disconnect RuNet from the global network risks masking the fact that officials have consistently avoided taking such actions.<sup>35</sup> It is highly likely that blocking popular internet platforms, isolating RuNet from the global Internet, and unduly restricting content would

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30 Gregory Asmolov, 'Welcoming the Dragon: The Role of Public Opinion in Russian Internet Regulation', *Internet Policy Observatory*, (2015): p. 9.

31 Russian Federation, *The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 5 December 2016; Russian Federation, Presidential Administration, *On the Russian Federation National Security Strategy*, Decree № 683, Moscow, 31 December 2015.

32 The State Duma, *On Amendments to the Federal law "On Communications" and the Federal law "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection"*, Federal Law № 90-FZ, Moscow, 1 May 2019; State Duma, *On Amendments to Article 15-3 of the Federal Statute on Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information*, Federal Law № 31-FZ, Moscow, 18 March 2019; State Duma, *On Amending the Federal Act "On Information, Information Technologies, and Protection of Information"*, Federal Law № 30-FZ, 18 March 2019.

33 Duffy, 'Internet Freedom', p. 2.

34 Ksenia Ermoshina and Francesca Musiani, 'Migrating Servers, Elusive Users: Reconfigurations of the Russian Internet in the Post-Snowden Era', *Media and Communication*, 5(1), (2017): 42–53.

35 Dmitry Medvedev, 'Gosudarstvo i internet: poyavilis' novyye instituty' [The State and the Internet: New Institutions Have Appeared], 18 April 2012; Dmitry Medvedev, 'Razgovor s Dmitriyem Medvedevym' [Discussion with Dmitry Medvedev], Moscow, 5 December 2019; Vladimir Putin, 'Zasedaniye Soveta Bezopasnosti' [Security Council Meeting], Moscow, 1 October 2014; Vladimir Putin, 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin', Moscow, 20 June 2019.

undermine the legitimacy of the government.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Russia has sought to reach a balance between controlling RuNet and limiting overt, widespread restrictions on internet use.

The selective enforcement of Internet regulations helps the government achieve this balance. The authorities can communicate the boundaries of tolerated behaviour to various audiences active on RuNet by targeting a limited number of users to serve as examples in order to shape online behaviour. This scheme is in line with the broader mechanisms of control practiced in Russia long before the advent of the internet.<sup>37</sup> As Sarah Oates argues, it is necessary to analyse the control of online communication in Russia within the context of its national political system and cultural patterns.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, our investigation into Russia's 'selective enforcement' of internet regulations examines the logic of such a practice and the ways it is enabled by Russia's 'legal culture'.

### Selective law enforcement in Russia

Selectivity in applying the law against political or business opponents is an infamous phenomenon in Russia.<sup>39</sup> However, it is only recently that the practice of 'selective law enforcement' has been conceptualised in depth. Håvard Bækken defines selective law enforcement as a 'mechanism of repression aimed at enforcing informal rules of political conduct through selective legal acts'.<sup>40</sup> He emphasises that the practice is marked by the penetration of informal, unwritten interests in the legal realm to suspend the application of the law or to employ it instrumentally. The law is not applied universally according to the letter of official legal documents and procedures. The selection of persons whom should be indicted is negotiated outside public view based on informal power structures (the judgement of officials as to who may actually pose a threat or obstacle to their exercise of power) to advance extra-legal interests and to communicate through legal means which behaviours will not be tolerated. In states adhering

36 Asmolov, 'Welcoming the Dragon'; Julie Fedor and Rolf Fredheim, "We Need More Clips About Putin, and Lots of Them:" Russia's State-commissioned Online Visual Culture', *Nationalities Papers*, 45(2), (2017): 161–81.

37 Tatiana Borisova and Jane Burbank, 'Russia's Legal Trajectories', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 19(3), (2018): p. 469–508; Vladimir Gel'man, 'The Unrule of Law in the Making: The Politics of Informal Institution Building in Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56(7), (2004): 1021–40; Ella Paneyakh, 'Neformal'nyye instituty i ispol'zovaniye formal'nykh pravil: zakon deistvuyushchii vs zakon primenyayemyi' [Informal institutions and the use of formal rules: acting law vs law in action], *Politicheskaya nauka*, 1, (2003): 33–52.

38 Sarah Oates, *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

39 Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?: Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Richard Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism, and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

40 Bækken, *Law and Power in Russia*, p. 2.

to the rule of law, law enforcement is commonly understood as a means of communicating the idea that legal rules apply to all members of a society, while states that practice selective law enforcement blur the boundaries between formal and informal sanctions; the application of the law is based on legally relevant material but extra-legal interests guide the selection of who is singled out for sanction. For instance, Bækken draws attention to electoral legislation in Russia: registration procedures can be selectively enforced to deny participation to opposition candidates based on minor technical violations, while politicians ‘leaning on patronal structures and informal support from within the system’ do not face similar legal scrutiny.<sup>41</sup> By means of these patterns of enforcement the authorities communicate unwritten rules to the wider public, as citizens easily grasp the double standard and think twice before standing openly against those in power.

Selective law enforcement thus constitutes a powerful tool of communication for those in power. It helps draw boundaries between those within the *systema*, the elites who are allowed to bend or bypass laws, and those on the outside, who must keep their heads down or risk facing the consequences.<sup>42</sup> In the words of Russian political scientist Vladimir Gel'man, the Kremlin has developed a ‘politics of fear’ in which selective repression plays a ‘signalling role, demonstrating to the elites and to ordinary citizens that public displays of disloyalty carry the risk of great losses’.<sup>43</sup> Laws are applied only in a limited number of cases, yet it is precisely the selective enforcement mechanism that communicates to all bystanders that they must respect the unwritten ‘rules of the games’ to avoid being noticed by the authorities and potentially face legal sanctions. The example of the electoral practices mentioned above shows how the ‘rules of the game’ encourage citizens to accept without protestation that, while in theory anyone can be an electoral candidate, in practice only individuals close to the regime or at least who do not pose a direct threat to its rule will be allowed to stand for election in most cases. Hence selective law enforcement is practiced only when deemed necessary and public knowledge of the practice continues to shape the political and social landscape long after an example case has been enforced.

It must be emphasised that the functioning logic of selective law enforcement depends on Russia’s ‘legal culture’—the ‘ideas, values, attitudes, and opinions

.....  
41 Ibid., p. 138.

42 Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?*

43 Vladimir Gel'man, ‘The Politics of Fear’, p. 9.

people in some society [sic] hold with regard to law and the legal system'.<sup>44</sup> Russia's legal culture and the values it embodies form the basis for the selective application of the law to act as a means of strategic communications as we shall see in the examples below.

Russia's leaders understand the law as a fundamental asset of sovereignty that can be manipulated to achieve various objectives, such as limiting political opposition or ensuring control over the economic sphere, rather than as a tool for enforcing healthy constraints.<sup>45</sup> As identified by scholars Tatiana Borisova and Jane Burbank, Russia's legal tradition is marked by 'the primacy of the sovereign as the source of the law' and the instrumentalist approach to the law as a means to advance and protect the interests of Russian elites.<sup>46</sup> Throughout Russia's history, rulers weaponised legislation in cases of 'apparent challenges to principles of Russian sovereignty and rulers who embody it'.<sup>47</sup> Successive Russian leaders have relied on the law to advance their own particular interests, to strengthen and protect their personal power and that of the state, and to avoid social and economic instability. They have employed legislation as a strategic tool of communication to signal and enforce informal rules of political conduct to targeted audiences.

This approach to the law emerged in the Russian Empire and persisted throughout the Soviet Era. Indeed, while important legal reforms under Tsar Alexander II in 1864 introduced principles of equality of all parties under the law, in practice the 'ultimate authority to grant, make, and change law' remained in the hands of rulers.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, following the 1917 revolution, Lenin characterised the law as a weapon and the courts as organs of power.<sup>49</sup> Under Stalin, criminal justice became a crucial tool for instilling terror through the selective prosecution of a very large number of individuals from all walks of life. The 'Moscow Trials', held to prosecute 'Trotskyist-Zinovievist conspirators' between 1936 and 1938, remain the iconic symbol of Soviet selective persecution. A large number of similar but lesser-known show trials took place throughout the 'republics, regions, and even districts of the USSR' so that Stalin could demonstrate his control to all.<sup>50</sup> While Krushchev put an end to the 'crimes of the Stalin Era'

44 Lawrence M. Friedman, 'Is There a Modern Legal Culture?', *Ratio Juris*, 7(2), (1994): p. 118.

45 Anton Oleinik, 'Existing and Potential Constraints Limiting State Servants' Opportunism: The Russian Case', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 24(1), (2008): p. 184.

46 Borisova and Burbank, 'Russia's Legal Trajectories', p. 501.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 480.

48 Borisova and Burbank, 'Russia's Legal Trajectories', p. 477.

49 Jane Burbank, 'Lenin and the Law in Revolutionary Russia', *Slavic Review*, 54(1), (1995): 23–44.

50 Peter H. Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 239.

and adopted the People's Law of 1961, which confirmed that 'all are equal under the law', nevertheless those in power 'used legal actors to cover up their criminal acts, protect friends, or selectively attack rivals'.<sup>51</sup> Under Brezhnev (1964–82), this trend was further reinforced: he left greater room for 'elites' contempt for the constraints of legal rules', while selectively targeting dissenters through high-visibility political trials in his first years in power.<sup>52</sup> The trials of writers Andrei Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel in 1966, and of Alexander Ginzburg and Yuri Galanskov in 1968 signalled the dangers faced by anyone engaged in the publication and dissemination of *samizdat* [dissenting, self-published literature] and *tamizdat* [works published abroad]. In Gel'man's words, such 'surgical repressions of dissenters sent a clear signal to other Soviet citizens: unauthorized public and political activism would cost them dearly'.<sup>53</sup>

The historical trajectory Russia's legal culture has thus set the basis for selective law enforcement under Putin. The turmoil that followed the fall of the Soviet Union under Boris Yeltsin's presidency provided grounds for Putin to push forward legal reforms and the centralisation of power. This brought much-needed stability to the country and improved the provision of justice in mundane or non-political cases.<sup>54</sup> However, the centralisation of justice and changes in law-making also created new opportunities for selective prosecution and further entrenched the seamy side of Russia's legal culture. As William Parlett argues, Putin's legal reforms provided him with a 'a tool for ensuring that he could punish those who did not comply with his informal rules of the game through selective prosecution'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, despite Putin's commitment that law would be restored and imposed according to universalist principles, selective law enforcement remained central to Russia's governance.

This was most notably exemplified in the high-profile prosecution of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. This oligarch likely breached certain laws by relying on tax avoidance schemes and other dubious means to build his wealth in the 1990s, a period characterised by chaos and unaccountable authority in Russia.<sup>56</sup>

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51 Bækken, *Law and Power in Russia*, p. 46.

52 Robert Sharlet, 'Soviet Legal Reform in Historical Context', *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 28(1), (1990): p. 6.

53 Gel'man, 'The Politics of Fear', p. 14.

54 Kathryn Hendley, *Everyday Law in Russia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017).

55 William Parlett, 'Putin's Artful Jurisprudence', *The National Interest* № 123, (January/February 2013): p. 36.

56 Richard Sakwa, 'Putin and the Oligarchs', *New Political Economy*, 13(2), (2008): p. 187.

However, it is widely believed that he was singled out because of his political ambitions, as similar individuals close to the Kremlin did not invite the same legal scrutiny.<sup>57</sup>

Putin relied strategically on legal means to shape and communicate the new 'rules of the game' to oligarchs who became aware that they, like Khodorkovsky, would face sanctions unless they stayed out of politics.<sup>58</sup> Hence, during Putin's first term, 'as in Soviet days, the law was used instrumentally';<sup>59</sup> as Richard Sakwa writes, 'in attacking a few oligarchs he was disciplining the rest'.<sup>60</sup> The Khodorkovsky case demonstrates selective law enforcement logic and reflects enduring trends in Russia's legal culture.

While selectivity in implementing the law has been discussed in terms of Russia's election procedures, tax schemes, and the regulation of NGOs, this practice has been overlooked in our understanding of the Russian government's control over RuNet.<sup>61</sup> Taking into consideration Russia's legal culture and widespread practice of selective law enforcement offers a more nuanced understanding of the Kremlin's strategy of control than the 'traditional' binary assessment of Russia's internet legislation. The following section will show that the Russian government has managed to adapt existing legal patterns to the online sphere.

### The selective implementation of internet regulations

We can consider the selective enforcement of internet regulations in Russia and its usefulness as a tool of strategic communications as it relates to three different targeted audiences: internet intermediaries, non-systemic opposition, and common citizens.

#### *Internet Intermediaries as a Targeted Audience*

Internet intermediaries, i.e. search engines, content hosts, and social media platforms, are a focal point of control for governments, as these actors manage internet users' communications and have access to their data.<sup>62</sup> The

57 Jonathan D. Greenberg, 'The Kremlin's Eye: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prokuratura in the Russian Authoritarian Tradition', *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 45(1), (2009): 1–50.

58 Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 200.

59 Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's choice*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 150.

60 Sakwa, 'Putin and the Oligarchs', p. 189.

61 Håvard Bækken, 'Selections Before Elections: Double Standards in Implementing Election Registration Procedures in Russia?', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 48(1), (2015): 61–70; Stephen Fortescue, *Russia's Oil Barons and Metal Magnates: Oligarchs and the State in Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 162; Maria Tysiachniouk, Svetlana Tulueva, and Laura A. Henry, 'Civil Society Under the Law 'On Foreign Agents': NGO Strategies and Network Transformation', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(4), (2018): 615–37.

62 Laura DeNardis, *The Global War for Internet Governance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Kremlin's decision to forbid access to the professional social networking website LinkedIn based on Federal Law № 242-FZ<sup>63</sup> exemplifies the practice of selective implementation. This piece of legislation requires internet intermediaries that process and collect the personal data of Russian citizens to store this information on servers physically located in the territory of the Russian Federation. Failure to comply can lead to the imposition of a fine and the decision to block services. The law introduced a new blacklist, the *Registry of Violators of the Privacy of Individual Personal Information*, which allows ROSKOMNADZOR, following a court order, to block access to websites that process personal data in violation of Russia's data protection laws. The Kremlin adopted this law in 2014 in response to public outrage provoked by Edward Snowden's revelation concerning the existence of a global surveillance programme conducted by the US National Security Agency (NSA). Following the revelations, Sergey Zhelezniak, a Russian MP, underlined the need to 'seriously protect both the information of our citizens and the information of our country' by requiring Western internet intermediaries that collect and analyse information on Russian users to relocate the servers that store this information onto Russian soil.<sup>64</sup> According to Zhelezniak, this would allow Russia to protect its 'digital sovereignty' and prevent US government surveillance.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the arguments of Russian officials, this measure does nothing to increase users' privacy. Legal scholars Anupam Chander and Uyên P. Lê stress that data localisation laws may, in fact, ease the logistical burdens of foreign intelligence companies by creating a 'honey pot' as users' information is centralised in one country.<sup>66</sup> The Snowden case was considered to be merely an excuse for Russia to increase its control over data and its surveillance potential.<sup>67</sup> By moving their servers onto Russian soil, Western platforms would be more vulnerable to censorship as they would have to follow Russian legislation to continue operating.<sup>68</sup> The adoption of the law also raised concerns that it would lead to the 'end of Facebook' or the 'end of Twitter' for Russian users, as the government obtained

63 The State Duma, *On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding Clarifying the Personal Data Processing Procedure in Information and Telecommunication Networks*, Federal Law № 242-FZ, Moscow, 21 July 2014.

64 Sergey Zhelezniak, 'My dolzhny obespechit' «tsifrovoy suverenitet» nashey strany' [We must ensure the 'digital sovereignty' of our country], *Ekonomika i Biznes*, 19 June 2013.

65 Ibid.

66 Anupam Chander and Uyên P. Lê, 'Data Nationalism', *Emory Law Journal*, 64(3), (2014): 677–740.

67 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

68 Tatevik Sargsyan, 'Data Localization and the Role of Infrastructure for Surveillance, Privacy, and Security', *International Journal of Communication*, 10, (2016): 2221–37.

a legal tool to shut down foreign social media by including them in a registry.<sup>69</sup>

Russian internet activist Ivan Begtin does not see Federal Law № 242-FZ as a protection but as ‘yet another tool for controlling the Internet’, which reveals that Russia is ‘moving very fast down the Chinese path’.<sup>70</sup> Following the adoption of the law, investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov warned that Russia may succeed in ‘splintering the web’ and ‘breaking off from the global internet’.<sup>71</sup>

However, five years after adopting the law, these bleak predictions were not realised, as the law has been only selectively enforced. It went into force in September 2015 and ROSKOMNADZOR began to verify the compliance of Western internet intermediaries in 2016. In August 2016, the Tagansky District Court of Moscow ordered ROSKOMNADZOR to include only one site, the professional social-networking platform LinkedIn, in the *Registry of Violators of the Privacy of Individual Personal Information* and to take measures to limit access to the platform, as it had failed to relocate its servers.<sup>72</sup> In November 2016, Russian users could no longer access the platform. By 2020, however, only a few Western companies had decided to comply with the law, and, aside from LinkedIn, ROSKOMNADZOR has blocked none of the other internet intermediaries that have yet to respect the legislation. Three years after LinkedIn was blocked, the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook were fined 3 000 RUB (42 USD) each.<sup>73</sup> They were then granted an additional nine months to transfer the data of Russian citizens onto servers within the territory of the Russian Federation. It was only later that ROSKOMNADZOR began administrative proceedings to impose a 4 million RUB (55,000 USD) fine against each of the two social networks.<sup>74</sup> The imposition of such small penalties, compared to the costs of complying with the law and to the radical step taken against LinkedIn, is unlikely to provoke any changes in Facebook or Twitter’s data localisation. Similarly, Google has yet to store Russian users’ data on servers inside Russia, but it has not faced any sanctions for its non-compliance with the legal requirements.<sup>75</sup> Thus, as summarised by Leonid Volkov,

69 Andrey Tselikov, ‘The Tightening Web of Russian Internet Regulation’, *Berkman Center Research Publication*, № 2014/15, (2014): 1–20.

70 Maria Makutina, ‘[Tsifrovoy suverenitet](#)’ [Digital sovereignty], *Gazeta.ru*, 19 June 2013.

71 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, ‘[Russia’s Surveillance State](#)’, *World Policy Journal*, 2 March 2015.

72 Russian Federation, Tagansky District Court, ‘[Case decision № 02-3491/2016](#)’, Moscow, 4 August 2016.

73 Russian Federation, Tagansky District Court, ‘[Case decision № 12-0513/2019](#)’, Moscow, 8 May 2019.

74 Russian Federation, Tagansky District Court, ‘[Case decision № 12-0449/2020](#)’, Moscow, 16 March 2020.

75 [Google Data Center Locations](#), 2020; Tatyana Lokot, ‘[Google Denies Russian Media Claims on Data Localization Move](#)’, *Global Voices*, 13 April 2015.

a co-founder of the Russian organisation Internet Protection Society: ‘[T]here was absolutely no difference between how LinkedIn and how Facebook stored and dealt with the personal data of their Russian users. The only thing that made a difference was politics.’<sup>76</sup>

This prompts the question of why only LinkedIn was selected and how that decision helps the Russian government control RuNet. Volkov argues convincingly that LinkedIn was carefully selected by ROSKOMNADZOR: ‘[LinkedIn is] a big brand, with an even bigger one behind it (Microsoft)’. So ‘it was chosen to scare off larger players’.<sup>77</sup> According to this interpretation, the Kremlin selectively implemented Law № 242-FZ against LinkedIn, not to force other intermediaries to comply with server localisation requirements but to communicate a message concerning the necessity of cooperating with the authorities. In a manner reminiscent of the Khodorkovsky case, blocking LinkedIn signalled to other social networking platforms that they could face similar sanctions should they oppose the government. The implicit message was that they must comply with certain requests from the Kremlin and suppress specific undesired content—for instance, calls for unauthorised protests or ‘information expressing clear disrespect for the official state symbols of Russia’—if they wish to stay out of trouble.<sup>78</sup> Following the selective enforcement of the law against LinkedIn, Western internet firms ‘started to express more willingness to engage in dialogue with Russian regulators’ and comply with certain of their demands.<sup>79</sup> In recent years, Western firms’ transparency reports indicate a sharp rise in requests sent by Russian authorities to restrict access or remove content and in the positive answers given by companies to such requests.<sup>80</sup>

Selective enforcement has thus helped the Kremlin find a sweet spot where they both have the means to pressure Western internet intermediaries and at the same time can fulfil Russian citizens’ demands for access to Western services and thus avoid a potential popular backlash. Indeed, despite widely publicised threats, the Russian government has not cut access to platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, which have been used primarily by hundreds

<sup>76</sup> Leonid Volkov, ‘[Why Are Western Internet Companies Cooperating with the Putin Regime to Censor the Web?](#)’, *Open Democracy*, 9 April 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> ROSKOMNADZOR, ‘[Po trebovaniyu ROSKOMNADZORA YouTube ogranichil dostup k roliku s oskorbitel'nymi deystviyami v adres gosudarstvennogo flaga Rossii](#)’ [At the demand of ROSKOMNADZOR YouTube limited access to an offensive video against the national flag of Russia], 19 August 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Alexander Saveliev, ‘Russia’s New Personal Data Localization Regulations: A Step Forward or a Self-imposed Sanction?’, *Computer Law & Security Review*, 32(1), (2016): p. 145.

<sup>80</sup> Google, ‘[Transparency Report: Government Requests to Remove Content](#), 2020; Twitter, ‘[Transparency Report: Russia Removal Requests](#)’, 2020.

of thousands of apolitical Russian citizens for entertainment and routine communications since the mid-2000s. According to internet activist and media scholar Ethan Zuckerman's 'cute cat theory of digital activism', governments have little interest in blocking popular platforms used by citizens for non-political activities, as this would risk undermining the regime's stability and legitimacy.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to imposing sanctions on LinkedIn, which was, according to Volkov, used only by a limited number of people who were 'part of the white-collar audience and unlikely to march in the streets against internet censorship', the closure of popular Western platforms would likely alienate much of the population, politicise those most affected, and fuel opposition against the government.<sup>82</sup> Hence, the selective application of the law has helped the government limit loss of legitimacy and communicate to Western platforms that they must cooperate with the Kremlin.

### *Non-Systemic Opposition as a Targeted Audience*

In addition to internet intermediaries, the government has also focused its activities on controlling non-systemic opposition to government policies in the online sphere. The following section examines the selective application of the law directed at this second audience. An analysis of the authorities' decision to block an online voting project launched by dissenters will show how the government uses this tool to signal to its most vocal critics the boundaries of tolerated online political activities, and to circumscribe the behaviour and aspirations of the opposition's wider audience on RuNet.

In November 2018, the leader of the non-systemic opposition, Alexei Naval'ny, launched his new online project, the 'smart voting' strategy website, *2019.vote*, designed to predict the candidate most likely to win in an election against a member of the governing party United Russia (UR), based on opinion polls and previous election results, in each single-member district (SMD). The goal was for all citizens registered on the website to gather their votes for the endorsed candidate and defeat UR. Naval'ny's smart voting sought to 'leverage digital technologies to circumvent problems of coordination and to exploit the vulnerabilities of the hybrid political system'.<sup>83</sup> However, a few weeks following the launch of *2019.vote* in December 2018, ROSKOMNADZOR filed a lawsuit

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81 Ethan Zuckerman, 'Cute Cats to the Rescue?', in *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, D. Allen and J. S. Light, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015): 131–54.

82 Volkov, 'Why are Western Internet Companies Cooperating?'

83 Jan Matti Dollbaum, 'Outsmarting Electoral Authoritarianism? Alexey Naval'ny's "Smart Voting" in Moscow and Beyond', *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 239, 26 September 2019: p. 7

to include the smart voting website in the *Registry of Violators of the Privacy of Individual Personal Information* and to block access to it because Naval'ny's election technology platform allegedly did not meet the legal requirements for the protection of online personal data. As previously mentioned, Federal Law № 242-FZ requires websites to store Russian citizens' data on Russian territory and allows ROSKOMNADZOR to suspend access to sites that violate data privacy laws. The text of the court's official decision stated that Naval'ny's website relied on two services to evaluate website traffic and analyse user behaviour (Google Analytics and Yandex Metrica), 'whose servers are located in the United States'.<sup>84</sup> The court also added that the website did not notify users that their personal information was being collected, did not ask users for their consent, and did not include a document declaring a privacy policy.<sup>85</sup> Based on these violations of Federal Law № 242-FZ, ROSKOMNADZOR included *2019.vote* in the registry, which led to the website being blocked.

This legal decision constitutes a clear case of selective law enforcement. We demonstrated above that the requirement for storing Russian citizens' data on servers located in Russia has been only selectively implemented. According to this criterion, a large share of websites available to Russian users should be included in the registry. Furthermore, Russian bloggers revealed that the government's official websites were committing similar privacy 'violations' to those of Naval'ny's project.<sup>86</sup> For instance, as their source codes verify, the website of the State Duma relies on Yandex Metrics, and the website of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation employs Yandex services and the Google Analytics system.<sup>87</sup> Both of these official Russian government websites rely on services 'whose servers are located in the United States', do not include a privacy policy document, and do not warn users about data collection nor ask for their consent to collect personalized information. Similarly, while UR has published a privacy policy document, its website does not ask users if they allow Facebook to process their personal data, despite the social media platform collecting and storing their personalised statistics and analytics on servers located in the US.<sup>88</sup> These sites remain accessible, despite violating the

84 Russian Federation, Tagansky district court, '[Case Decision № 02-4261/2018](#)', Moscow, 19 December 2018.  
85 Ibid.

86 Alexander V. Litreev, '[Zakon dlya vsekh yedin—ROSKOMNADZOR i sayt «Umnoye Golosovaniye»](#)' [The law is the same for everyone—ROSKOMNADZOR and the site "Smart Voting"], Alexander V. Litreev's Blog on *Medium*, 19 December 2018.

87 Russian Federation, [State Duma Page Source Code](#), 2020; Russian Federation, [Server of the State Bodies of the Russian Federation Page Source Code](#), 2020.

88 Russian Federation, [Edinaya Rossiya Page Source Code](#), 2020.

same laws that led to the shutdown of Naval'ny's political project.

The selective application of Law № 242-FZ against Naval'ny's project allowed the Kremlin to limit the opposition's capacity to promote an anti-UR voting scheme before the elections and thus its capacity to threaten the state's grip on power. This selective implementation of the law communicated that, while Naval'ny's popular YouTube videos were left untouched, if the regime feels threatened it can always use existing legislation to limit any meaningful online projects launched by the opposition.

Naval'ny's position can be compared to that of LinkedIn in the previous example. As the most popular figure of the non-systemic opposition, Naval'ny constitutes a 'convenient symbol' the authorities can target to communicate messages to the opposition's audience concerning acceptable political behaviour. As Gel'man explains, selective enforcement of the law against political opponents serves to 'keep the opposition isolated and limits its capacity to grow: [It] is aimed [...] not so much at punishing the regime's enemies (although these purposes are present in some cases), but at preventing the spread of hostile activity beyond the (usually very narrow) circle of direct opponents'.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, while the opposition and its supporters may succeed in bypassing the blocking of their website through technical means, those who are contemplating joining the non-systemic opposition can grasp the double standard at play, interpret the decision to block Naval'ny's website as politically motivated, and thus be discouraged from joining the non-systemic opposition due to fear of sanctions. The precise impact of this practice on citizens' willingness to join the opposition cannot be estimated, as citizens who have been thus deterred refrain from voicing their opinions. Still, Gel'man suggests that 'under those circumstances, the circle of dissenters remained narrow and had no real opportunity to expand their ranks'.<sup>90</sup> Using selective law enforcement to limit projects that might influence election results allows the regime to minimise the impact of the non-systemic opposition's online activities and to communicate, to precisely the audience most likely to challenge it, state-sanctioned values associated with 'managed democracy', in which elections constitute a means to reinforce the regime's legitimacy rather than an opportunity for citizens to contest the leadership of the incumbent.

### *Citizenry as a Targeted Audience*

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89 Gel'man, 'The Politics of Fear', p. 9.

90 Ibid., p. 14.

In 2018–19 there was growing discontent in the Russian countryside and the people began voicing their demands for political change. This led more citizens to publish their criticisms of the government and local authorities on social media.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, the government decided to employ selective legislation also towards ordinary citizens to shape their online behaviour. The pattern of enforcement of Federal Law № 30-FZ<sup>92</sup> exemplifies the use of selective implementation of the law to control the third audience, the common citizens.

Federal Law № 30-FZ prohibits the dissemination of online information considered to be ‘indecent expressions and obvious disrespect towards society, the state, official state symbols and the constitution of the Russian Federation, and bodies exercising state authority in the Russian Federation’. For posting such content, violators face fines of up to 100 thousand RUB (1,400 USD) and 300 thousand RUB (4,200 USD) in the case of a repeated offence. Additionally, following a request from the Prosecutor General, ROSKOMNADZOR may demand the deletion of information considered to be indecent.

This piece of legislation was hastily adopted. Deputy Andrei Klishas introduced it in the State Duma in December 2018, and it came into force only four months later, in March 2019. This left no time to respond to criticisms that were repeatedly raised by the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (SPCh), the consultative body to the President of the Russian Federation tasked with assisting the presidency in guaranteeing and protecting human rights and freedoms in Russia. The SPCh demanded the rejection of the bill on the grounds that the vague definition of what constitutes ‘indecent expressions and obvious disrespect’ leaves ‘a very high degree of discretion’ in the hands of law enforcers. Consequently, ‘it can be applied as one desires’, and opens the door for violation of the principles of equality under the law.<sup>93</sup> Senators at the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian Parliament, voted that ‘each court, depending on the circumstances, will decide for itself what an indecent form is and what a decent form is’.<sup>94</sup> Such public concern suggests that, from its

91 Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, ‘Russians’ Growing Appetite for Change’, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, January 2020.

92 The State Duma, *On Amending the Federal Act “On Information, Information Technologies, and Protection of Information*, Federal Law № 30-FZ, 18 March 2019.

93 Russian Federation, Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, ‘[V SPCH raskritikovali zakony o feykovykh novostyakh i oskorblenii vlasti](#)’ [SPCh criticizes the law on fake news and on insulting authority], 16 May 2019; Russian Federation, Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, ‘[Ekspertnyye zaklyucheniya](#)’ [Expert opinions], 11 March 2019.

94 Russian Federation, Federation Council, ‘[454 zasedaniye Soveta Federatsii](#)’ [Meeting №454 of the Federation Council], 13 March 2019.

very conception, Law № 30-FZ was designed to be selectively enforced.

Following the first prosecution under Law № 30-FZ, leaders of the non-systemic opposition and their supporters posted hundreds of messages that could potentially be considered illegal according to that piece of legislation.

A cursory look at Russian social media reveals that everyday users post messages that can be considered ‘indecent expressions towards bodies exercising state authority in the Russian Federation’. However, according to the Russian NGO Agora, in the first 18 days after Law № 30-FZ came into force, only 45 users in 29 regions were charged.<sup>95</sup> Those fined were generally neither activists nor public figures, but ordinary citizens from rural areas voicing their dissatisfaction with the authorities online because of issues such as declining living conditions. For instance, following a reform increasing the retirement age in Russia, a pensioner from the Krasnodar krai was fined 70 000 RUB (980 USD) for posting ‘Vladimir Putin is a state criminal! Thief and impostor Vladimir Putin! Get out!’ on the Russian social media platform VKontakte.<sup>96</sup> While the law theoretically applies to a broad range of indecent expressions directed towards state symbols and bodies exercising state authority, up to 80% of the fines imposed have been for posts directed at Vladimir Putin, further demonstrating selectivity in the application of the law.<sup>97</sup>

In several cases, the law was enforced against users who posted messages insulting the authorities in concert with offline protests. For instance, one of the first fines imposed for indecent expression concerned a citizen from the rural oblast of Vologda who insulted Vladimir Putin after taking part in protests against pension reforms.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the largest proportion of related cases (15%) prosecuted under this law took place in the Arkhangelsk oblast, following protests against the construction of a waste dump.<sup>99</sup> Extra-legal criteria penetrated the legal realm, as the law was selectively enforced against users after they took part in protests. Selective prosecutions for indecent expression

95 Stanislav Seleznev, ‘[Votum neuvazheniya prezidentu: pervoye polugodiye «zakona Klisasha»](#)’ [Vote of disrespect to the president: first six months of the «Klisha’s law»], *Agora Report*, 30 September 2019, 1–19.

96 Russian Federation, Dinskoy District Court, ‘[Resheniye po administrativnomu delu](#)’ [Decision concerning an administrative case], Dinskaya, 12 December 2019.

97 Ibid.

98 OVD-info, ‘[Na zhitelya Vologodskoy oblasti sostavili protokol o neuvazhenii k vlasti](#)’ [A protocol for disrespect toward the authorities was drawn up against a resident of the Vologda Oblast], *OVD.info.org*, 15 May 2019; Russian Federation, Verkhovansky District, ‘[Press-sluzhba](#)’ [Press Service], Verkhovazhye, 6 July 2019.

99 Seleznev, ‘[Votum neuvazheniya prezidentu](#)’, p. 15.

constituted a means to communicate to protesters that they should refrain from engaging in demonstrations and criticisms against the regime.

While there seems to be a degree of coherence and regularity in the selective enforcement of the law, one should be wary of assuming that these patterns are always the result of a coherent pre-determined strategy established by the highest authorities and implemented by lower echelons. Selective law enforcement should not be thought of as always being part of a ‘coordinated master plan’, but rather as a more or less uncoordinated set of actions that are based on a shared legal culture.<sup>100</sup> The selection of certain citizens may well be arbitrary in certain cases and local authorities may try to instrumentalise the law for their personal interests. For example, the mayor of Troitsk, a town in the Chelyabinsk oblast, has used the law to prosecute an individual who insulted him online.<sup>101</sup> The increase in cases initiated by mayors or governors led the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs (MVD) to intervene and send recommendations to the heads of the regional branches of the MVD, ordering them to report all cases concerning indecent expressions to the ministry’s main directorate and to take control of them personally.<sup>102</sup> This reveals that the highest authorities may not be able to manipulate the law as they desire. In this instance, the government sought to regain control over the legislation following its instrumentalisation by lower echelons of authority.

Despite a temporary loss of control, the selective enforcement of this law directed at common citizens represents a powerful tool of strategic communications used by the state to limit the expression of negative public opinion on RuNet without resorting to heavy-handed censorship by technical means. First, a larger number of users would potentially relate to those prosecuted when the legislation is applied to opinions posted by common citizens rather than in instances involving leaders of the non-systemic opposition. Citizens who identify with those prosecuted are motivated to abstain from online dissent and are thus depoliticised.

Second, it is strategically prudent for the Kremlin to target individuals located in specific regions. The regime might face a bigger risk of backlash when it targets individuals living in Moscow or St Petersburg who have greater opportunities for

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100 Bakken, *Law and Power in Russia*, p. 187.

101 Russian Federation, Troitsky City Court, ‘[Case decision № 5-50/2019](#)’, Troitsky, 5 June 2019.

102 Russian Federation, Ministry of Internal Affairs, ‘[O napravlenii metodicheskikh rekomendatsiy po delam o neuvazhenii k vlasti](#)’ [On the direction of methodical recommendations concerning cases of disrespect toward the authorities], № 1/7615, 1 July 2019.

making their voices heard and to contest legal decisions than pensioners isolated in rural towns. Moreover, citizens are more likely to be influenced by cases brought against people from their own regions to whom they can relate, rather than by cases brought against individuals living on the other side of the vast country or enjoying very different socio-economic conditions in Russia's capital.

Because citizens identify with their regional peers the authorities can use local cases to communicate to internet users dispersed throughout Russia that they should refrain from online dissent. The maximum fine for transgressing Law № 30-FZ is up to seven times the average monthly salary in certain area—a clear incentive for users to abstain from insulting the Kremlin.

Third, legal vagueness concerning what constitutes 'indecent expression and obvious disrespect' plays a fundamental role in fostering restraint on the part of Russian citizens. In their study of authoritarian practices on the internet, legal theorists Bryan Druzin and Gregory S. Gordon write: 'the precise ambit of permissible speech is left unclear so as to maximize the range within which people voluntarily restrain their behaviour online, creating a chilling effect on public speech'.<sup>103</sup> The line between legitimate criticism and indecent expression is left ill-defined, creating uncertainty and thus further incentives for citizens to refrain altogether from online criticism directed at the authorities.

Finally, to further ensure that the selective use of the law functions as a means of Strategic Communications, prosecutions for 'indecent expression and obvious disrespect' are often widely publicised in regional newspapers and on television channels under the control of the authorities. For instance, in Krasnodar Krai, 'Kuban News', the official newspaper of the regional administration and the most read in the region, has consistently reported on legal sanctions for 'obvious disrespect', as in the example of the pensioner previously mentioned.<sup>104</sup> Such publicising of selective enforcement serves to amplify the signalling and deterring effect created by selective enforcement of the law.<sup>105</sup> This helps authorities get their message through to a vast audience spread throughout the territory of the Russian Federation. Hence, without large-scale restriction,

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<sup>103</sup> Bryan Druzin and Gregory S. Gordon, 'Authoritarianism and the Internet', *Law & Social Inquiry*, 43(4), (2018): p. 1431.

<sup>104</sup> Kubanskie Novosti, 'Pensioner iz Krasnodarskogo kraya oshtrafoyan na 70 tysyach za oskorbleniye prezidenta Putina' [A pensioner from the Krasnodar Krai was fined 70 thousands for insults against President Putin], 25 February 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Kirill Rogov, 'The Art of Coercion: Repressions and Repressiveness in Putin's Russia', *Russian Politics*, 3(2), (2018): 151–74.

which has the potential to damage government legitimacy, selectively enforcing Federal Law № 30-FZ against ordinary citizens represents a particularly helpful tool of Strategic Communications for the Kremlin to control and shape this audience's behaviour on RuNet.

## Conclusion

The debate that followed the adoption of numerous internet regulations in Russia around 2013, concerning the Kremlin's technical capacity to implement its legislation in full and limit all dissenting speech on RuNet, fails to take into account the more subtle ways in which the authorities shape the online sphere. In accordance with Russia's enduring legal culture, the Kremlin uses legislation selectively as a tool of Strategic Communications to control RuNet, communicating to various audiences the boundaries of tolerated behaviour in the online sphere. Through selective enforcement of existing legislation, the Kremlin 1) signalled to Western intermediaries that they must cooperate with the authorities, 2) suppressed a potentially threatening political project promoted by the non-systemic opposition and surgically delineated the limits of activists' online behaviour, and 3) deterred ordinary citizens from all walks of life throughout the vast territory of Russia from freely expressing their criticisms of the government online. The strategy of selective enforcement allows the government to maintain unrestricted access to the internet for the vast majority of citizens, while simultaneously ensuring their acceptance of the adoption of further regulations and keeping popular backlash to a minimum.<sup>106</sup> In sum, internet regulations are used selectively by the government to achieve its objective of communicating the unwritten 'rules of the game' for online political behaviour to various audiences while limiting the risks of popular backlash in the contested environment that is RuNet.

As Strategic Communications is 'a holistic approach to communication based on values',<sup>107</sup> selective enforcement of RuNet regulations must be conceived holistically as a tool of the Russian government within the broader legal culture, together with other tools at the Kremlin's disposal that might further shape users' behaviour, such as government surveillance or the mass dissemination of pro-government content.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Asmolov, ['Welcoming the Dragon'](#).

<sup>107</sup> Bolt and Haiden, NATO Strategic Communications Terminology, p. 46.

<sup>108</sup> Jonathon W. Penney, 'Internet Surveillance, Regulation, and Chilling Effects Online: A Comparative Case Study', *Internet Policy Review*, 6(2), (2017): 1–39; Seva Gunitsky, 'Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability', *Perspectives on Politics*, 13(1), (2015): 42–54.

One question remains: how effective is Russia's use of internet regulations as a tool of strategic communications? It is difficult to isolate the effect of this strategy from other dynamics that might protect the legitimacy of the regime and those that might influence the propensity of citizens to oppose the Kremlin both on and offline. In the past decade the Kremlin has successfully employed legal practices to mark and enforce the boundaries of permissible political behaviour, while leaving the online sphere seemingly unrestricted and thus avoiding public backlash. It is perhaps no coincidence that the largest opposition movement coordinated online remains the 2011 Bolotnaya protest, an event that just preceded the introduction of stricter internet regulations on public speech. Contrary to the cyber-utopianist view prevalent in the wake of this protest, few would now argue that the expansion of internet use and Russian citizens' access to foreign social media represent an existential threat to the Russian regime. On the contrary, the case can be made that the Kremlin now benefits from the openness of the online sphere. The regime enhances its legitimacy by leaving 'enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence' while it can reassert, through the selective use of the law, the boundaries of this 'space of freedom' when its grip on power seems threatened.<sup>109</sup>

Russia's selective enforcement of the law is nothing other than careful management of the online sphere by targeting the few to discipline the rest. While Russia's ability to shape RuNet has been robust so far, small shifts in public perception regarding permissible limits of online expression and the need to respect the rules communicated by the leadership could rapidly 'proliferate into large-scale torrents of uncensored speech'.<sup>110</sup> The future of RuNet depends to a great extent on various audiences' willingness and capacity to break the yoke of fear and boundaries of online political conduct communicated and enforced through selective application of the law.

### Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the support and helpful feedback of Dr Ofer Fridman.

109 Rebecca MacKinnon, 'Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China', *Public Choice*, 134(1/2), (2008), p. 33.

110 Druzin and Gordon, 'Authoritarianism and the Internet', p. 27.

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# CAPITALISM, COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE CORPS: IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY GUARD AND THE COMMUNICATIONS ECONOMY

**Monika Gill**

## **Abstract**

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have consolidated an economic empire, acting as a corporation similar to AT&T or Vodafone. Yet, despite the prominence of the IRGC in the Iranian economy, few studies have engaged directly with the topic, and fewer still have examined the forces motivating its involvement.

This article considers the extent to which the IRGC relied on the Iranian communications economy under former President Ahmadinejad to justify and promote its strategic narrative. Defining 'communications economy' as the system of ownership and distribution relating to communications infrastructure, the article investigates the alignment between strategic narratives and military ownership of communications infrastructure. The article argues that the IRGC relied on the communications economy as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence; but also, beyond ideological concerns, the IRGC as an opportunistic institution became reliant on the communications economy as a source of capital gain.

**Keywords**—*strategic communication, strategic communications, IRGC, strategic narrative, communications economy, infrastructure, military ownership*

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## Introduction

In Iran, it is not private corporations such as AT&T, Verizon, or Vodafone that dominate the economy. Rather, it is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is an organ of the Iranian state, and an intriguing one. Regarded as Iran's 'premier military branch',<sup>1</sup> the Revolutionary Guard is at once a 'security service, an intelligence organisation, [and] a social and cultural force'.<sup>2</sup> Established by order of Ayatollah Khomeini at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the IRGC acts as a Praetorian Guard to the Supreme Leader and to the political system of the Islamic Republic. Yet, the activities of the Guard have expanded beyond their initial mandate. They have emerged as an economic oligarchy, forming a military-business elite that dominates approximately one-third of Iran's economy.<sup>3</sup> One could posit that the ideological army are in fact 'creating [their] own versions of GE, Bechtel, AT&T and Goldman Sachs'.<sup>4</sup>

Our understanding of Iran has been dominated by the nuclear issue. In viewing Iran through a nuclear paradigm, we neglect to consider equally concerning aspects of the Iranian polity, such as the IRGC's dominant position within the economy. Despite the prominence of the IRGC in post-revolutionary Iran, few studies have engaged directly with the topic. Rather, the IRGC is treated as tangential in broader discussions exploring Iran's foreign policy, the sanctions regime or the nuclear research and weapons programme.<sup>5</sup> Those who have dealt explicitly with the IRGC have tended to focus on its military capabilities from

1 Ariel I. Ahran, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, (Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 96.

2 Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.

3 Frederic Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, (RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 71.

4 Narimon Safavi, 'In the Aftermath of Iran's Latest Revolution', in *What's Next?: Unconventional Wisdom on the Future of the World Economy*, ed. David Hale & Lyric Hughes Hale, (Yale University Press, 2011), p. 213.

5 Udit Banerjee, 'Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps', *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, No. 3 (2015): p. 94

a strategic studies perspective.<sup>6</sup> Where scholarship has sought to investigate the IRGC's economic ascendancy, it has dwelled on the *degree* of economic activity as opposed to the *justification* for such involvement.<sup>7</sup> This prompts us to consider two issues: How can we better understand the IRGC as an institution tied to the clerical regime's decision-making system? And how can we understand IRGC interaction with the economy from a strategic communications perspective?

The concept of strategic communications is notoriously difficult to define, but at its heart lies the aim to influence behaviour in pursuit of an objective.<sup>8</sup> As a field of inquiry, strategic communications sits within a social constructivist framework; it is occupied with the assignment of meaning and the construction of conversations to achieve an end. Hence, the interplay between persuasion and coercion is considered integral to strategic communicators.<sup>9</sup>

This article aims to demonstrate the alignment between strategic narratives and military ownership of communications infrastructure in Iran. It investigates the extent to which the IRGC's strategic narrative relied on the Iranian communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. The concept of 'communications economy' is central to the question and is defined here as the system of ownership and distribution relating to communications infrastructure. Fundamental to the communications economy are economic processes of monopolisation, privatisation, or acquisition. The term 'communications economy' is not interchangeable with concepts of information economy, media-space, or information-space. Rather, it is an economic subsystem within the ownership economy and is distinct in its emphasis on infrastructure. In effect, the communications economy is about the political economy of communications infrastructure, such as media or telecommunications infrastructure. The concept sits within the Marxian tradition that sees economic organisation as a driver of social organisation and builds on Manuel Castells' argument that communication technology is not neutral but rather, is a site of power and counter-power.<sup>10</sup>

6 See for example, Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, and Daniel Byman, et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, (RAND Corporation, 2001).

7 See for example, Kevan Harris, 'Of Eggs and Stones: Foreign Sanctions and Domestic Political Economy in the Islamic Republic of Iran' in *Economic Shocks and Authoritarian Stability: Duration, Financial Control, and Institutions*, ed. Victor C. Shih, (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Michael Axworthy, *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford University Press, 2017).

8 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xvi.

9 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (2019), p. 3.

10 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans., Tim Delaney (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859); Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, (Oxford University Press, 2009): p. xxiv.

The communications economy is ultimately a power and influence resource.

We begin with a review of the literature, first addressing strategic narratives and power projection, then moving on to capitalism and communications, and finally considering the existing debates concerning the IRGC's post-revolutionary role. In the next section we analyse the three main storylines comprising the strategic narrative of the IRGC—Revolution, Holy Defence, and Enemies and Opposition—and continue with an assessment of potential sources of legitimacy for the IRGC strategic narrative. In the third section we investigate the scope of IRGC ownership within the communications economy, and in the final section we examine the extent to which the IRGC's strategic narrative was reliant on this communications economy.

This article will show that the IRGC strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence in the soft war against the West. Yet, it is in the IRGC's relationship with the communications economy that we can identify the tension between ideology and opportunism. The IRGC relied on the communications economy not only to project its strategic narrative, but also as a source of capital gain for the opportunistic institution.

## Literature Review

### *Strategic Narratives and Power Projection*

Strategic communicators aim to influence the attitudes and shape the behaviour of a target audience in support of certain values, interests, or objectives.<sup>11</sup> Broadly speaking, they seek to convince a target audience of a specific way of thinking and behaving.<sup>12</sup> Acknowledging the 'startling power of story' to effect change,<sup>13</sup> the strategic narrative has been celebrated as a valuable tool for strategic communicators in pursuit of influence.<sup>14</sup> Some theorists see strategic narratives as meta-storylines that connect a sequence of events, including a setting, actors,

11 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011).

12 Miranda Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1 (2015), p. 119.

13 Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*, (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

14 Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, & Jens Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power', *Media, War, and Conflict* 7, No 1. (2014): 70–84; Lawrence Freedman, 'The Transformation of Strategic Affairs', *Adelphi Papers*, No 379 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006).

and plot; the past, present, and future; and a situation, problem, and resolution.<sup>15</sup> Exceeding stories by scale, strategic narratives can be understood as reiterated systems of storylines that serve a particular objective.<sup>16</sup> Holmstrom emphasises our ‘human need’ for narratives as explanatory frameworks through which we understand the world as it has been and as it will be.<sup>17</sup> In this view, strategic narratives are forward-looking conceptual frameworks.<sup>18</sup> They are ‘sense-making devices’ that ‘tie together otherwise disjointed events and trends’.<sup>19</sup> As a persuasive frame of reference, the strategic narrative is intended to resonate with the needs and values of its target audience and so to influence behaviour.

If a strategic narrative is understood as a persuasive frame of reference, then it is useful to note that such framing is based on a particular interpretation of reality. Norris, Kern, and Just use the concept of news frames in mass media coverage to demonstrate how framing can ‘define the social meaning of events’.<sup>20</sup> The process of selecting, emphasising, and excluding messages encourages a specific perception of reality through which strategic narratives can become ‘embedded in the social construction of reality’.<sup>21</sup> The strategically designed narrative is a necessary ‘tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate’.<sup>22</sup> Their value is in their ability to create what Gramsci defines as ‘common sense’—a form of ‘everyday thinking’ that offers us ‘frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world’.<sup>23</sup> Common sense draws on past ideas and evolves to give meaning to new developments and solve new problems.<sup>24</sup> By creating links to the past, strategic actors are able to ground their present activity in history and logic. Reframed and reiterated, narrative links to the past become irrefutable and a natural part of the hegemonic understanding of reality.

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15 Freedman, ‘The Transformation of Strategic Affairs’, p. 22; Thomas Colley, ‘Britain’s Public War Stories: Punching Above its Weight or Vanishing Force’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 2 (2017): p. 164–65; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, (eds), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, (University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 7.

16 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

17 Holmstrom, ‘The Narrative and Social Media’, p. 132.

18 Monroe E. Price, ‘Narratives of Legitimacy’, *Tripodos*, No 30 (2012), p. 12.

19 De Graaf, et al., *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*, p. 8.

20 Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, & Marion R. Just, (eds), *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4.

21 Norris, et al., *Framing Terrorism*, p. 5; Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

22 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

23 Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, & Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

24 Ibid.

Gramscian common sense is well aligned with the idea of the strategic narrative; both impose a dominant framing of reality. Indeed, the idea that strategic narratives are ‘interlaced with power’<sup>25</sup> is a dominant theme within the literature.<sup>26</sup> For Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, the alignment of communication and power is an important function of strategic narratives.<sup>27</sup> They are power resources that amidst a ‘global battle of ideas’, must be ‘heard and supported to the maximum degree while other [narratives] get side-lined’.<sup>28</sup>

### *Capitalism and Communications*

If strategic narratives are in competition with one another, then ownership of communications infrastructure is logically linked to the formation and projection of a dominant strategic narrative and to the side-lining of its competitors.

Scholarship in the mid-1980s and late 1990s makes a strong case for the relationship between communications and the economy.<sup>29</sup> Munson and Warren support the proposition that the market is a regulative mechanism for social relations, ‘subordinating politics, religion, culture, family and community life to its rule’.<sup>30</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is an adequate representation of the ‘culture industry’, wherein media organisations are akin to factories producing standardised, undifferentiated, mass cultural goods, with the aim of manipulating society into passivity.<sup>31</sup> Herman and Chomsky elaborate, arguing that mass communication media infrastructures are ‘effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function’, through which state-desired cultural ‘norms’ are projected.<sup>32</sup> By relying on market forces in which ‘realities’ are constructed and ‘sold’ to the masses, communications infrastructure can be used as a tool to encourage audiences to internalise assumptions, thereby manufacturing power and consent without overt coercion.<sup>33</sup>

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25 Price, ‘Narratives of Legitimacy’, p. 12.

26 Miskimmon, et al., ‘Strategic Narrative’, p. 70–84; Entman, *Projections of Power*, p. 5.

27 Miskimmon, et al., *Forging the World*, p. 1.

28 Miskimmon, et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 69, 148.

29 Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Eve S. Munson, & Catherine A. Warren, *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

30 Munson & Warren, *James Carey*, p. 70–71.

31 M. Horkheimer, & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1944), p. 107.

32 Noam Chomsky, & Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Stefaan Walgrave & Peter Van Aelst, ‘The Contingency of the Mass Media’s Political Agenda Setting Power’, *Journal of Communication* 56 (2006).

33 Chomsky & Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*; Scott Lash, *Critique of Information*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. vii; McChesney, Robert W., *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

Extending the debate, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle propose that ‘whose narrative “wins” is also a matter of institution-building, technology transfer, and political economy’.<sup>34</sup> The key tenet of their argument is that the material organisation of communication through infrastructure impacts how strategic narratives are formed, projected, and received. They maintain that strategic communicators compete to shape infrastructure in order to best support the propagation of their messages.<sup>35</sup> Communications infrastructure allows regimes to ‘exercise power at a distance, to govern, monitor, and administer territory and populations, and to cultivate loyalty and consent’.<sup>36</sup> This argument supports the notion that the economy is an inherently communicative tool, which can be used coercively as a means to the end of controlling a target audience. Hence, in state- or military-controlled economies, communications infrastructure has become politicised. It serves as a conduit through which strategic narratives are broadcast in pursuit of instilling values, interests, or objectives.

### *The IRGC*

Scholars have suggested that in addition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005, the new conservatives and the IRGC came to power.<sup>37</sup> Testament to this close relationship, by 2010, twelve of Ahmadinejad’s twenty-one cabinet ministers were IRGC members or veterans.<sup>38</sup> As Alfoneh notes, this was a clear break from previous administrations in the Islamic Republic, which represented numerous ‘powerful elite groups’: the traditional bazaar class, technocratic and business elites, and various factions amongst the clergy.<sup>39</sup> The entrenchment of the IRGC in Ahmadinejad’s government constituted the emergence and consolidation of a deep-power nexus.<sup>40</sup> Aside from the IRGC’s fortified political presence, observers are cognizant of the IRGC’s expanding remit under Ahmadinejad.

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34 Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 150.

35 Ibid., p. 148.

36 Ibid., p. 150.

37 Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, (RAND Corporation, 2009): p. 24; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, & Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran’s Silent Revolution*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007): p. 49; Jack Straw, *The English Job: Understanding Iran and Why It Distrusts Britain*, (Biteback Publishing, 2019): p. 288

38 Ali Alfoneh, ‘All the Guard’s Men: Iran’s Silent Revolution’, *World Affairs* 173, No. 3 (2010): p. 74.

39 Ibid.

40 Abedin, Mahan, *Iran Resurgent: The Rise and Rise of the Shia State*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), p. 2.

In particular, several studies note IRGC strategic involvement in the energy and construction sectors, with many documenting IRGC financial activities from the 1980s to date.<sup>41</sup>

When attempting to explain the IRGC's involvement in the post-revolutionary political economy, Harris suggests that it can be considered either as an 'ideologically driven praetorian monolith' that uses economic means to consolidate political power, or a 'state bourgeoisie' that is driven by greed.<sup>42</sup> Regarding the latter, the IRGC could be considered part of Siddiq's concept of an emerging 'Military Inc.'<sup>43</sup> Military Inc. engages in accumulating capital, sourced through business interests, for the purpose of benefitting the military fraternity.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that militaries such as the IRGC use communications economies in support of their stated values, but also to support their inherent capital interests.

However, whilst many have noted the IRGC's expanding mandate, one feature of their economic predation has remained under-researched: the justification for such involvement from the perspective of strategic communications. In particular, the alignment between IRGC ownership within the communications economy and strategic narrative formation and projection is rarely examined. The IRGC is deserving of additional research. Beyond treating economic involvement as tangential to its role as a military or intelligence organisation,<sup>45</sup> this article considers the IRGC as critical to the decision-making system of post-revolutionary Iran.

## The Strategic Narrative of the IRGC

### *Revolution*

The Islamic Revolution is the historico-ideological foundation upon which the Revolutionary Guard was established and is the driving force behind their strategic narrative. The IRGC was born out of the 'heat of the revolution'

41 Ali Alföneh, *The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy*, (American Enterprise Institute, 2010); Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*; M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', *Strategic Analysis* 36, No. 4 (2012).

42 Kevan Harris, 'All the Sepah's Men: Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Theory and Practice' in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, ed. Zainab Abul-Magd & Elke Grawert, (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): p. 99.

43 Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, (Pluto Press, 2007).

44 Ayesha Siddiq, 'Military's Economic Role and Beyond', *RUSI Journal* 152, No. 6 (2007): p. 64.

45 Banerjee, 'Revolutionary Intelligence'.

to safeguard Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from counterrevolutionaries.<sup>46</sup> Acting as a vanguard for the Supreme Leader, the IRGC emerged as ‘one of the main security pillars of the Islamic Republic’, carving a niche for itself as both ‘defender of the revolutionary order’ and ‘guardian of the Islamic state’s borders and territory’.<sup>47</sup> As opposed to the regular Artesh national army, which was viewed as loyal to Reza Shah Pahlavi, the IRGC promoted itself as an ‘organic military force’ and the revolutionary ‘brotherhood’ that built the Islamic Republic.<sup>48</sup> For the IRGC, the revolution represented the Islamisation of Iranian political society, after which the regime would define itself predominantly in a cultural sense, framing society within the context of revolutionary Shi’ite Islamic culture.<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the IRGC recognised two roles afforded to it by the revolution: safeguarding the Supreme Leader and related clerical establishment, and safeguarding the revolution from internal and external threats.

The revolution is not a distinct event that began and ended with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. It is not a static moment in history. Rather, there is an ongoing revolution that the IRGC must continue to defend. Testament to this, IRGC leaders have stated that enemies of the revolution would feel the ‘reverberating impact of the hammer of the Islamic Revolution on their skulls’.<sup>50</sup> By promoting a ‘common sense’ understanding that enemies of the revolution are enemies of Iran, the IRGC justifies their continuing revolutionary fervour and aggression. Take, for example, the re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009. Protesters gathered to express discontent with the ‘implausibly fast ballot counting’ and ‘high levels of electoral support’ credited to Ahmadinejad.<sup>51</sup> Though peaceful in nature, the violent response to the post-election protests demonstrate that for the IRGC, the revolution continues. By sustaining a narrative link to the 1979 revolution, the IRGC reiterate and reinforce a hegemonic understanding of the revolution as a state of being for Iran.

46 Ali Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled’, *The National Interest*, 11 February 2010.

47 Byman, et al., *Iran’s Security Policy*, p. 33–34.

48 Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will Be Mercantiled’.

49 Edward Wastnidge, ‘The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War’, *Politics* 35, No 3–4 (2014), p. 367.

50 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, *Iran Report* 3, No 17 (2000).

51 Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3.

## *Holy Defence*

Asserting and safeguarding revolutionary values remains central to the IRGC's strategic narrative. An example of this is the 1980 Iran-Iraq War. Referred to in Iran as the Imposed War or the Holy Defence, this event forms the second storyline contributing to the IRGC's strategic narrative.

Eighteen months following the revolution, Iraq invaded Iran, threatening the territorial foundation of the revolutionary state. For the IRGC, Iraq's invasion was confirmation of external threats facing the revolution and the system of clerical rule. It was a test of the Guards' revolutionary loyalty. The IRGC developed from a 'disorganised militia' into a 'complex and powerful organisation'.<sup>52</sup> However, as neither side emerged as the decisive victor, the Iran-Iraq War has a complex legacy, leaving a 'strong imprint on Iranian defence thinking'.<sup>53</sup> It serves as a reminder that the revolutionary fervour of the IRGC did not achieve a clear victory for Iran, but instead cost between 350–400,000 Iranian lives.<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, the IRGC have remained committed to presenting a war-like disposition in the public domain. They have succeeded in keeping its 'reality, dramas and combatants readily accessible' to Iranian citizens through numerous channels such as murals, broadcasts, and academic works.<sup>55</sup> For example, IRGC-affiliated academic institutions such as the Imam Husayn University have been publishing literature about the war since 1981, offering an IRGC-guided narration of the war. Moreover, such Persian-language journals as the Specialised Quarterly Journal for the Holy Defence are tasked with examining the 'eight-year regime war of Iraq's Ba'ath against the Islamic Republic'.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of the result, the Holy Defence is celebrated as a source of Iranian power and a reaffirmation of the revolutionary cause. Determined to transform the war from an 'unfortunate consequence of the Islamic Revolution into its most impressive achievement',<sup>57</sup> the IRGC have mythologised the war, using it as ammunition to promote their ideological position. The story of the war is framed and articulated so as to represent the IRGC as the undisputed victors, successfully upholding Iran's ideological and territorial integrity.

52 Ibid., p. 41; Annie Tracy Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Iran-Iraq War*, (Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs—Discussion Paper, 2012), p. 4.

53 Byman, et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 35.

54 Ibid., p. 36.

55 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 87.

56 Translated from 'About the Journal' section on website.

57 Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 6–7.

### *Enemies and Opposition*

Iran's war with Iraq is a powerful shaper of the IRGC's strategic narrative. Yet beyond that, the IRGC have continued to mythologise war as emblematic of the continuing need to defend the state against ideological enemies of the revolution. This perception of enemies and opposition comprises the final storyline of the IRGC's strategic narrative.

The aphorism that 'war made the state and the state made war' applies to the IRGC; war made the Guard and the Guard made war;<sup>58</sup> in particular, soft war. In Iran, soft war is presented as a 'concentrated, directed and strategic series of information-related actions [...] by the United States and the West', who coordinate to form a 'cultural NATO'.<sup>59</sup> For Ayatollah Khamene'i, soft war involves 'creating doubt in people's hearts and minds'.<sup>60</sup> For several senior IRGC commanders, it is an attempt by the West to drive a wedge between the people and the regime, to ensure that the revolutionary Islamic Republic ceases to be a model for the Islamic world.<sup>61</sup> Soft war intentionally inverts the Western concept of soft power to reflect the cultural, information-based attacks against Iran by its enemies, who seek to influence the attitudes and behaviours of Iranian citizens.<sup>62</sup> It encompasses 'all aspects of the system of understanding' deemed to be part of the informational 'battlefield'—including the arts, the media, and the educational system.<sup>63</sup> During Ahmadinejad's hard-line presidency, the concept commanded such extensive attention that the Iranian Majlis ratified a bill designating \$100 million to countering the soft war.<sup>64</sup>

Constant reiteration of the idea that the Islamic Republic must not be victim to the enemies that seek its demise is linked to the 'soft war' storyline.

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58 Ibid.

59 Monroe E. Price, 'Iran and the Soft War', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012), p. 2398.

60 Emily Blout, 'Iran's Soft War with the West: History, Myth, and Nationalism in the New Communications Age', *S.A.I.S. Review of International Affairs* 35, № 2 (2015), p. 44.

61 This sentiment is expressed in similar forms by Hojjatol Islam Saedi—former representative of the Supreme Leader in IRGC, referenced in Saeid Golkar, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guard: Its Views of the United States', *Middle East Policy* 21, № 2 (2014), p. 54, and Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi—former head of the IRGC, referenced in Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power', p. 373.

62 Nima Adelpkhan, 'Iran Integrates the Concept of the 'Soft War' Into its Strategic Planning', *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 8, № 23 (2010).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

Grounded in the Holy Defence storyline, IRGC leaders retain a firm belief that Western powers encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Iran,<sup>65</sup> contributing to the ‘suspicion’ and ‘paranoia’ about foreign interference in Iran.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, there is a strong feeling of shared Shi’a victimhood driving the IRGC worldview. Ayatollah Khomeini in particular, held the view that the world was hostile to the ‘true Shi’a faith and to the intertwined interests of his nation’.<sup>67</sup> This sense of being surrounded by enemies of Iran and therefore, enemies of Shi’ism pervades the strategic narrative of both the neoconservative clerical establishment and the IRGC. Paradoxically, the IRGC’s strategic narrative is well served by maintaining enemies and continually reinforcing the notion that the Islamic Republic is under attack. It allows the IRGC to define Iran in diametric opposition to the enemies of the revolution and to profess that it is leading an ongoing resistance. In this view, the IRGC strategic narrative is a narrative of resistance, expressing defiance against threats to the revolution, externally imposed hard and soft war, and the enemies of the Iranian state.

#### *Potential Sources of Legitimacy*

To achieve a common understanding of the framing and articulation of reality, a strategic narrative must have persuasive value and therefore, both the message and the messenger must be considered legitimate.

First, the IRGC have been afforded institutional legitimacy. Following the revolution, Khomeini sought to convert the ‘institutions of revolutionary insurrection’ into ‘institutes of rule’.<sup>68</sup> The constitution requires that the IRGC be responsible not only for defending the borders, but also for the ‘ideological mission of holy war in the way of God and fighting to expand the rule of God’s law in the world’.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, it states that the IRGC will ‘remain active in order to continue [their] role in guarding the revolution and its offshoots’.<sup>70</sup> They are constitutionally mandated to safeguard the revolution and the system of clerical rule. This constitutional mandate has justified the IRGC’s development as an institution in itself. Militarily, the Guard maintain their own specialised armed

65 Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, referenced in Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 8.

66 This suspicion of foreign interference precedes the establishment of the Islamic Republic, referring also to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh – Straw, *The English Job*, p. 158.

67 Ibid., p. 221.

68 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, p. 107.

69 Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security*, p. 2.

70 Ibid.

unit with resources to manufacture weaponry; they dominate ballistic missile production in Iran and play a central role in the state nuclear program. The institutional breadth of the IRGC is vast; they are viewed as both an institutional extension of the state and the mouthpiece of the revolutionary Republic.

Second, the IRGC's strategic narrative has derived legitimacy from its recognition as the state's premiere hard power institution. As the war has been mythologised, so too has the role of the IRGC in fighting external threats. The initial 'image of resistance' and battle has been transformed into a 'mythology of the Revolutionary Guard' affording credibility to their projection of a resistance narrative.<sup>71</sup> This image is reflected in the IRGC's emblem, showing a clenched fist holding a rifle, above which stands a verse from the Qur'an: 'prepare against them whatever arms and cavalry you can muster'.<sup>72</sup> The emblem symbolises a 'rallying cry for righteous militancy',<sup>73</sup> and is a reminder of the Guard's militant origins in liberating the Islamic Republic from Shah Pahlavi and Western influence. As soldiers of the ongoing revolution, the Guardsmen act in an official capacity, using force as directed by the Supreme Leader. In their exercise of force during the 2009 post-election protests, the Revolutionary Guard claimed that their use of violence was legitimate and carried out in defence of the Islamic Republic. As a political entity, the IRGC enjoys the right to deploy violence just as Weber argues a legitimised state does.<sup>74</sup> In this 'devolution of state control over violence' to the Revolutionary Guard,<sup>75</sup> legitimacy is derived in part from their role as the state's military.

A final source of legitimacy is the identity of the group itself. The Guard position themselves as concomitant with the birth of the Islamic Republic, affording their own strategic narrative legitimacy. During the war, Khomeini attributed a sense of divine authorisation to the IRGC, declaring the war to be a contest between the forces of God and forces of an apostate.<sup>76</sup> This has contributed greatly to the way in which the Guard see themselves. In projecting themselves as a credible ideological cadre, the IRGC have justified their own institutional legitimacy to such an extent that they view themselves as superior to the Artesh in Iran's dual military structure.

71 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will Be Mercantized'.

72 Afshon Ostovar, 'Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979–2009)', (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009), p. 112.

73 Ibid.

74 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Talcott Parson, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

75 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, p. 1.

76 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 62–63.

The IRGC are uniformed, armed, and trained like the Artesh, but rather than being subservient to the military establishment, the Guard report directly to the Supreme Leader.<sup>77</sup> In viewing themselves as a vanguard, the IRGC associate themselves with the Supreme Leader's divine authority and his clerical establishment. They are a self-professed extension of the religious state.

## The IRGC's Economy

### *Open for Business*

When he began his tenure as Iran's fourth president in 1989, Abkar Hashemi Rafsanjani inherited a post-revolution, post-war economy. He adopted a two-pronged approach to reforming this economy, both involving the IRGC. First, the Guard were tasked with rebuilding infrastructure that had been damaged during the war. Second, Rafsanjani encouraged entrepreneurship amongst state organisations. In particular, the IRGC were provided with a cut of oil income as seed money to invest in various strategic sectors of the economy.<sup>78</sup> One such investment was in the defence industry. Under Shah Pahlavi, Iran had been reliant on the West for its defence technology. Following the revolution and the assertion of anti-Western sentiment, the new regime focused on the development of a native defence industry 'almost entirely controlled by the Revolutionary Guard'.<sup>79</sup> This extended the mandate of the IRGC from safeguarding the revolution in an exclusively military capacity to include the economic arena.

Rafsanjani built on what Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's post-revolution constitution had done to consolidate the post-war economic role of the IRGC. Article 147 of the constitution states that 'in times of peace, the government must utilise the personal and technical equipment of the Army in relief operations, for educational and productive ends, and [for] the Reconstruction Campaign'.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Article 150 assigns to the IRGC the role of 'protecting the Revolution and its achievements'.<sup>81</sup> These constitutional phrases entrenched the IRGC's role in the economy. Intentionally broad, they enabled IRGC

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<sup>77</sup> Steven O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The Threat That Grows While America Sleeps*, (Potomac Books, 2012), p. xii.

<sup>78</sup> Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*, p. 110.

<sup>79</sup> Safavi, 'In the Aftermath of Iran's Latest Revolution', p. 212.

<sup>80</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organisation, 1979), p. 32.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

commanders to interpret ‘productive ends’ as encompassing ‘economic, societal, and cultural developmental programs’.<sup>82</sup> Consolidating this economic role, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that ‘should [the] Islamic revolution be endangered economically, we will see how the Guards will be engaged in the economy’.<sup>83</sup> The post-revolution constitution signalled that the IRGC was effectively open for business and set to become a key player in the Iranian economy.

### *Ahmadinejad & IRGC Inc.*

Rafsanjani may have introduced the IRGC to economic activity, but their rise as an ‘unmeritocratic economic elite’ was consolidated under President Ahmadinejad.<sup>84</sup> IRGC economic empowerment underwent a ‘noticeable acceleration during Ahmadinejad’s presidency’.<sup>85</sup> In part, this was due to a ‘symbiosis’ between the leader and the Guard.<sup>86</sup> A former IRGC commander, Ahmadinejad was linked to the ‘close-knit network of [IRGC] factions’ and shared their strong sense of ‘entitlement to power as true sons of the revolution’.<sup>87</sup> Based on this ideological affinity, Ahmadinejad afforded the Guard preferential economic treatment. No-bid contracts were awarded to IRGC-affiliated firms, former IRGC members were elected to key government positions, and the regime increased control of state banks to finance the IRGC’s economic activities.<sup>88</sup> Effectively, Ahmadinejad ‘let them off the leash’.<sup>89</sup>

Ahmadinejad allowed the IRGC to manage Iran’s largest infrastructure projects. The IRGC’s infrastructure project management can be categorised into two economic arms—the IRGC-Cooperation Fund (IRGC-CF) and the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Base (KCB). The IRGC-CF is comprised of a complex network of Orbit 1 companies and Orbit 2 companies. In Orbit 1 companies, the IRGC-CF is directly represented on the board of directors, whilst in Orbit 2 companies, there appears to be no direct representation and therefore, seemingly no links to the IRGC-CF. Whilst Orbit 2 companies appear independent of the IRGC, they maintain ties to the directly affiliated companies, and therefore

82 Brigadier Gen. Hossein Yasini, quoted in Ali Alfoneh, *How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran’s Economy*, (American Enterprise Institute, 2007), p. 2.

83 Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guard is Transforming Iran from Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013), p. 179.

84 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 11.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

86 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 12.

87 Ehteshami, & Zweisei, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, p. 75.

88 Nader Habibi, ‘The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’, *Middle East Brief* № 74 (2013): p. 5-6.

89 Ansari, ‘The Revolution Will be Mercantilized’.

remain under indirect IRGC influence.<sup>90</sup> Baharahn Gostar Kish for example, is an information technology and communications company that has no formal links to the IRGC-CF, with no IRGC members on the board of directors.<sup>91</sup> However, two board members represent Baharahn and Mowj Nasr Gostar, which are both Orbit 1 companies, meaning that the company still effectively falls under the IRGC economy.

KCB runs its business relationships through four construction bases, each of which operates multiple companies.<sup>92</sup> KCB qualifies as Iran's largest infrastructure and project management contractor.<sup>93</sup> Shortly after Ahmadinejad asked KCB to enter the oil and gas industry to 'satisfy the domestic needs of the country', the Oil Ministry awarded KCB an \$850 million pipeline project and later a project worth \$7 billion.<sup>94</sup> Ahmadinejad justified such extensive IRGC involvement in strategic economic sectors by suggesting that the IRGC were less vulnerable to 'corruption and inefficiency' than an alternative economic elite.<sup>95</sup> In broadening their remit to involvement in strategic economic sectors, Ahmadinejad encouraged the IRGC to develop as an infrastructure investment arm of the regime through IRGC-CF and KCB.

### *Iran's Communications Economy*

The rapid emergence of the communications economy in Iran as one of the 'fastest growing economic sectors'<sup>96</sup> coincided with Ahmadinejad's presidency. In 2008, Iran had 23 million Internet users, amongst a population of 72 million.<sup>97</sup> By the end of Ahmadinejad's first term in office in 2009, this number had risen to 27.9 million users, accounting for approximately 34% of the population.<sup>98</sup> In the same year, Iran had 30.2 million mobile phone users,<sup>99</sup> all participating in the communications economy.

90 BBC Monitoring, 'Explainer: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and the economy—a complex web', *BBC Monitoring Insight*, 27 September 2018.

91 *Ibid.*

92 BBC Monitoring, 'Explainer: Revolution Guards' construction base, Iran's economic behemoth', *BBC Monitoring Insight*, 14 November 2018.

93 Abedin, *Iran Recurgent*, p. 248.

94 Alfoneh, *The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy*, p.1.

95 Abedin, *Iran Recurgent*, p. 248.

96 Annabelle Sreberny, & Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), p. 2.

97 Sara B. Elson, et al., *Using Social Media to Gauge Iranian Public Opinion and Mood After the 2009 Election*, (RAND Corporation, 2012), p. 11.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media*, (Freedom House, Washington, DC, 2009).

As the system of ownership and distribution relating to dynamic communications infrastructure, the communications economy can be understood as a sum of the institutions and infrastructure that form it. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, media and telecommunications infrastructure sat at the heart of the Iranian communications economy. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) held a monopoly over media infrastructure, dominating radio and television services. Subordinate to the Supreme Leader, IRIB acted in an official capacity as the state broadcaster.<sup>100</sup> It maintained five international news channels, complemented by numerous comprehensive news websites available in Persian and the languages of the target audiences. According to Article 175 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'freedom of expression and dissemination of ideas must be granted through the mass media of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, IRIB held a legal monopoly over broadcasting, and was tasked with the 'audio-visual policy' of the Islamic Republic.<sup>102</sup>

In addition to media infrastructure, telecommunications infrastructure was vital to the communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. The Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) maintained a monopoly over the telecommunications industry and in 2010, was the largest listed company by market capitalisation in Iran.<sup>103</sup> The extent of TCI control over communications infrastructure during Ahmadinejad's presidency should not be underestimated. TCI managed approximately thirty provincial subsidiaries and two brand companies.<sup>104</sup> Through these subsidiaries and companies, TCI provided internet access, mobile phone services, landline telephone services, wireless services, and data services. Under the TCI banner, the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI) held a monopoly over internet connectivity, with all internet traffic being directed through DCI and, therefore, TCI infrastructure.<sup>105</sup> TCI also managed the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MCI), which provided the infrastructure for mobile telephony services.<sup>106</sup> Essentially, any mobile or fixed-line phone user in Iran was interacting with TCI infrastructure.

100 Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power', p. 372–73.

101 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 36.

102 Pierre Pahlavi, 'Understanding Iran's Media Diplomacy', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6, No 2 (2012), p. 22.

103 Turquoise Partners, *Iran Investment Monthly* 4, No 50 (2010), p. 3.

104 Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, p. 6.

105 Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 2.

106 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 165.

Article 44 of the Constitution sets forth a key principle that is central to ownership of communications infrastructure, specifying that the state will operate a planned economy, maintaining ownership of strategic industries such as foreign trade, banking, energy sources, and, most notably for our topic, radio, television, telegraph, and telephone services.<sup>107</sup> It institutionalises state control of the communications economy. However, in 2004, (just prior to Ahmadinejad's election in 2005), Ayatollah Khamene'i issued a decree reversing Article 44, ordering 25% of state-owned assets to be privatised within 5 years.<sup>108</sup> \$120 billion worth of government assets were sold as part of Khamene'i's decree. Yet, the largest purchaser of privatised government assets was the IRGC, which received favourable terms from the Ahmadinejad regime.<sup>109</sup> Under the guise of de jure privatisation, state-owned assets were de facto militarised.

A small number of other actors were involved in Ahmadinejad's communications economy. Some private companies did exist in the non-governmental sector; however, they were still accountable to the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology of Iran and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance,<sup>110</sup> and so cannot be understood as independent of the state. Baharahn Gostar Kish—an Orbit 2 company involved in IT and telecommunications—is a good example of this fictional separation between public and private in Iran's communications economy. Several foreign companies did maintain business relationships with the Iranian government during Ahmadinejad's presidency. For example, TCI was a long-standing client of the Nokia Siemens Network, one of the world's largest telecommunications infrastructure companies.<sup>111</sup> Such companies must be considered part of the Iranian communications economy.

### *The IRGC's Investment Portfolio*

Regardless of non-governmental sector and foreign corporation involvement, the communications economy remained the domain of the state and its affiliates.<sup>112</sup> The most extensive ownership claim to the communications

107 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 13.

108 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 167; O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, p. 127.

109 Ibid.

110 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 121–22.

111 Judith Schrempf, 'Nokia Siemens Networks: Just Doing Business—or Supporting an Oppressive Regime?', *Journal of Business Ethics* 103, № 1 (2011), p. 9

112 Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution*, (Rutgers University Press, 2013).

economy lay with the increasingly commercialised IRGC. Their place in the Iranian communications economy can be understood through several activities involving the ownership and distribution of communications infrastructure.

First, under Ahmadinejad, the IRGC expanded their media operations, frequently engaging with media infrastructure. In 2007, they launched Press TV as a 24-hour English-language news network.<sup>113</sup> Press TV aimed to provide a ‘new type of state media’ competing globally with Sunni-Arab channels such as Al-Arabiyah and with Western channels such as CNN and BBC World News.<sup>114</sup> The channel was affiliated with IRIB and maintained a close relationship with Ahmadinejad’s conservative political faction. Furthermore, in 2009, the IRGC launched the Atlas press agency, modelled on international agencies such as Al-Jazeera.<sup>115</sup> The IRGC also maintained several weekly magazines and websites to highlight its positive contributions to bettering the Iranian nation, including Sobh-e Sadegh, Basij News, and Sepah News.<sup>116</sup> The vast number of media organisations, all associated with the IRIB conglomerate and sponsored by the Supreme Leader, afforded the IRGC a significant role in the wider media infrastructure.

Second, the IRGC asserted their role in the communications economy through two significant developments in telecommunications infrastructure involving MTN Irancell and TCI. MTN Irancell was launched in 2005, at the start of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, as a telecommunications company that provided 2G and 3G connections and fixed wireless internet services. MTN Irancell was a joint venture between the South Africa-based MTN Group and the Iran Electronic Development Company (IEDC). A subsidiary company of the Iranian Ministry of Defence, IEDC maintained close ties with the Revolutionary Guard. Following the IRGC’s opposition to foreign involvement in Iran’s strategic telecommunications sector, IEDC negotiated 51% ownership of the MTN Irancell joint venture,<sup>117</sup> ensuring that the military had a majority stake in the newly formed telecommunications infrastructure.

In addition to rejecting foreign majority ownership in Iranian telecommunications infrastructure, IRGC telecommunications activity was driven largely

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113 Price, ‘Iran and the Soft War’, p. 2407.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, p. 49.

117 Ibid., p. 59.

by 'lucrative no-bid contracts awarded by the Iranian government'.<sup>118</sup> Testament to this, in September 2009, shortly after the violent protests following Ahmadinejad's re-election, the government announced plans to privatise TCI. Amongst the investors were numerous IRGC-backed institutions, including the IRGC-CF, the Mostazafan Foundation, and the Execution of the Imam's Order company.<sup>119</sup> Minutes after TCI was privatised, the IRGC acquired 51% of the company in a \$5 billion deal<sup>120</sup>—the 'largest trade in the history of the Tehran Stock Exchange'.<sup>121</sup> This represented 'yet another calculated step' in the IRGC's campaign to dominate Iran's communications economy.<sup>122</sup> Rather than using IEDC as a front, as they had done in 2005, the IRGC had overtly purchased a majority stake in TCI's monopoly over Iranian telecommunications.

### **Reliance of the IRGC's Strategic Narrative on the Communications Economy**

We have shown that the IRGC's strategic narrative is based on three main storylines—Revolution, Holy Defence, and Enemies and Opposition—and have demonstrated how the strategic narrative is legitimised and therefore has persuasive value. We have also established that the role of IRGC in the communications economy expanded under President Ahmadinejad, whose policies allowed the Guard to capitalise on their ownership of media and telecommunications infrastructure and to assert their negotiating power as a business conglomerate. Now, we will turn to analysing the extent to which the strategic narrative of the IRGC relied on the state's communications economy.

#### *The 'Construction Jihad'*

Propagating revolutionary ideology is central to the IRGC's strategic narrative. Recognising that the economy is a communicative tool, and that communications infrastructure can be politicised to advance the interests of political actors,<sup>123</sup> the IRGC used the communications economy to promote their ideological messages. The use of the communications economy as an ideological tool is best exemplified by IRGC ownership of Iran's media

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118 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 6.

119 Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 5.

120 Ibid.

121 Alfoneh, 'The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy', p. 5.

122 Alfoneh, 'All the Guard's Men', p. 77.

123 McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 151.

infrastructure. Acting in a ‘system-supportive propaganda function’, the media infrastructure shapes perceptions and consolidates ‘norms’, critically reinforcing what Gramsci referred to as ‘common sense’ with regard to the people’s understanding of the Iranian political landscape.<sup>124</sup>

Of significance to the IRGC was the notion that the communications economy of media infrastructure could be conditioned through ownership and distribution to carry with it a specific ideology. The ideology of the Islamic Republic and Ahmadinejad’s hardline regime was reinforced through media infrastructure; cultural norms could be established and reiterated until irrefutable. Functioning as a vanguard to Khamene’i and Ahmadinejad, the Revolutionary Guard assigned a distinctly ‘ideological tenor’ to their activities,<sup>125</sup> including their involvement in the communications economy. Media infrastructure was used as an additional ideological conduit, through which the government could ‘control news and political commentary’ in support of the regime’s ideology and thus, sustain a revolutionary identity.<sup>126</sup> Through the aforementioned outlets Sepah News, Sobh-e Sadegh, and others, the communications economy enabled the Guard to control and centralise cultural production, placing its strategic narrative at the centre, whilst rejecting or side-lining any narratives that challenged its ideological frame.

For the IRGC, ownership and control of the media was a vital aspect of the ‘Construction Jihad’. Article 147 of the Constitution discusses the post-war Reconstruction Campaign and mandates the economic involvement of the IRGC.<sup>127</sup> Following the initial efforts to reconstruct the economy, owning and distributing media and telecommunications infrastructure was viewed as necessary for the ongoing Construction Jihad; the construction of infrastructure in the name of defending the Islamic Republic. That there is no limit to ‘protecting the revolution and its achievements’<sup>128</sup> means that the Construction Jihad—with infrastructure development led by the IRGC—must be sustained. Consequently, the Guard became reliant on the communications economy both to supply a purpose for its activities, and to provide an effective and constitutionally recognised channel for transmitting its strategic narrative.

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124 Chomsky & Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 306; Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 80–81; Roxane Farmanfarman, *Iran’s Rhetoric Aggression: Instrumentalizing Foreign Policy Power through the Media*, (Centre for the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa, 2017), p. 6.

125 Abedin, *Iran Resurgent*, p. 3.

126 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 7; Wehrey et al., *The Rise of Pasdaran*, p. 49.

127 Islamic Republic of Iran, *The Constitution*, p. 32.

128 Ibid.

Thus, the construction of infrastructure came to be seen as necessary for the ideological defence—or jihad—of the Islamic Republic.

*The Invisible Hand of the IRGC*

However, the reliance of the IRGC's strategic narrative on the communications economy concerns more than explicitly ideological motivations; a distinctly coercive element can also be identified. Beyond their devotion to the Construction Jihad, the Guard relied on the communications economy as a tool of power projection, expanding their coercive hand in Iranian political society.

Communications infrastructure, particularly media and telecommunications licenses, are a source of state revenue. As discussed in the previous section, the communications economy is lucrative for those involved. Ahmadinejad's regime faced a dichotomy between reaping the 'business benefits of a modern information infrastructure', whilst simultaneously preventing the communication of political criticism of the regime or of the broader Islamic revolutionary system.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, communications infrastructure was treated as a political asset. Whilst the regime *de jure* separated telecommunications providers and regulators from the direct control of the Iranian state, *de facto* control was 'rarely surrendered by privatisation'.<sup>130</sup> Khamene'i's Article 44 decree shows that the legal separation between state and assets allowed leaders to remain influential in the communications economy by appointing politically like-minded affiliates. By militarising, rather than privatising the economy, the regime transferred ownership from 'relatively transparent parts of the public sector to other parts of the public sector shielded from public scrutiny', such as the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>131</sup>

It is in this fictional separation between the public and private sector in Iran that the invisible hand of the IRGC can be assessed. Power projection and realpolitik remained central to the Guard's strategic thinking to the same extent as their ideological devotion.<sup>132</sup> The Revolutionary Guard's penetration of strategic sectors of the Iranian polity provided 'power to the corps in national-level decision-making'.<sup>133</sup> In asserting its role within the communications economy, the Guard acted as an extension of the state—the economic arm

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129 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 80-81.

130 Ibid.

131 Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 167.

132 Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, p. xiv.

133 Ibid., p. 46; Sarah Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics*, (Center for American Progress, October 2018), p. 1.

of Ahmadinejad's regime and the related clerical establishment—and in return received greater influence as a political actor.

Developing nationalised communications infrastructure improved the 'management capacity of the state', allowing the IRGC to manage social risks more effectively.<sup>134</sup> In order to counter activism online and offline, particularly during the 2009 protests, the IRGC authorised a number of media and telecommunications infrastructure restrictions, including censorship, filtering, surveillance, and access speed constraints.<sup>135</sup> The communications economy acted as a social management tool; the IRGC manipulated communications infrastructure to suppress protests and justify the exercise of their strategic narrative. Regulation of the communications economy became a 'necessary element' of control and coercion, forcing society into a state of conformity by 'exercis[ing] power at a distance'.<sup>136</sup> The IRGC monitored dissent online, observing protesters and their networks and tracking the organisation of protests, then enforced punishment offline through arrest or detention. The Revolutionary Guard's control of the communications economy ensured that the protests did not result in institutional change. In effect, it facilitated the manipulation of mass society into passivity.<sup>137</sup> Consequently, both the projection of the strategic narrative storyline of an ongoing attack that required defence of the revolution by the Guard, and their violently putting the narrative into effect, depended on the Guard's control of the communications economy.

### *A Military-Commercial Complex*

Whilst the IRGC's strategic narrative relied on the communications economy as a tool through which to broadcast revolutionary ideology and project power over society, it also relied on communications infrastructure as a tool of its articulated defence against enemies and opposition. The ownership and distribution of communications infrastructure supported the IRGC's strategic message of the threat of soft war and of the persistence of enemies of the revolution.

The notion that the West was 'softly preparing [its] target society [Iran] to become a

134 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 57; Joshua Teitelbaum, 'Dueling for "Da'Wa": State vs. Society on the Saudi Internet', *Middle East Journal* 56, No 2 (2002).

135 Akamai Report, 'The State of the Internet: 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, 2009', *State of the Internet Connectivity Reports* 2, No 2 (2009), p. 11, 38; Sreberny & Khiabany, *Blogistan*, p. 24.

136 Laleh D. Ebrahimi, 'Socio-Economic Development in Iran through Information and Communications Technology', *Middle East Journal* 57, No 1 (2003), p. 98; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 150.

137 Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 107.

more intense demander of democratic change' necessitated an integrated defence, activating all aspects of the Iranian political, cultural, and economic system.<sup>138</sup>

Based on their extensive reach in the communications economy, the IRGC orchestrated a 'comprehensive messaging strategy' using radio and television broadcasts, newspapers, websites, and social media accounts to amplify the message that the Islamic Republic was under attack from the West.<sup>139</sup> Using media infrastructure to promote state ideology and telecommunications infrastructure to censor online conversations and 'neutralise' rhetoric targeting Iran,<sup>140</sup> the IRGC actively engaged the communications economy in defending the Islamic Republic against the soft war tactics of the West.

From a business perspective, the IRGC capitalised on Ahmadinejad's conceptualisation of the soft war, creating a military-commercial complex in which the Guard benefitted from the construction of a perceived and persistent threat. Communications infrastructure was both at risk from the soft war, but also a necessary point of control for defence. Whilst publicly promoting rhetoric about national security and the defence of Shi'ite Islamic culture,<sup>141</sup> the IRGC was sustaining a military-commercial complex that benefitted them financially. The IRGC and the Iranian communications economy maintained a close partnership, with both taking advantage of the articulation of a soft war. Consequently, the IRGC strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy as a tool of persuasion in their ideological soft war and simultaneously, the communications economy benefitted from IRGC investment.

*Safeguarding the Revolution, But Also Our Own Interests...*

It is here, in the IRGC's relationship with the communications economy that the tension between ideology and opportunism can be identified. The emerging military-commercial complex—a union between the IRGC and the communications economy of media and telecommunications infrastructure—provided opportunity for an increasingly profit-driven and self-interested Revolutionary Guard. It must be considered that the IRGC's dealings with the communications economy were driven not only by their ideological convictions, but also by the opportunistic organisation of career-driven members of the Guard.

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138 Price, 'Iran and the Soft War', p. 2398.

139 Alaoui, *Tired Narratives, Weary Publics*, p. 5.

140 Ibid.

141 Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 82.

The IRGC is motivated by ideological and non-ideological stimuli.<sup>142</sup> IRGC involvement in the laser eye surgery or luxury goods industry in Iran for example, is not driven by ideological concerns based on the Construction Jihad or the soft war defence. Rather, there is a notably profit-driven motive to the Guard's economic involvement. Just as soft war rhetoric allowed the Guard to control communications infrastructure as part of their defence, ideology was used to 'mask a preference for opportunism and realpolitik'.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, this notable development in the ethos of the Guard requires a comment on demography. By the time Ahmadinejad ascended to the presidency in 2005, younger IRGC recruits were too young to recall the revolution or to have experienced the war.<sup>144</sup> Although they were trained to maintain a 'hunger' for opportunities to win glory and recognition to the same degree that officers during the revolution and the Holy Defence had,<sup>145</sup> this new generation of officers was driven more by opportunism. As such, the involvement of the IRGC in the communications economy under Ahmadinejad was reflective of an ideological, but also increasingly opportunistic Revolutionary Guard.

Indeed, the development of the IRGC as an organisation is marked by the increasing importance of individuals and personal networks. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the IRGC developed as a 'network' and a 'brotherhood'.<sup>146</sup> The Guard were no longer simply a 'violent group of young men'; their leaders were making careers of their service to the Guard rather than returning to civilian life.<sup>147</sup> The IRGC acts as a business fraternity within which members of the Guard can progress along a prescribed career path. Following active service, IRGC members are offered senior positions in state-affiliated media organisations and telecommunications networks such as IRIB, TCI, and MTN Irancell. Accordingly, 'no one ever leaves the IRGC'; its senior officers are viewed as an Iranian 'freemasonry' and 'Ivy League network',<sup>148</sup> signalling that the IRGC exceeds ideological devotion.

142 Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 1.

143 Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, p. xiii–xiv.

144 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will be Mercantitized'; Golkar, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guard', p. 59–60.

145 Alfonch, 'All the Guard's Men', p. 78; Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', p. 584–96.

146 Ansari, 'The Revolution Will be Mercantitized'; Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*, p. 4.

147 O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, p. xiv.

148 Anonymous British diplomat, quoted in Straw, *The English Job*, p. 339.

Military capital raised by the Guard was used for the ‘personal benefit of the military fraternity’ and particularly, the officer cadre, constituting what Siddiqā terms an ‘officer economy’.<sup>149</sup> When ‘privatising’ the national media and telecommunications infrastructure, the Ahmadinejad regime sold its majority stake to the IRGC, blending its mission of national security with ‘investor profits’.<sup>150</sup> In holding senior economic positions in communications infrastructure companies and accruing profits, the IRGC became a ‘moneymaking machine that imp[ed] on the growth of the private sector’ for the purpose of personal gain.<sup>151</sup> The IRGC’s opportunistic and exploitative involvement in the communications economy facilitated a system of military crony capitalism within Ahmadinejad’s Iran. The Guard reinvested their profits from the communications economy in IRGC-CF and KCB infrastructure projects, funding the elite officer cadre. The IRGC grew to depend on the communications economy to support the personal and financial endeavours of the Guard, who valued safeguarding their own self-interest to the same extent as they valued safeguarding the revolution.

## Conclusion

This article has questioned the extent to which the strategic narrative of the IRGC was reliant on the Iranian communications economy under President Ahmadinejad. I argued that the IRGC’s strategic narrative was reliant on the communications economy to the extent that it acted as an ideological channel, a coercive tool of power projection, and a persuasive tool of defence. I also proposed that in addition to the strategic narrative, the IRGC as an institution was reliant on the communications economy as a source of capital gain.

More broadly, this article identified tensions between public and private, coercion and persuasion, and ideological projection and capital gain; such tensions characterised the Guard’s involvement in the communications economy under Ahmadinejad. Primarily emboldened by Khamene’i’s Article 44 decree, the IRGC used the fictional separation between the public and private sectors in Iran to facilitate its rise as an economic conglomerate. Whilst the IRGC relied on the communications economy as a tool of coercion and social management during the 2009 protests, they also required its use as a tool of persuasion in the soft war defence against the soft war. Most significantly, the analysis presented

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<sup>149</sup> Siddiqā, *Military Inc.*, p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> Howard, *The Digital Origins*, p. 60.

<sup>151</sup> Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled*, p. 165.

here confirms that whilst the Guard relied on the communications economy to propagate their ideology, they also acquired and monopolised communications infrastructure as a source of capital gain. The Guard's involvement with the communications economy moved beyond the projection of revolutionary ideology, becoming equally a matter of realpolitik and of accruing military capital. The communications economy allowed the IRGC both to project the state ideology as part of its initial mandate and to satisfy self-interest.

This study offers two contributions. First, it has examined Iran from a perspective that moves beyond its characterisation as a nuclear state. In focusing on the IRGC exclusively, the analysis has demonstrated that Iran cannot be viewed as a monolithic, unidimensional polity and the IRGC cannot simply be understood as a coercive institution. Second, this study contributes to the limited literature on the relationship between strategic communications and the economy. It offers a new perspective on how strategic narratives are projected through economies, and particularly through communications economies. Whilst strategic narratives construct the truth, communications economies enable control over communicative processes; both reinforce one another to create a hegemonic understanding of reality that supports a political actor's values, interests, or objectives.

The strategic communications of the IRGC is complex and multifaceted, but this study has demonstrated that the communications economy is one tool that it uses to influence the target society and to cultivate consent. The communications economy ultimately reinforces a hegemonic understanding in which the IRGC remain central to Iranian defence and resistance. By controlling the material organisation of communication, the IRGC control part of the process of influence in Iran, ensuring that their strategic narrative and perception of reality remain dominant to the point of irrefutability. The Guard, perhaps, are on their way to creating their own ideologically imbued versions of AT&T, Verizon, and Vodafone.

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# ‘CLIMATE EMERGENCY’: HOW EMERGENCY FRAMING AFFECTS THE UNITED KINGDOM’S CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Quentin Wight

## Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between how discourses are framed, how they influence processes of change and stability, and how liberal democracies—here, the UK—govern the risks posed by climate change. It analyses divergent ways in which ‘emergency framing’ is employed in the UK’s climate governance field—a contested, multi-actor field where strategic communications works to influence processes of goal setting, policy making, standard setting, and implementation. The article inquires who is and who is not using emergency frames at varying levels of intensity, and why.

It concludes that ‘incumbent’ actors are more inclined to reject the emergency frame; they tend to employ implicit ‘techniques of emergency’ only when in support of adaptation and resilience measures. Conversely, explicit emergency framing is the defining discursive characteristic of disempowered ‘challengers’, who employ it confrontationally in their fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, strategic communication, framing, frame analysis, climate governance, climate change communications, climate emergency*

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## Introduction

In 2018, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR15)*. The key takeaway for policymakers and publics was that to limit global warming to 1.5°C—the level nations agreed to in signing the 2016 Paris Agreement to avoid the most severe impacts of climate change—we must reduce annual global emissions by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030. For many this represented a 'startlingly brief'<sup>1</sup> period given progress to date. The 45% by 2030 timeframe translated into alarming headlines that relayed an emergency on a catastrophic scale: 'we have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN' wrote *The Guardian*.<sup>2</sup> 'Why we're heading for a "climate catastrophe"' proclaimed *BBC Newsnight*.<sup>3</sup> *SR15*'s findings informed revised emissions targets in major economies, such as the United Kingdom's move to net-zero<sup>4</sup> by 2050. It seemingly justified newfound claims from Green politicians<sup>5</sup> and NGOs<sup>6</sup> that we are in the midst of a 'climate emergency'.

From relative obscurity, the term 'climate emergency' became 100 times more common in the year following the publication of *SR15*;<sup>7</sup> it was even chosen as the Oxford Dictionary's 'word of the year' for 2019. Correspondingly, the notion of a 'climate emergency' has now been endorsed by disparate actors, from social movements and campaign groups to government authorities, though

1 Barry Gills and Jamie Morgan, 'Global Climate Emergency: After COP24, Climate Science, Urgency and the Threat to Humanity', *Globalizations* Volume 17 № 6 (2020): 894.

2 Jonathan Watts, 'We Have 12 Years to Limit Climate Change Catastrophe, Warns UN', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2018. Accessed 1 November 2020

3 BBC Newsnight, 'Why We're Heading for a "Climate Catastrophe"', [YouTube video] 8 October 2018; cited in Bounegru, L., K. De Pryck, T. Venturini, and M. Mauri, "We Only Have 12 Years": YouTube and the IPCC report on global warming of 1.5°C, *First Monday*, Volume 25 № 2/3 (2020).

4 The term 'net-zero' refers to an overall balance between emissions produced and emissions taken out of the atmosphere.

5 See UK Green Party politician Carla Denyer's 2018 motion to declare a 'climate emergency' in Bristol City Council.

6 See The Club of Rome, *Climate Emergency Plan: A Collaborative Call To Action*, December 2018.

7 Oxford Languages, 'Word of the Year 2019', [online]. [Accessed 7 November 2020].

it is not without its critics.<sup>8</sup> Motivated by unprecedented climate protests in April 2019, the UK Parliament followed in the footsteps of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly by officially declaring a ‘climate emergency’—a move that marked a striking shift in political rhetoric. However, this supposed ‘acceptance’ of the emergency frame did not happen ‘naturally’ or merely in accordance with shifting scientific evidence. Nor can we say that discourses regarding the ‘climate emergency’ are settled. The struggle between competitive discourses and interpretations of the ‘climate emergency’ with regard to future policy directions and governance continues.

This article focuses on how the communicative process of ‘framing’—the persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion of ideas within discourse that shapes how we think about an issue<sup>9</sup>—is strategically employed to justify or influence what should be done to address the problem of climate change. Purposeful use of framing to telegraph meaning, prioritise a specific course of action, and focus a target audience’s attention on particular aspects of a topic to gain a favourable response, is also referred to as ‘strategic framing’.<sup>10</sup> Effective strategic communications derives from ‘persuasion and explanation (in terms that resonate with target audiences), finding shared perspectives[...] compromise, credibility, legitimacy, partnership, and support’.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, framing—with its central role in processing information—sits at the heart of Strategic Communications. By analysing how arguments are framed, we are better placed to understand how specific frames and discourses become dominant or hegemonic,<sup>12</sup> and how they come to constitute a specific field of policy<sup>13</sup> such as climate governance.

Though framing and frame analysis are essential skillsets for strategic communicators, the overlap between strategic framing and governance is often overlooked in the literature on Strategic Communications. Therefore, this

8 See veteran climatologist [Mike Hulme’s website](#). He has criticised the language of climate ‘emergency’ as ‘dangerous talk’ due to its closeness to political states of emergency. [Accessed 11 August 2020].

9 The ‘selection, emphasis, and exclusion’ made use of within a frame is applicable, but not limited, to words, phrases, metaphors, images, themes, and storylines; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, ‘Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: a Constructionist Approach’, *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 95 No 1 (1989): 1-37.

10 Kirk Hallahan, ‘Strategic Framing’, in W. Donsbach (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

11 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011) p. 9.

12 Matt McDonald, ‘Discourses of Climate Security’, *Political Geography* Volume 33 (2013): 42–51; Arjen Boin, Paul ‘t Hart, and Allen McConnell, ‘Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 16 No 1 (2009): 81–106.

13 Frank Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

article examines competing climate governance discourses in the UK, where the ‘emergency frame’ is used variously to legitimise or delegitimise<sup>14</sup> climate governance structures—namely, the goals, policies, and procedures used to address climate change. By understanding the constitutive power of framing in climate governance structures, we may better understand processes of change and stability in how liberal democracies such as the UK address climate change, and how emergency framing is employed to affect such change or stability.

I conduct a frame analysis of 18 prominent policy documents sourced from a variety of political actors. These include ‘incumbent’ entities such as government departments, non-departmental public bodies, and the Conservative Party, and ‘challengers’, such as opposing political parties, non-governmental organisations, and environmental social movement organisations. This article asks who is and who is not employing the emergency frame, how it is being done, and why. The subsequent discussion borrows from political sociology—primarily the concept of ‘governmentality’ and Fligstein and McAdam’s idea of the ‘strategic action field’<sup>15</sup>—to interpret the findings in the broader context of change and stability in UK climate governance. Such conceptual frameworks link different discursive ‘moves’ to specific political and institutional contexts and ways of understanding.

The language of emergency in politics generally acknowledges that there is only a short time horizon available to reverse an existential threat or potential catastrophe.<sup>15</sup> Hence, such language is used in appeals to accelerate social, juridical, or political change to meet such challenges. By using terms such as ‘emergency’, ‘crisis’, and ‘catastrophe’, risk and danger are problematised in a specific way. For political actors to speak of the climate in such terms is to frame climate change in a specific way and to render it governable through a specific field of knowledge, practices, and technologies. Emergency-oriented problematisations of ‘danger’ are traditionally used to justify treatment of an issue through a state’s security apparatus and/or legitimise exceptional measures to deal with it. In the oft-quoted words of literary critic Roland Barthes,

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14 *Legitimacy* here speaks to whether actions of an entity are desirable and proper within the context of a society’s systems of norms, values, and beliefs—a quality akin to a general perception of appropriateness (Suchman, Mark C., ‘Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches’, *Academy of Management Review*, Volume 20 No 3 (1995): 571–610; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). This quality is established or contested through a discursive process of *normative evaluation* referred to as ‘*legitimization*’ or ‘*delegitimization*’ from which legitimacy or illegitimacy emerges (Jens Steffek, ‘Discursive Legitimation in Environmental Governance’, *Forest Policy and Economics*, Volume 11 No 5/6 (October 2009): 313–18.

15 Stefan Skrimshire, ‘Activism for End Times: Millenarian Belief in an Age of Climate Emergency’, *Political Theology* Volume 20 No 6 (2019): 518–36.

‘language is never innocent’.<sup>16</sup> As indicated by theories of securitisation<sup>17</sup> and *crisification*,<sup>18</sup> security issues, crises, and emergencies alike are socio-politically constructed. That means that certain events are considered emergencies, while others of equal gravity are not. Following this constructivist tradition of frame analysis, the unique risk of climate change must be ‘represented, depicted and ordered before it can be governed’.<sup>19</sup>

While the emergency frame applied to climate change, like other emergency designations, aims to communicate *urgency*, *necessity*, and a *high level of risk*, the notion of a ‘climate emergency’ has grown to represent a wider narrative regarding the consequences of humanity’s current relationship with the natural world. Veteran naturalist David Attenborough says:

It may sound frightening, but the scientific evidence is that if we have not taken dramatic action within the next decade, we could face irreversible damage to the natural world and the collapse of our societies.<sup>20</sup>

Attenborough’s words highlight three key representations of climate change bound in the term ‘climate emergency’, which make it a unique type of emergency. Let us analyse what he says.

First, although the ‘climate emergency’ argument rests solely on ‘scientific evidence’, climate change is characterised by uncertainty (*‘we could face’*). This uncertainty is criticised by ‘climate sceptics’ (we can never be sure what exactly will happen or what exactly constitutes ‘safe’ emissions).<sup>21</sup> The ‘climate emergency’ argument acknowledges that we have yet to understand the ‘non-linear’ feedback and other complexities abound in the climate system,<sup>22</sup> and that we should expect sudden leaps in climate disruption and ‘bumpy temporalities’.<sup>23</sup>

16 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1967) translated from the French *Le Degré Zero de L'Écriture* (Editions du Seuil, 1953), p. 53.

17 Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’ in Ronnie Lipschutz (ed.) *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 46–86.

18 E. Paglia, ‘The Socio-scientific Construction of Global Climate Crisis’, *Geopolitics* Volume 23 № 1, (2018): 96–123.

19 J. Strippel and H. Bulkeley, ‘Governmentality’ in Karin Bäckstrand and Eva Lövbrand (eds) *Research Handbook on Climate Governance* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), p. 50.

20 David Attenborough, *Climate Change – The Facts*, *BBC One*, (2019). [Accessed: 12 August 2020].

21 Maxwell T. Boykoff, David Frame, and Samuel Randalls, ‘Discursive Stability Meets Climate Instability: A Critical Exploration of the Concept of ‘Climate Stabilization’ in Contemporary Climate Policy’, *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 20 № 1 (2010): 53–64.

22 Gills and Morgan, ‘Global Climate Emergency’.

23 William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 89.

This type of uncertainty lends itself to a frightening ‘catastrophic imaginary’.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the nature of the risk tied to climate change is represented as ‘*irreversible damage*’ and ‘[societal] *collapse*’, positioning climate change as ‘catastrophic’. Rather than being a knowable threat, ‘catastrophe’ denotes a ‘radical moment of interruption’<sup>25</sup> to our way of life, characterised by novelty, surprise, and rupture.<sup>26</sup> The logic of catastrophes induces a sense of limit, which functions as a ‘tipping point’. In the context of climate change, when a tipping point is unexpectedly crossed (at a certain place and time), the affected ecosystem passes irreversibly into potentially catastrophic disequilibrium.<sup>27</sup> Here, planetary subsystems, on which life and society depend, are pushed into a qualitatively different state.<sup>28</sup>

Third, although the most severe medium- and long-term climate change consequences have not yet materialised, the ‘climate emergency’ necessitates the acceleration of ‘*dramatic*’ action in the relatively short-term. Transformation must happen ‘*within the next decade*’. Yet this timescale for action does not align with conceptions of ‘immediate’ action in current political schedules, allowing for a kind of ‘exploitable proactive complacency’.<sup>29</sup> Skrimshire argues that the ‘temporally quickening tendency’ of proponents of the ‘climate emergency’ is at odds with the ‘liberal political order’s favoring of gradual, incremental change’.<sup>30</sup> This tension is particularly acute when the threat is non-traditional and cannot be addressed by the established security apparatus of the state. Similarly, the ‘invisible’, ‘spectral’ threat of catastrophic climate change requires a radical transformation of all aspects of life.<sup>31</sup> Yet it still may not materialise as predicted and has no ‘shadowy’ actor, or dangerous ‘other’, supposedly at its root, that can be easily blamed. Therefore, legitimising immediate radical transformation to address climate change is a difficult task for governance.

To summarise, the emergency frame applied to climate change captures three key representations tied to risk, temporality, and strategic action: (a) its uncertain and complex character; (b) its catastrophic potential (climate change is ‘non-

24 Skrimshire, ‘Activism for End Times’, p. 527.

25 Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster, ‘Governing Terrorism Through Risk: Taking Precautions, (un)Knowning the Future’, *European Journal of International Relations* Volume 13 № 1 (2007): 89–115, p. 4.

26 Ibid.

27 Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013).

28 T. M. Lenton et al., ‘Tipping Elements in the Earth’s Climate System’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Volume 105 № 6 (February 2008): 1786–93.

29 Gills and Morgan, ‘Global Climate Emergency’, p. 890.

30 Skrimshire, ‘Activism for End Times’, p. 532.

31 Mark Lacy, *Security, Technology and Global Politics: Thinking with Virilio* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

linear' and may cause 'irreversible' damage to the natural world upon which all societies depend); and (c) the need for urgent transformation in the short term (despite being a medium- to long-term threat).

## Literature Review

### *(1) Modernity, Risk, and Futurity*

By the 1990s, sociologists were describing a major temporal and spatial reconfiguration of modernity.<sup>32</sup> 'Fluid', 'post-industrial', 'global systems' were replacing the 'bounded', or 'fixed', structures of modern industrial society.<sup>33</sup> Risks previously limited to known and bounded environments—making them more calculable, controllable, and predictable—were now falling on unknown others thanks to processes of 'globalisation'.<sup>34</sup> Just as the forces of globalisation accelerated production and the flow of transportation and information across the world, various commentators argued that risks, disasters, and catastrophes were being accelerated in tandem.<sup>35</sup> For John Urry, this conceptual reconfiguration recognises 'emergent global complexities' rooted in a new 'profound relationality'<sup>36</sup> between a diverse array of people, objects, events, and information.

In this new domain of global systems, the principal governance task for securing the future was re-addressed by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. These authors emphasised risk-laden consequences in their diagnoses of modernity. In *The Risk Society*, Beck theorised that in the late modern era scientific and technological advances had created a new kind of society, in which the consciousness of risk became the first concern of politics. Rather than a linear notion of 'progress' that was concerned with the development and employment of technologies in the realms of nature and society, the new *sine qua non* of governance was political and economic 'management' of risks derived from actual or potential technological enterprise,<sup>37</sup> such as those related to carbon-based technologies and infrastructure. Giddens, Beck, and Paul Virilio—with

32 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990); Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992); Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London: Sage, 1994).

33 Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs*.

34 Scruton, *Green Philosophy*.

35 Paul Virilio and John Armitage, 'From Modernism to Hypermodernism' in John Armitage (ed.), *Virilio Live* (London: Sage, 2001); Virilio and Drew Burke, *Grey Ecology* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010).

36 Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 139.

37 Beck, *The Risk Society*.

the latter's critique of Western society's blinkered desire for progress, efficiency, and security<sup>38</sup>—suggested the need to look inwards, at ourselves and at our now global systems and beliefs to 'secure' an increasingly contingent future. Accordingly, the new modernity is 'reflexive'.<sup>39</sup> It requires 'self-confrontation' and acquiring an awareness of unintended, latent side-effects and hidden dangers of emergent technologies and an understanding of the increasingly intensified connections between many parts of the world.<sup>40</sup>

The language of risk and futurity was not new to the 1990s. However, as the Soviet threat collapsed, the practice of anticipatory governance became more complex in the West. Giddens argued 'ontological security'—a sense of order, continuity, and knowledge of roughly what to expect—had vanished.<sup>41</sup> This *Zeitgeist* shaped both the security and military establishments. Aradau and van Munster believe expert knowledge was now needed to tackle the limits of knowledge: the unknown.<sup>42</sup> After the Cold War—a period marked by a military logic of containing and deterring quantifiable material threats—the goal of 'security' was seen to be better pursued by proactive strategies of prevention and pre-emption that seek out distant dangers before they can materialise into proximate threats.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, Dörries sees the end of the Cold War as opening up the space for the issue of climate change to gain traction and replace nuclear war as the prevailing apocalyptic fear.<sup>44</sup>

Political leaders such as Donald Rumsfeld and Tony Blair spoke of how the limits of knowledge could be addressed for governance.<sup>45</sup> This governance task was further consolidated in the minds of security professionals and bureaucrats when the 9/11 Commission Report criticised intelligence agencies for failing to imagine a dangerous future. Moreover, Paglia saw in 9/11 a 'new catastrophic benchmark',<sup>46</sup> and there emerged a post-9/11 association of climate change

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38 Virilio, Mark Polizzotti (trans.), *Popular Defence and Ecological Struggles*, (New York, Colombia University: Semiotext(e), 1990), originally published as *Defense populaire et Lutttes ecologiques* (Paris: Edition Galilee, 1978); Lacy, *Security, Technology and Global Politics*.  
39 Beck, *The Risk Society*; Beck et al, *Reflective Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford University Press, 1994).  
40 Beck, 'Risk Society and the Provident State' in S. Lash, B. Szerszynski and B. Wynne (eds), *Risk, Environment and Modernity*. (London: Sage, 1996), p. 27–43, p. 28.  
41 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).  
42 Aradau and van Munster, *Governing Terrorism Through Risk*, p. 4.  
43 Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Marieke de Goede, Stephanie Simon, and Marijn Hooijink, 'Performing Preemption', *Security Dialogue*, Volume 45 No 5 (2014): 411–22.  
44 Matthias Dörries, 'Climate Catastrophes and Fear', *WIREs Climate Change* Volume 1. (2010).  
45 Scruton, *Green Philosophy*, p. 104.  
46 Paglia, 'The Socio-scientific Construction', p. 114.

with catastrophe.<sup>47</sup> This focus on futurity reflects the theorisations of Beck and Giddens, wherein our changing relationship with time is a common theme. For Beck, ‘the concept of risk reverses the relationship of past, present and future’<sup>48</sup> as governance styles become attuned to what *might* happen, and the past loses its sway. For Giddens, ‘futurology’—the charting of possible, likely, and available futures—has become more important than charting the past.<sup>49</sup>

## (II) *The Climate Change Domain*

### *Representing, Depicting, and Ordering Climate Change*

O’Neill’s literature review of climate change communication identifies ten dominant frames:<sup>50</sup>

- settled science—science has spoken, others must act
- uncertain science—scientific or technological uncertainty creates ambiguity
- political/ideological struggle—a power struggle among nations, groups, or personalities
- disaster—experienced or predicted impacts have severe consequences
- opportunity—the re-imagining of how we live and/or invest in ‘co-benefits’<sup>51</sup>
- economic—a focus on economics and the market and on the monetary costs of action or inaction
- morality and ethics—moral, religious, or ethical reasons for action or inaction
- role of science—concerned with the role of science in society rather than focussing on scientific evidence
- security—human, national, or international security is threatened
- health—severe danger to human health, for example malnutrition

47 Hulme, ‘The Conquering of Climate: Discourses of Fear and Their Dissolution’, *Geographical Journal*, Volume 174 № 1 (2008): 5–16.

48 Beck, ‘Risk Society Revisited: Theory, Politics and Research Programmes’, in Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck and Joost van Loon (eds), *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory*, (London: Sage, 2005), p. 211–29, p. 214.

49 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 51.

50 S. O’Neill et al, ‘Dominant Frames in Legacy and Social Media Coverage of the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report’, *Nature Climate Change* Volume 5 № 4 (2015): 380–85.

51 ‘Co-benefits’ refer to a win-win strategy or policy that captures both development and climate benefits in a single measure or policy

Keywords that frame the problem of climate change include ‘risk’, ‘danger’, ‘emergency’, ‘disaster’, ‘crisis’, ‘catastrophe’, ‘apocalypse’, and ‘extinction’. Scholars differentiate these variously. For Diez et al, the term ‘risk’ denotes ‘indirect’ and ‘manageable’ problems, commonly evoking ideas such as uncertainty, contingency, long-termness, resilience, preparedness, statistics, and precaution.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, ‘danger’ is linked to more traditional conceptions of security threats that are immediate, clear-cut, urgent, existential, extraordinary, and inevitable.<sup>53</sup> The terms ‘emergency’, ‘disaster’, and ‘crisis’ are used interchangeably and in combination.<sup>54</sup> The word ‘emergency’ is traditionally used to refer to risks and dangers that are developing into events in which severe consequences are about to materialise, requiring pre-emptive or precautionary action, or have materialised, requiring reactive measures.<sup>55</sup> However, unlike crises and disasters, emergencies are not always sudden.<sup>56</sup> The literature shows the unique features of an emergency as contradictory. ‘Emergencies are usually unanticipated’,<sup>57</sup> yet can be imminent.<sup>58</sup> This is an important observation given that framing climate change as ‘climate emergency’ includes the idea of reversing possible future catastrophe.

Crisis scholars Boin and Rhinard argue that we speak of catastrophe when a crisis is perceived to have extremely severe consequences.<sup>59</sup> Catastrophes have also been defined on an empirical level, as ‘those in which many millions of people could suffer severely harmful outcomes’.<sup>60</sup> However, others see ‘catastrophes’ as distinct from ‘crises’ in that the term evokes the idea of a temporal disruption with the present, followed by an unexpected and unknown future.<sup>61</sup> Catastrophes appear at the limits of management and are ‘generally seen as the intensification of disaster on a gradual continuum of destruction

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52 Thomas Diez, Franziskus von Lucke and Zehra Wellmann, *The Securitisation of Climate Change Actors, Processes and Consequences*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).

53 Ibid.

54 Hajer F. Al-Dahash, Menaha Thayaparan, and Udayangani Kulatunga, ‘Understanding the Terminologies: Disaster, Crisis and Emergency’ in P.W. Chan and C. J. Neilson (eds) *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual ARCOM Conference*, 5–7 September 2016, Manchester, UK, Association of Researchers in Construction Management, Volume 2, p. 1191–200.

55 Hodder and Martin, ‘Climate Crisis?’.

56 Al-Dahash et al, ‘Understanding the Terminologies’.

57 David Alexander, ‘Towards the development of a standard in emergency planning’, *Disaster Prevention & Management: An International Journal* 14(2), (2005) 158–75, p. 159.

58 Ibid.

59 Arjen Boin and Mark Rhinard, ‘Managing Transboundary Crises: What Role for the European Union?’, *International Studies Review*, Volume 10 (2008): 1–26.

60 Lauren Hartzell-Nichols, ‘Precaution and Solar Radiation Management’, *Ethics, Policy & Environment* Volume 15 № 2 (2012): 158–71, p. 160.

61 Aradau and van Munster, ‘Governing Terrorism Through Risk’, p. 4.

[...] it is the worst-case scenario'.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, this continuum is not traversed in a gradual, linear fashion; rather, catastrophes are characterised by rupture, novelty, surprise.<sup>63</sup>

The origins of climate catastrophe discourse have been traced back to the late-1980s.<sup>64</sup> Most discussions of 'climate emergencies' among scientists and researchers normally have 'tipping points' in mind.<sup>65</sup> They are closely tied to the notion of catastrophe in climate change literature. What is unique to 'climate emergency' is a specific type of emergency construction, rationalised by potential future catastrophe, combining risk *and* danger. The forthcoming frame analysis shows that articulations of catastrophe often combine elements of risk ('long-termness', 'uncertainty', 'contingency', 'diffuseness') and danger ('existential', 'extraordinary', 'direct', 'security', and 'survival'). Hence, the 'parallel invocation of danger and risk' have a particularly strong political impact as this approach 'legitimises extraordinary measures to counter the immediate threats, while it also strives to prolong these measures into the infinite future to cope with the remaining risks'.<sup>66</sup> Both political leaders and grassroots activists have been found to articulate the problem of climate change as potentially catastrophic, and needing sustained emergency action.

### *The Emergency*

Definitions of emergency imply the properties of danger or difficulty, immediacy, the unexpected (at a specific place and time), and the need for a specific response.<sup>67</sup> The elements of 'high-risk', 'immediacy', 'uncertainty', and 'necessity' (of action) are thus important to the concept of emergency. In response to the task of governing the uncertain future climate change catastrophe, discursive techniques used to convey the idea of emergency function in various ways. They can draw attention to the problem,<sup>68</sup> instil a sense of urgency in high-level

.....  
62 Ibid., p. 5.

63 Ibid., p. 2–15.

64 Paglia, 'The Socio-scientific Construction'.

65 Joshua B. Horton, 'The Emergency Framing of Solar Geoengineering: Time For a Different Approach', *The Anthropocene Review*, Volume 2 No 2 (2015): 147–51.

66 Diez et al, *The Securitisation of Climate Change Actors*, p. 14.

67 Nils Markusson, Franklin Ginn, Navraj Singh Ghaleigh, and Vivian Scott, 'In Case of Emergency Press Here: Framing Geoengineering as a Response to Dangerous Climate Change', *WIREs Climate Change*, Volume 5 No 2 (2014): 281–90; Council Action in the Climate Emergency 'The Climate Emergency', [caceonline.org](http://caceonline.org), [web page] n.d. [Accessed 12 June 2020].

68 Hodder and Martin, 'Climate Crisis?'; Shannon O'Lear and Simon Dalby, *Reframing Climate Change: Constructing Ecological Geopolitics* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

decision-making,<sup>69</sup> prioritise the issue,<sup>70</sup> transcend procedural constraints of ‘normal’ politics,<sup>71</sup> and legitimise or delegitimise governance structures.<sup>72</sup> When an emergency or crisis delegitimizes the power and authority that dominant social, political, or administrative discourses underpin, then ‘structural change is desired and expected by many’.<sup>73</sup> Emergencies that hold a future catastrophe as the referent subject work to change what is expected in normal governance and politics by necessitating a pre-emptive and/or precautionary logic, one that ‘justifies action in the present on the basis of events at the limit of imagination and calculation’.<sup>74</sup> So we can see how framing a situation as an emergency to encourage an audience to reverse a possible future catastrophe aligns with the changes in security and governance thinking (oriented toward ‘futurology’) that have been taken hold since the 1990s.

Political theorists have noted authoritarian and undemocratic tendencies inherent in states of emergency and exception.<sup>75</sup> In *Green Philosophy*, Roger Scruton argues that what is central to emergency politics is its opposition to the ordinary politics of compromise and its endorsement of ‘top-down’, state-led, goal-oriented structures. This assumes that only governments have the capacity to create the kind of change that is needed quickly enough.<sup>76</sup> The undemocratic, state-centric implications of emergency politics are apparent in the Copenhagen School’s ‘securitization’ theory. In this framework, audience acceptance of a ‘speech act’ articulating an existential threat elevates an issue to a higher place on the political agenda, and legitimises the transcendence of normal democratic politics and its deliberative processes.<sup>77</sup>

In the study of climate change policy, one group of scholars<sup>78</sup> sees the promotion of undemocratic, emergency techniques to achieve policy change (‘eco-authoritarianism’) as dangerous and counter-productive to popular mobilisation

69 McDonald, ‘Discourses of Climate Security’; Markusson et al, ‘In Case of Emergency’.

70 Piki Ish-Shalom, Piki, *Beyond the Veil of Knowledge: Triangulating Security, Democracy, and Academic Scholarship* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

71 McDonald, ‘Discourses of Climate Security’.

72 Boin et al, ‘Crisis Exploitation’.

73 Ibid., p. 81.

74 Aradau and van Munster, ‘Governing Terrorism Through Risk’.

75 Giorgio Agamben, ‘No to Bio-Political Tattooing’, *Le Monde*, 10 January 2004. [Accessed 2 March 20]; Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

76 Patrick Hodder and Brian Martin, ‘Climate Crisis? The Politics of Emergency Framing’, *Economic and Political Weekly* Volume 44 No 36 (2009): 55–60.

77 Barry Buzan, ‘Rethinking Security After the Cold War’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Volume 32 No 1 (1997): 5–25, p. 13–14.

78 Hulme, ‘The Conquering of Climate’.

around climate change.<sup>79</sup> However, others outline how the ‘securitization’ framework—with its invocation of an emergency—could elevate climate change to ‘high politics’ and provide motivation for aggressive emissions cuts and the systematic de-carbonisation of industrialised economies.<sup>80</sup> However, there is a consensus that climate securitising speech acts have not led to emergency measures and have failed to gain sufficient audience acceptance at domestic and international levels.<sup>81</sup> Importantly, one group of scholars argues that the securitisation of climate change, rather than fostering radical engagement with its causes, actually mobilises *resilience* in the current system as the dominant mode of securing the future.<sup>82</sup> For this group, uncertainty, catastrophe, and apocalyptic scenarios fail to mobilise political action among the public (creating apathy) and instead legitimise technocratic governance.<sup>83</sup> Based on these studies, it is important to ask if disseminating the ‘emergency’ frame also fosters this type of resilience opposed to exceptional measures that would mitigate the threat.

### Frame Analysis and Methodology

Framing refers to discursive processes of ‘sense-making’ where aspects of reality are selected and/or emphasised while others are not selected and/or de-emphasised.<sup>84</sup> Central to *stability* and *change* in the political world, frames justify, contest, and/or (de)legitimise incumbent actors and institutions, and their governance structures.<sup>85</sup> Robert Entman provides the key definition: ‘*selection and salience [...] promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described’<sup>86</sup> Gamson and Modigliani introduce the idea of ‘framing devices’,<sup>87</sup> which tell us how to think about an issue, and ‘reasoning devices’,<sup>88</sup> which tell us what should be done about it.

79 Hodder and Martin, ‘Climate Crisis?’.

80 Angela Oels, ‘Security’ in Karin Bäckstrand and Eva Lövbrand (eds), *Research Handbook on Climate Governance* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015).

81 Ibid.

82 Chris Methmann and Angela Oels, ‘From “Fearing” to “Empowering” Climate Refugees: Governing Climate-induced Migration in the Name of Resilience’, *Security Dialogue*, Volume 46 No 1 (2015): 51–68; Marieke de Goede and Samuel Randalls, ‘Precaution, Preemption: Arts and Technologies of the Actionable Future’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Volume 27 No 5 (2009): 859–78.

83 De Goede and Randalls, ‘Precaution, Preemption’, p. 874.

84 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, ‘Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000): 611–39; Mike S. Schäfer and Saffron O’Neill, ‘Frame Analysis in Climate Change Communication’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*, September 2017.

85 Steffek, ‘Discursive Legitimation’, p. 315.

86 Robert M. Entman, ‘Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’, *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), (1993): 51–58, p. 52.

87 Gamson and Modigliani, ‘Media Discourse and Public Opinion’.

88 Ibid.

This article employs the ‘manual holistic’ (standardised) approach to frame analysis by ‘[using] an *a priori* frame definition and frame set which are then searched for’.<sup>89</sup> It constructs a criterion for identifying the ‘emergency frame’ (see *Table 1*) based on the academic literature to capture the main ways emergency framing (or lack thereof) is used to justify or contest governance structures. The methodology employs Matthes & Kohring’s approach, which divides a frame into separate elements that are then coded into the analysis. By breaking the frame down into three parts—representations of risk, timeframe, and strategic action—it helps us identify the emergency frame and differentiate between intense (explicit) framing, where most or all of the elements are present, and weaker (implicit or absent) framing, where some or none are present. ‘Techniques of emergency’ refers to constituent elements and/or keywords/phrases (see *Table 1*). A text can exhibit ‘techniques of emergency’ and yet not be considered explicit emergency framing. Furthermore, explicit use of the term ‘climate emergency’ is a good *indicator* of the emergency frame, but it does not mean that all three key constituent elements of the emergency frame will be invoked.

Though Entman’s definition of framing contributes to identifying and interpreting frames, this analysis also uses three basic indicators suggested by Diez: (a) frequency of articulation; (b) position in the document—do they appear in the title, executive summary, conclusion, or somewhere in the middle of text?; (c) intensity of articulation—articulations may use alarmist and dramatic vocabulary or more cautious, neutral terms.<sup>90</sup> ‘Frequency of articulation’, ‘position in the document’, and ‘intensity of articulation’ have all been applied to the keywords and phrases, which are *a priori* classed as constitutive elements of the emergency frame (see *Table 1*).

The policy documents cited below have been drawn from the following categories of actors: governmental departments; non-departmental public bodies (specifically, the UK Committee on Climate Change); political parties; environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGO); and social movement organisations (SMO). These are not the only categories of actors that affect UK climate governance—they do not include corporate actors or news media. However, by analysing the discourses of incumbent UK government and governmental departments, a ‘neutral’ body such as the Committee on Climate Change, as well as prominent challengers to the status quo in the form of opposition parties, ENGOs, and SMOs, the scope of this article captures the main categories of variations of emergency framing.

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89 Schäfer and O’Neill, ‘Frame Analysis’, p. 11.

90 Diez et al, *The Securitisation of Climate Change Actors*, p. 29.

CODING SCHEME USED TO IDENTIFY EMERGENCY FRAMING		
Elements of the problem <sup>91</sup>	Aspects of the frame	Language and common themes
<p><b>PROBLEM DEFINITION</b>                      Predicted impacts of climate change are numerous and severe, with potentially catastrophic and/or existential consequences.                      The most vulnerable are impacted already.</p> <p><b>CAUSE/MORAL EVALUATION</b>                      Situation cannot be ignored and is generally represented as negative. Cause is attributed to the failure to enforce or lack of governance goals, rules, policies, procedures.</p> <p><b>REMEDY</b>                      Immediate and exceptional action, change, or transformation is necessary. The action may be reactive, pre-emptive and/or precautionary; 'business as usual' is morally unacceptable.</p>	<p><b>RISK</b>                      A perception of risk as 'high' and 'dangerous', with a reasonable likelihood of occurrence, and with substantial damage expected.<sup>92</sup></p> <p><b>TEMPORALITY</b>                      Sense of urgency or immediacy<sup>93</sup></p> <p><b>STRATEGIC ACTION</b>                      A feeling of necessity is communicated to the exceptional response in question.<sup>94</sup></p>	<p><b>KEYWORDS/PHRASES</b>                      short-term, long-term, high-risk, threat, catastrophic, apocalyptic, huge challenge, chaotic, out-of-control, cataclysmic, severe, irreversible, inescapable, runaway, abrupt, rapid, accelerating, immediately, urgent, necessity, emergency, emergency measures, clear-cut, existential, extraordinary, unprecedented, security, direct, danger, certain, destruction, survival, eradicate, aggressive, defence, non-linear, uncertain, tipping point, crisis, disaster, breakdown, huge disruption<sup>95</sup></p> <p><b>OTHER COMMON THEMES, METAPHORS, OVERLAPPING FRAMES</b>                      Lists and details of severe impacts                      'Pandora's Box': potential catastrophe<sup>96</sup>                      'frightening language: e.g. 'apocalyptic', 'immense risk'<sup>97</sup>                      runaway greenhouse scenario<sup>98</sup> or 'tipping points'<sup>99</sup>                      unnatural weather: 'violent' or 'extreme' weather, 'weather on steroids', 'runaway climate change'<sup>100</sup>                      'disaster frame': disaster 'strikes'—severe consequences already clear, something must be done<sup>101</sup> and/or a new model of social progress required<sup>102</sup>                      'security frame': human/national/international security<sup>103</sup>                      'settled science frame': science producing 'unprecedented', 'bombshell', 'brutally detailed' reports<sup>104</sup>                      'uncertain frame': dangerous, unknown</p>

91 Extracted from: O'Neill et al, 'Dominant Frames in Legacy and Social Media Coverage of the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report', *Nature Climate Change* Volume 5 № 4 (2015): 380–85; Lieven, 2020; McDonald, 'Discourses of Climate Security'.

92 Horton, 'The Emergency Framing'; James Painter, *Climate Change in the Media: Reporting Risk and Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

93 McDonald, 'Discourses of Climate Security'; Markusson et al, 'In Case of Emergency'; Horton, 'The Emergency Framing'; Scruton, *Green Philosophy*.

94 Markusson et al, 'In Case of Emergency'; Aradau and van Munster, 'Governing Terrorism Through Risk'; Scruton, *Green Philosophy*.

95 Keywords/phrases gathered from qualitative analysis of academic literature, including: O'Neill et al, 'Dominant Frames'; Diez et al, *The Securitisation of Climate Change Actors*.

96 Matthew C. Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter to Public Engagement', *Environment* Volume 51 № 2 (2009): 514–18.

97 O'Neill et al, 'Dominant Frames'; Chris Methmann and Delf Rothe, 'Politics For The Day After Tomorrow: The Logic of Apocalypse in Global Climate Politics', *Security Dialogue*, Volume 43 № 4 (2012): 323–44.

98 Horton, 'The Emergency Framing'.

99 Aradau and van Munster, 'Governing Terrorism Through Risk'.

100 Simon Dalby, 'Climate Change and the Insecurity Frame' in Shannon O'Lear, and Simon Dalby (eds), *Reframing Climate Change: Constructing Ecological Geopolitics* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

101 Doulton & Brown, 2009.

102 Ibid.

103 O'Neill et al, 'Dominant Frames'; McDonald, 'Discourses of Climate Security'; Lieven, 2020.

104 O'Neill et al, 'Dominant Frames'.

## Identifying the ‘Emergency Frame’ in Current UK Policy Documents Concerning Climate Change<sup>105</sup>

### Government Departments

#### I. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA): *implicit emergency framing*

DEFRA’s stated mission is to ‘protect and enhance the environment—with policies and actions that are also key to sustainable national growth’.<sup>106</sup> Since the 2016 Paris Agreement, DEFRA has published three major policy papers influential to climate governance structures: the 2017 *Climate Change Risk Assessment* (CCRA),<sup>107</sup> the 2018 *National Adaptation Programme* (NAP),<sup>108</sup> the 25 *Year Environment Plan* (25EP).<sup>109</sup>

The term ‘climate emergency’ is not used explicitly in any of these papers. Nonetheless, emergency framing is apparent in how DEFRA define the problem, the temporal dynamics, and type of response required. DEFRA frame the problem facing us as ‘already *unescapable*’<sup>110</sup> and ‘*unavoidable*’<sup>111</sup> impacts. This is ‘due to *past emissions* of greenhouse gases’<sup>112</sup> and ‘rates of change *far greater* than those experienced historically’.<sup>113</sup> This has positive and negative moral implications—presenting ‘*challenges* and *opportunities*’<sup>114</sup> in achieving the goal of ‘a stronger, more resilient economy and [...] natural environment’.<sup>115</sup> What DEFRA call ‘high future risks’ demand ‘*urgent*’ action ‘to reduce *long-term vulnerability* to climate change’.<sup>116</sup> To remedy the most urgent problems, ‘new, stronger or different [adaptation and resilience] government policies’ are needed in the next 5 years.<sup>117</sup> Due to uncertain knowledge—‘the future is *uncertain*, and our climate and weather particularly so’<sup>118</sup>—DEFRA’s ‘cornerstone principle’ is ‘resilience preparation’, and must plan for a ‘*reasonable worst case scenario*, in parallel

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105 All emphases (italics) added.

106 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), *Single Departmental Plan*, updated 27 June 2019.

107 DEFRA, *Climate Change Risk Assessment* (CCRA), 18 January 2017.

108 DEFRA, *2018 National Adaptation Programme* (NAP), 19 July 2018.

109 DEFRA, *25 Year Environment Plan* (25EP), 11 January 2018, last updated 16 May 2019.

110 CCRA, p. 1.

111 NAP, p. i.

112 CCRA, p. 1.

113 NAP, p. 1.

114 CCRA, p. 3; NAP, p. 5.

115 CCRA, p. 3.

116 CCRA, p. 7.

117 Ibid.

118 NAP, p. i.

with taking actions to reduce the likelihood of that scenario becoming reality [i.e. mitigation measures].<sup>119</sup> It clarifies the priority (moral judgement) between national mitigation and national adaptation in the following sentence: ‘*while we continue to play a leading role in international efforts to keep global temperature rises well below 2°C [...] our resilience will only be robust if we prepare for worse climate change scenarios*’.<sup>120</sup>

The *25 Year Environment Plan* warns that ‘major ecosystems (such as seas and oceans) that support *billions of people are under threat*’ and the ‘damage we cause can be *multiplied*, creating conditions *hostile to our existence*’.<sup>121</sup> Negative, existential framing is used to justify ‘joint action on a *global scale*’.<sup>122</sup> The document highlights the threat multiplier of climate change—‘prime drivers of poverty, food insecurity and instability [that] can trigger conflict and migration’.<sup>123</sup> However, implicit emergency framing does not appear until the final chapter. The remedy entails ‘achieving global change’ by ‘showing international leadership, supporting developing countries and reducing our own environmental footprint’.<sup>124</sup> Notably, national mitigation is backgrounded here, whilst ‘work[ing] together to confront pressing challenges’<sup>125</sup> is presented as the fundamental solution to climate change.

DEFRA do not explicitly use the term ‘climate emergency’ or ‘emergency’ to represent climate change, but use techniques of emergency to represent the problem and moral judgement (‘*inescapable [change]*’; ‘*unavoidable impacts*’; ‘*billions of people are under threat*’; ‘*conditions hostile to our existence*’; ‘*uncertain [future]*’; ‘*urgent action [...to create] the step change required*’). However, all three papers discuss this problem within the ‘opportunity frame’. DEFRA’s remedy to this problem includes adaptive measures to make the economy and natural environment more resilient<sup>126</sup> and leading joint action on a global scale.<sup>127</sup>

119 NAP, p. i-ii.

120 NAP, p. ii.

121 25EP, p. 110.

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid., p. 111.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 CCRA and NAP.

127 25EP.

II. *Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS):  
background/reject emergency framing*

BEIS's current mission statement is 'building a stronger, greener future by fighting coronavirus, tackling climate change, unleashing innovation and making the UK a great place to work and do business'.<sup>128</sup> The key policy document is BEIS's *2017 Clean Growth Strategy* (BEIS CGS), which 'sets out how we will deliver the clean, green growth needed to combat global warming'.<sup>129</sup>

This paper's foreword firmly situates the strategy within the 'opportunity frame'—addressing climate change as a way to invest in co-benefits: 'In short, we need higher growth with lower carbon emissions'.<sup>130</sup> The problem of climate change is framed as an opportunity to steer societies onto a new 'clean growth' trajectory. The executive summary frames greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as 'of course, [...] a global problem [...for] all countries'<sup>131</sup> and backgrounds 'domestic targets'.<sup>132</sup> The strategy sets out the 'policies and proposals that aim to accelerate the pace of "clean growth"',<sup>133</sup> i.e. 'deliver **increased** economic growth and **decreased** emissions' (original—bold).<sup>134</sup> Not until the annex section does the document begin to use emergency language regarding climate change. Here, it lists 'great risks' posed by 'global climate instability',<sup>135</sup> and states 'scientific evidence shows that increasing magnitudes of warming increase the likelihood of *severe, pervasive* and *irreversible* impacts on people and ecosystems'.<sup>136</sup> Like DEFRA, BEIS states 'there will be an *unavoidable* level of climate change, regardless of future global emissions'.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, 'as a consequence, some level of adaptation will be necessary in the UK'.<sup>138</sup> 'Uncertainty' is mentioned 18 times in the document and climate governance is said to reflect 'huge uncertainties'.<sup>139</sup> Uncertain 'projections' and 'shifting evidence' about the impact of policies is used to justify a 'flexible' approach, where emissions reductions can be supplemented by 'surplus from previous carbon budgets or the purchase of good quality international carbon credits' to meet carbon budgets.<sup>140</sup>

128 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), *What the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy does*, [Accessed 13 August 2020].

129 BEIS, 'Clean Growth Strategy' (BEIS CGS), 12 October 2017, last updated 16 April 2018.

130 Ibid., p. 3.

131 Ibid., p. 7.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., p. 10.

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid., p. 139.

136 Ibid., p. 140.

137 Ibid., p. 141.

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid., p. 47.

140 Ibid., p. 40.

In short, the paper emphasises the ‘global problem’ of GHG emissions and frames reducing national emissions as an ‘opportunity’ for co-benefits. Emergency language regarding the impacts of climate change (‘*unavoidable... climate change*’; ‘*severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts on people and ecosystems*’) is used to justify this strategy, but not until the annex. Furthermore, the terms ‘uncertainty’, ‘uncertain projections’ and ‘shifting evidence’ are used to justify a ‘flexible’ approach to climate change mitigation.

### III. Ministry of Defence (MOD): *implicit emergency framing*

The *Global Strategic Trends* paper published by the Ministry of Defence in 2018 describes ‘a strategic context for those in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and wider government who are involved in developing long term plans, strategies, policies and capabilities’.<sup>141</sup>

The executive summary emphasises the ‘increasing disruption and cost of climate change’ and predicts ‘an increasingly volatile climate’ and concerns about an ‘approaching ecological “*tipping point*”’.<sup>142</sup> Emergency language is apparent in the report’s list of ‘discontinuities’ regarding climate change. It defines discontinuities as factors that ‘cause disruption and change the path of trends, or even cause them to disappear’<sup>143</sup>: they function similarly to catastrophes/‘tipping points’. Discontinuities ‘occur in *unexpected* ways due to the *accelerating* pace of change and complex interaction of the key drivers’.<sup>144</sup> Discontinuities regarding climate change risks include ‘ecosystem *tipping point* reached’,<sup>145</sup> ‘*abrupt* changes in the natural environment’,<sup>146</sup> and ‘unilateral adoption of geoengineering’.<sup>147</sup> The ‘implications’ section for climate change also exhibits emergency language. The first bullet point states: ‘the climate is changing and will have *major consequences for humanity*. The *impacts of climate change need to be mitigated* effectively, otherwise it could act as a driver of instability and conflict with *far-reaching humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical consequences*’.<sup>148</sup>

141 Ministry of Defence (MoD), ‘*Global Strategic Trends*’ (GST), 2 October 2018.

142 GST, p. 14.

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid., p. 57.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid.

In general, the MOD's *Global Strategic Trends* employs implicit emergency framing on the problem of climate change. The paper ties 'discontinuities' to uncertainty and global complexity as the key characteristic of the climate change threat. This use of 'discontinuities' sets the discussion in the emergency frame by invoking the idea of catastrophe and tipping points. The *Implications* section represents the problem of climate change as having 'major' and 'far-reaching' consequences for 'humanity'. According to the MOD, a remedy to the problem of climate change is to effectively mitigate 'impacts', as opposed to causes.

## Non-departmental public bodies

### *IV. Committee on Climate Change (CCC): implicit emergency framing*

The CCC is an independent non-departmental public body that 'advise[s] the UK and devolved governments on emissions targets and to report to Parliament on progress made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change'.<sup>149</sup> Three key policy documents set forth this analysis: *Independent Assessment of the UK's Clean Growth Strategy* (CGS) published in January 2018, *Net Zero* (NZ) published in May 2019, and *Reducing UK Emissions 2019 Progress Report to Parliament* (PRP) published in July 2019.

Generally, the CCC construct the problem of climate change within the 'settled science frame', blaming governmental sluggishness in reducing emissions and enacting structural change. In response to the *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*, the CCC 'emphasised the *critical importance* of limiting further warming to as low a level as possible and the need for *deep and rapid reductions* in emissions to do so' in the executive summary of *Net Zero*.<sup>150</sup> The summary emphasises that '**delivery [of emissions reduction] must progress with far greater urgency**' (original—bold).<sup>151</sup> The committee warns that UK action is 'lagging behind' and, since June 2018, the government 'has delivered only 1 of 25 critical policies needed to get emissions reductions back on track'.<sup>152</sup> Though there are no explicit mentions of an 'emergency', implicit emergency framing can be detected throughout the documents due to the representation of risk, timeframe, and action required. For example, the *Clean Growth Strategy* emphasises the 'urgency' (mentioned 17 times) required in policy development,

149 Committee on Climate Change (CCC), 'About the Committee on Climate Change', Accessed 1 August 2020.

150 CCC, 'Net Zero' (NZ), 2 May 2019, p. 12.

151 Ibid., p. 11.

152 CCC, 'Reducing UK Emissions 2019 Progress Report to Parliament' (PRP) [outline], 10 July 2019.

and stresses that gaps in meeting targets ‘**must be closed**’ (original—bold)<sup>153</sup> through ‘new policies beyond those in the *Clean Growth Strategy*’.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the foreword of *Net Zero* outlines three key factors leading to the committee’s recommendation: *necessity*, feasibility, and cost-effectiveness.<sup>155</sup> ‘Necessary’ or ‘necessity’ (used 61 times) is one of the most prominent words in the CCC lexicon, and is applied to contexts ranging from carbon capture and storage being ‘a necessity not an option’,<sup>156</sup> to the ‘necessary innovation, market development and consumer take-up of low-carbon technologies’.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, ‘urgent’/‘urgency’ is mentioned 16 times in the *Clean Growth Strategy*; notably in the foreword, where the committee equates setting a net-zero target to ‘handling climate change with appropriate urgency’.<sup>158</sup> The committee warns Parliament that committing to a net-zero target means that ‘a *major ramp-up* in policy effort is now required’,<sup>159</sup> and ‘a net-zero GHG target is not credible unless policy is **ramped up significantly**’ (original—bold).<sup>160</sup> The final line of the foreword of *the Progress Report to Parliament* captures the ‘emergency’ mood of the report: ‘The *need for action* has rarely been clearer. Our message to government is simple: *Now, do it*’.<sup>161</sup> ‘Urgency’/‘urgent’ is mentioned 10 times—including ‘urgent need for action’,<sup>162</sup> the closing of policy gaps as ‘urgently necessary’,<sup>163</sup> ‘**delivery must progress with far greater urgency**’ (original—bold),<sup>164</sup> and ‘bold and decisive action is *urgently* needed from Government’.<sup>165</sup> All three reports reproduce some of the latest scientific evidence from SR15, such as conclusions regarding ‘**irreversible changes**’ (original—bold),<sup>166</sup> where ‘ice sheet instability in Antarctica and/or irreversible loss of the Greenland ice sheet could possibly be triggered by warming between 1.5°C and 2°C’.<sup>167</sup>

Neither alarmist language nor explicit mention of ‘emergency’ is found in the CCC policy discourse. However, emergency language is used (‘*critical importance*’; ‘*deep and rapid*’; ‘*far greater urgency*’; ‘*bold and decisive action is urgently*

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153 CCC, ‘*Clean Growth Strategy*’ (CGS), 17 January 2018, p. 9.

154 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

155 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

156 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

157 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

158 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

159 NZ, p. 11.

160 PRP, p. 11.

161 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

163 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

164 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

165 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

166 NZ, p. 31.

167 *Ibid.*

*needed*; ‘*Now, do it!*’), especially in emphasising the severity of the problem as proven by scientific evidence (*‘irreversible changes’*), and the necessity of urgently developing governance structures to achieve the net-zero 2050 target.

## Political Parties

### V. Conservative Party: background/reject emergency framing

The Conservative Party manifesto of 2019 mentions ‘climate change’ 8 times, ‘environment’ 22 times, and ‘climate emergency’ only once. Here, climate emergency is framed as a global problem (rather than domestic emergency): ‘climate emergency means that the challenges we face stretch far beyond our borders’.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the document positions both ‘fighting climate change’ and ‘promoting international development’ as matters of foreign policy.<sup>169</sup> Climate change is downplayed in the very structure of the manifesto—the topic does not appear until the penultimate section. The document places the problem of climate change within the socio-political context of the Conservatives’ proud ‘stewardship of the natural environment’, and asserts that ‘conservation is, and always has been, at the heart of Conservatism’.<sup>170</sup> In the Conservative view, the problem is that not having Brexit ‘done’ is holding Britain back from achieving ‘the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth’.<sup>171</sup> The Conservative approach to climate governance involves a moral/ideological judgement: ‘Unlike Jeremy Corbyn [the opposition leader], we believe that free markets, innovation and prosperity can protect the planet’.<sup>172</sup> This justifies the party’s clean growth strategy and market-based solutions to climate change. In general, emergency-associated language is avoided.

### VI. Labour Party: explicit and intense emergency framing

The Labour Party manifesto of 2019 mentions ‘climate change’ 11 times, ‘environment’ 13 times, and ‘climate emergency’ 21 times. The foreword claims that the government has ‘failed [...] on the *climate crisis*’<sup>173</sup> and promises to ‘kick-start a Green Industrial Revolution to tackle the climate emergency’.<sup>174</sup> The manifesto also emphasises that ‘Labour led the UK Parliament in declaring

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<sup>168</sup> ‘Conservative Party Manifesto 2019’, p. 55, [Accessed 12 August 2020].

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>173</sup> ‘Labour Party Manifesto 2019’, p. 1. [Accessed 20 August 2020].

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

a climate and environmental emergency'.<sup>175</sup> The foreword closes with the statement: 'This is *our last chance* to tackle the climate emergency'.<sup>176</sup> Emphasis on the 'climate emergency' is also reflected in the first section, titled 'A Green Industrial Revolution'—the proposed remedy to Conservative failings. Here, the opening paragraph states: '**This election is about the crisis of living standards and the climate and environmental emergency. Whether we are ready or not, we stand on the brink of unstoppable change**' (original—bold).<sup>177</sup> The recent election was framed as 'our best hope to protect future generations from an *uninhabitable planet*'.<sup>178</sup> The manifesto evokes the emergency frame by describing global warming as 'the *most serious threat to our shared humanity*'<sup>179</sup> and by using the phrase 'climate *catastrophe*'.<sup>180</sup> However, the opportunity frame is also evoked, for example in the statement, 'Averting climate catastrophe offers huge economic opportunities'.<sup>181</sup>

Labour's 2018 policy paper of *The Green Transformation: Labour's Environment Policy* evokes catastrophic climate change: 'It is now imperative that earth does not cross certain *tipping points* beyond which *abrupt and irreversible* impacts occur'.<sup>182</sup> To address the 'environmental crisis', the papers claims a 'transformational effort from government' is required, and 'this is not a task for tomorrow's leaders, but one that requires urgent interventions today'.<sup>183</sup> In contrast to BEIS *Clean Growth Strategy*'s indication that cutting emissions should not harm the economy, Labour's first principle is that their '**ambition is based on science**' ('settled science' frame; original—bold)<sup>184</sup> and their policies 'will be defined, *not by political compromise*, but by what is *necessary* to keep temperatures within safe levels'.<sup>185</sup> They use the analogy that 'winning slowly on climate change is the same as losing'.<sup>186</sup> For Labour, 'building a sustainable economy for the long run, requires *nothing short of societal transformation*'.<sup>187</sup>

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175 Ibid., p. 11.

176 Ibid., p. 8.

177 Ibid., p. 11.

178 Ibid.

179 Ibid., p. 98.

180 Ibid., p. 16.

181 Ibid.

182 Labour Party, '[The Green Transformation: Labour's Environment Policy](#)', September 2019, p. 3. [Accessed 12 June 2020].

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid., p. 5.

185 Ibid.

186 Ibid.

187 Ibid.

In short, the Labour Party heavily espouses the ‘climate emergency’ frame and use intense articulations to describe their current position: ‘we stand on the brink of unstoppable change’. According to Labour, the problem is the economic system created by the Conservative Party. To remedy this ‘emergency’ and ‘catastrophe’, we must support ‘societal transformation’ immediately through a Green Industrial Revolution: ‘this is our *last chance*’; we need ‘*urgent* interventions today’.

## Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

### VII. *Environmental NGOs (ENGOs): explicit and intense emergency framing*

Prominent ENGOs such as Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and Friends of the Earth (FoE) have all published policy reports that explicitly use the ‘climate emergency’ frame and heavily employ emergency language. Greenpeace, the world’s largest environmental NGO, is well-known for investigating, documenting, and exposing causes of environmental destruction. Their 2019 climate manifesto *How Government Should Address The Climate Emergency* uses the phrase ‘climate emergency’ 32 times. The introduction begins: ‘We are in the midst of a climate emergency’.<sup>188</sup> Based on the 2030 deadline proposed by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to cut global emissions by 45%, the report states ‘we *must* listen and we *must* act’.<sup>189</sup> This includes delivering “‘net zero’ greenhouse gas emissions significantly sooner than 2045’.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the report *Government Investment for a Greener and Fairer Economy* of September 2019 calls on the government to ‘**allocate at least £42 billion of public expenditure per year to help address the climate and nature emergency at home and abroad**’ (original—bold).<sup>191</sup> The report asserts that government investment on this scale ‘must begin *immediately* to drive forward the *transformation*’.<sup>192</sup>

Similarly, in its 2019 report *Keeping It Cool*, the world’s largest conservation NGO, the WWF, emphasise that ‘**in order to [...] limit global warming to 1.5°C we need urgent action to prioritise deep emissions cuts**’ (original—bold).<sup>193</sup>

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188 Greenpeace, ‘[How Government Should Address the Climate Emergency](#)’, p. 1. [Accessed 20 August 2020].

189 Ibid., p. 1.

190 Ibid., p. 3.

191 Greenpeace, ‘[Government Investment For A Greener and Fairer Economy](#)’, p. 3. [Accessed 20 August 2020].

192 Ibid.

193 WWF, ‘[Keeping It Cool](#)’, p. 1. [Accessed 13 August 2020].

Their report of April 2019 *WARNING: CLIMATE EMERGENCY* opens with: ‘UK CLIMATE EMERGENCY PACKAGE: IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO AVOID RUNAWAY CLIMATE DISASTER [sic]’.<sup>194</sup> The opening paragraph emphasises that the UK government is ‘*failing*’ to take action at anything like the *scale and speed necessary* if we are to avert disaster’ and that reaching net-zero by 2045 at the latest is ‘necessary for our survival’.<sup>195</sup> Emergency framing is further emphasised on the first page: ‘Our planet has warmed by 1°C over the last century. We are *running out of time*, and we’re the last generation with the power to avert a *climate breakdown*. *The time to act is now*’.<sup>196</sup>

Friends of the Earth—an international network of environmental organisations—released a briefing in November 2018 in response to SR15, entitled *12 Years to Save Our Planet: The Solutions to the Climate Crisis*. The document begins with ‘**A summary of the transformative change government must drive, and ways in which people can take action to align the UK to the 1.5°C Paris Climate Agreement.**’ (original—bold)<sup>197</sup> It frames climate change as ‘the biggest threat to humanity’, stating that ‘we are already feeling its impacts’.<sup>198</sup> To avoid ‘*catastrophic climate change*’,<sup>199</sup> the report calls for ‘evidence-based solutions’<sup>200</sup> for reaching net-zero by 2045, including ‘large-scale investment [...] to enable the *transformational changes* that will help avoid *catastrophe*’.<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, it states, that the ‘climate crisis we face requires an even greater and bolder response’ than ‘the creation of the welfare state that followed the devastation of World War 2’.<sup>202</sup>

## Social Movement Organizations (SMOs)

### VIII. *Extinction Rebellion (XR): explicit and intense emergency framing*

Environmental social movement organisations such as Extinction Rebellion (XR)—the No. 1 influencer on climate awareness<sup>203</sup>—have spearheaded the ‘climate emergency’ discourse and led the call for the UK to declare a ‘climate emergency’.

194 WWF, ‘WARNING: CLIMATE EMERGENCY’. [Accessed 12 July 2020].

195 Ibid.

196 Ibid.

197 FoE, ‘12 years to save our planet’, p. 1. [Accessed 10 June 2020].

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., p. 2.

201 Ibid.

202 Ibid., p. 5.

203 Onalytica, 2020 [https://onalytica.com/]

XR's policy brief *The Emergency* begins: '*The science is clear*: It is understood that we are facing an *unprecedented* global emergency. We are in a *life or death* situation of our own making. *We must act now*.'<sup>204</sup> The document heavily employs functional honorifics to imbue the piece with credibility before the argument is even laid out, quoting James Hansen, former Director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies: 'We are in a planetary emergency'.<sup>205</sup> And, Ban Ki-Moon, former UN Secretary General: 'This is an emergency and for emergency situations we need emergency action.'<sup>206</sup> The first subheading in the document reads: '**Human activity is causing irreparable harm to the life on this world**' (original—bold).<sup>207</sup> This section emphasises that '*catastrophic* effects on human society and the natural world may *spiral out of control* if this climate and ecological emergency is not addressed in time'.<sup>208</sup> The paper details the environmental impacts and human consequences of 'destabilizing events'—'millions displaced' and 'increased risk of war and conflict'.<sup>209</sup> Much emphasis is placed on 'tipping points'—'if we do not change course by 2020, we risk missing the point where we can avoid *uncontrollable climate and ecological breakdown*, with disastrous consequences for people and for all life on Earth'.<sup>210</sup> Further sections employ terms such as '**urgency**', '**faster than expected**', '**risk and the precautionary principle**', and '**feedback and tipping points**' (original— all bold).<sup>211</sup> The brief concludes: 'If we don't take radical action, or [if we] trigger these tipping points, the outcome would be devastating for natural ecosystems and human societies across the world'.<sup>212</sup>

Ultimately, emergency framing is used to legitimise the organisation's three demands. The government must: declare a climate and ecological emergency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2025, and must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice.

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204 XR, '*The Emergency*'. [Accessed 13 July 2020].

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

209 Ibid.

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid.

## Discussion

Our frame analysis shows that XR, Greenpeace, WWF, FoE, and the Labour Party all explicitly embrace the ‘climate emergency’ frame and frequently and intensely employ techniques of emergency. By contrast, the CCC, DEFRA, and the MoD implicitly use emergency framing when addressing climate change by employing techniques of emergency without explicitly using the terms ‘emergency’ or ‘climate emergency’. Then, finally, the Conservative Party and BEIS downplay emergency language in depicting climate change or avoid it altogether.

But what does this really tell us about power struggles in the world of climate governance and activism? And why is this relevant for strategic communicators trying to gauge how language is used to shift and shape longer term discourses, policies, and attitudes toward climate change?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to view these framing examples in relation to specific political and institutional contexts, structures, and rationalities in which they can be meaningfully understood. Here, by using concepts borrowed from political sociology—primarily, the concept of ‘governmentality’ and Fligstein and McAdam’s idea of the ‘strategic action field’—we can connect the findings of our study to broader, extratextual dimensions in understanding how language and discursive frames influence processes of change and stability in UK climate governance.

### I. Competing mentalities in the UK’s climate governance

From the outset, this article has borrowed from the language of ‘social field’ theory by differentiating ‘incumbents’, those who help to produce and reproduce the status quo, from ‘challengers’, those who articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position within it. ‘Incumbents’ are those dominant actors who ‘wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the [field’s] dominant organization’.<sup>213</sup> ‘Challengers’, by contrast, ‘occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operation’.<sup>214</sup> This classification helps us grasp how relative power differentials affect particular mentalities (ways of

213 Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, ‘Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields’, *Sociological Theory* Volume 29 № 1 (2011): 1–26, p. 5.  
214 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

thinking and acting) invested in the process of governing climate change. This mode of inquiry is akin to governmentality approaches to climate governance, which contextualise and examine its particular articulations, rationalities, and programs.<sup>215</sup> The concept of ‘governmentality’ was originally advanced by Michel Foucault in the 1970s as a perspective on how power finds new expressions through new circumstances of governance. It has since been adopted and adapted by a range of scholars, so that governmentality today is conceived of as a ‘cluster of concepts that can be used to enhance the think-ability and criticize-ability of past and present forms of governance.’<sup>216</sup>

In line with governmentality approaches to climate governance, I now redeploy three mentalities borrowed from Anthony Giddens, what he calls ‘adaptive reactions’ to a risk-laden modernity: ‘sustained optimism’, ‘radical engagement’, and ‘pragmatic acceptance’.<sup>217</sup> These broad but divergent mentalities are reflected in the language analysed in the previous section.

#### *The Incumbents: Pragmatic Acceptance and Sustained Optimism*

The case study shows that, for the most part, incumbent actors embrace ‘pragmatic acceptance’ and ‘sustained optimism’. However, the same cannot be said for the Committee on Climate Change, who advocate a more radical engagement in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

‘Pragmatic acceptance’ involves a ‘concentration on “surviving”’.<sup>218</sup> It takes the position that much in the modern world is contingent; therefore, pragmatic participation maintains a focus on day-to-day problems and tasks.<sup>219</sup> In the context of climate change, this translates as a focus on adapting to its ‘already inescapable’<sup>220</sup> impacts. With its focus on the day-to-day, the mentality of ‘pragmatic acceptance’ fosters the integration of an ecological reasoning into the operational routines of a range of actors using the logic of resilience—a broad process that Angela Oels refers to as ‘climatization’.<sup>221</sup> Therefore, adaptation

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215 For an in-depth analysis of governmentality in the context of climate governance, see Stripple and Bulkely, ‘Governmentality’, in Karin Bäckstrand and Eva Lövbrand, (eds) *Research Handbook on Climate Governance*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015).

216 William, *Governmentality*, p. 2.

217 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 134–37.

218 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

219 *Ibid.*

220 DEFRA, ‘CCRA’, p. 1.

221 Oels, ‘From ‘Securitization’ of Climate Change to ‘Climatization’ of the Security Field’, In Scheffran J., Brzoska M., Brauch H., Link P., Schilling J. (eds) *Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict*. Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace Volume 8. (Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2012): 185–205.

and resilience are generally the privileged modes of action for the ‘pragmatic acceptance’ mentality. While the strategy of *mitigation* constitutes a process of ‘interception’, or dealing with risks by ensuring they will not arise, the strategies of *resilience* and *adaptation* entail preparing for adversity rather than striving to avoid it.<sup>222</sup> Instead of influencing or eliminating the sources from which risks arise (such as CO<sup>2</sup> emissions), resilience and adaptation focus on improving competences or changing operational routines so that we are better able to cope when things change for the worse.

Several indications from this analysis support the conclusion that incumbents maintain a mentality of ‘pragmatic acceptance’. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Defence—both concerned with adaptation and resilience—are more inclined to use emergency language in framing the problem of climate change than the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which is tasked with mitigation. For example, DEFRA foregrounds emergency language, using such words as ‘unescapable’, ‘unavoidable’, ‘accelerating’, ‘hostile’, and ‘uncertain’ to describe the impacts of climate change in the UK. For DEFRA, the causal interpretation emphasises ‘past emissions’, and the remedy is to reduce ‘long-term vulnerability’ through new adaptation and resilience policies in the coming five years. The MoD’s *Global Strategic Trends*, with its discussion of ‘discontinuities’ and ‘tipping points’, also invokes potential future catastrophe. However, again, the answer given by the MoD relies on mitigating the *impacts* of climate change, as opposed to attacking its root causes.

Compare these to BEIS’s *Clean Growth Strategy*, in which the few examples of emergency language used are relegated to the annex section. Furthermore, all three organisations use the ‘uncertainty frame’ and concept of ‘contingency’ in their reports. However, rather than using the uncertain character of the climate emergency to justify *pre-emptive mitigation*, for example, these concepts are invoked to justify the strategies of resilience and adaptation and to necessitate radical preparedness: ‘the future is uncertain’ and thus ‘we prepare for worse climate change scenarios’.<sup>223</sup> Therefore, we can say that the use of emergency language to justify the strategies of *adaptation* and *resilience* indicates the inclination of incumbent power towards a mentality of ‘pragmatic acceptance’ in addressing climate change.

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<sup>222</sup> Scruton, *Green Philosophy*.

<sup>223</sup> DEFRA, ‘NAP’, p. i.

In this context, ‘sustained optimism’ most often refers to ‘faith’ in the capitalist zone of ‘free markets’ and technological innovation to master and control complex climate change and its risk-laden consequences.<sup>224</sup> The Conservative *Manifesto* reflects this mentality: ‘[W]e believe that free markets, innovation and prosperity can protect the planet.’<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, BEIS’s framing of ‘clean growth’ celebrates the creativity of capitalism in adapting to climate change. While many scholars and practitioners maintain that one of the most significant impediments to meaningful change in reducing carbon in the atmosphere is ‘our system of capital accumulation with its commitment to material growth of economies’.<sup>226</sup> The UK’s national mitigation strategy is rooted in investing in co-benefits (i.e. ‘growth’) rather than intervening in the economy (e.g. through regulation). BEIS externalises climate change as a ‘global problem’ and practices ‘sustained optimism’ in the UK’s ability to tackle the problems posed by climate change without deviating from the status quo. Therefore, we can say that the language used by BEIS and the Conservative Party reflects a mentality of ‘sustained optimism’, one that is at odds with the radical change proposed by challengers, as we shall see next.

#### *The Challengers: Radical Engagement*

‘Radical engagement’ is an ‘attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger’.<sup>227</sup> In the case of climate change, the main source can be identified as the carbon-based economic system we rely on, and as GHG emissions in particular. Those who take this position recognise that we are increasingly beset by major problems and believe that ‘we can and should mobilise either to reduce their impact or to transcend them’.<sup>228</sup>

The approaches to governing risk that are most associated with the mentality of ‘radical engagement’ are *precaution* and *pre-emption*—strategies that seek to shape the contingencies of the future through immediate engagement with the source of the risk.<sup>229</sup> As reflected in the concept of ‘precautionary risk management’,<sup>230</sup> the focus here is on avoiding catastrophic futures via drastic pre-emption, involving ‘policies that actively seek to prevent situations from

224 Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler and John Armitage, ‘The Information Bomb: A Conversation’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* Volume 4 No 2 (1999): 81–90; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 136.

225 ‘Conservative Party Manifesto 2019’, p. 55.

226 Gills and Morgan, ‘Global Climate Emergency’, p. 897.

227 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 137.

228 Ibid.

229 Hodder and Martin, ‘Climate Crisis?’.

230 Aradau and van Munster, ‘Governing Terrorism Through Risk’, p. 89–115.

becoming catastrophic at some indefinite point in the future'.<sup>231</sup> Here, risk must be prevented at all costs, even in the absence of complete scientific evidence. This approach views the probable risks that stem from climate change as unpredictable, but irreversibly catastrophic should they in fact occur.<sup>232</sup>

There are numerous instances in the documents produced by challengers that reflect the mentality of radical engagement. The 'climate emergency frame' in and of itself epitomises a call for 'radical engagement' and 'precautionary risk management' by defining the problem as already severe and potentially catastrophic, thus necessitating immediate and radical change and transformation to prevent the worst potential consequences from becoming reality at all costs. Here, radical engagement is needed in response to an identified failure in climate governance, in combination with our current economic model.<sup>233</sup> The proposed remedy is investing in a 'greener and fairer economy'<sup>234</sup> and 'prioritis[ing] deep emissions cuts'.<sup>235</sup> We have seen that challengers use the language of emergency intensely and frequently to justify the need for radical engagement. Labour warns that 'we stand on the brink of unstoppable change'<sup>236</sup>—i.e. our current lack of engagement means the scale of the challenge is almost overwhelming, and Friends of the Earth's *12 Years to Save the Planet* clearly emphasises the short time horizon for radically engaging and thus reversing catastrophe.

At the heart of the power struggle in the world of climate politics is a conflict in governance mentalities—pragmatic acceptance and sustained optimism versus radical engagement. Though not all language used by the different groups will neatly reflect this division, the frame analysis has allowed us to identify these mentalities, which play a large part in determining the direction of climate policy in the UK.

## II. An episode of contention: how climate change came to be seen as an emergency

Beyond governance mentalities, we can further contextualise the analysis presented here so as to understand the central role emergency framing plays in the development of collective strategic action by challengers to the status quo.

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>232</sup> Oels, 'Rendering Climate Change Governable By Risk: From Probability to Contingency', *Geoforum*, Volume 45, (2013): 17–29.

<sup>233</sup> *Labour Party Manifesto 2019*, p. 6.

<sup>234</sup> Greenpeace, 'Government Investment For A Greener and Fairer Economy'

<sup>235</sup> WWF, 'Keeping It Cool', p. 1.

<sup>236</sup> *Labour Party Manifesto 2019*, p. 11.

The ‘strategic action field’ framework proposed by Fligstein and McAdam’s in their work on cooperation and collaboration in social fields helps us see how the emergency frame has functioned to facilitate collective action since the publication of *SR15*.

A strategic action field (SAF) is ‘a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field [e.g. in the climate governance context, the goals, policies, and procedures used to address climate change], the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field’s rules [i.e. the tactics that are possible, legitimate, and interpretable for each category of actor in the field].’<sup>237</sup> The idea of the SAF emphasizes the contingency and plasticity of interaction within social fields. Here, incumbents and challengers vie for strategic advantage by deploying ‘social skills’. Social skill is premised on the idea that actors produce collective action by strategically engaging others—so to secure their ‘willing cooperation’—in an effort to create, stabilise, or transform the structures of the field.<sup>238</sup> Framing is an aspect of social skill; it is a cognitive mechanism that is ubiquitously employed in power struggles among unequal actors within a contested field,<sup>239</sup> such as the field of climate governance in the UK. The SAF framework helps to clarify how discursive mechanisms, such as the emergency frame, are linked to broader processes of collective power-making and power-countering. The remaining discussion will trace how the emergency frame became hegemonic in the UK’s climate debate, and thus how it came to steer climate governance in a new direction.

The rapid rise of the emergency frame began with publication of the *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This report can be understood as an ‘exogenous shock’, disrupting the conversation that had been carried on within the UK up to that point. Exogenous shocks refer to significant changes in one field that can threaten the stability of many proximate fields; typically, by ‘undermining the legitimating ideas on which the field rests’.<sup>240</sup> In the case of *SR15*, the report facilitated, or at least consolidated, the co-construction of the threat of climate change as ‘catastrophic’. From its opening lines, the report emphasised the

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<sup>237</sup> Fligstein and McAdam, ‘*Toward a General Theory*’, p. 3–4.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2–7.

<sup>239</sup> Benford and Snow, ‘*Framing Processes and Social Movements*’.

<sup>240</sup> Fligstein and McAdam, ‘*Toward a General Theory*’, p. 17.

urgency and immensity of the challenge humanity faces: ‘Now more than ever, unprecedented and urgent action is required of all nations.’<sup>241</sup> Moreover, the data presented in the report—significantly, that limiting warming to 1.5°C would require annual emissions to fall by 45% by 2030—played a crucial role in anchoring the emergency discourse and providing a metric through which to understand the crisis. In response to the publication of *SR15*, various actors within the field of governance in the UK joined in the co-construction of the idea of climate change as a catastrophic threat by communicating it for broader consumption in emergency-laden terms, so as to precipitate urgent action. The CCC’s *Net Zero* report, Greenpeace’s *Climate Manifesto*, the WWF’s *Keeping It Cool*, and FoE’s *12 Years to Save the Planet* all take up the baton. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the 45%-by-2030 timeframe was translated into alarming news headlines that evoked a sense of emergency, such as BBC Newsnight’s report ‘Why we’re heading for a “climate catastrophe”’.<sup>242</sup>

This collective construction of climate change as a catastrophic threat was the first step in the ‘episode of contention’ that followed the publication of *SR15*. For Fligstein and McAdam, an episode of contention is ‘a period of emergent, sustained contentious interaction between [...] actors utilizing new and innovative forms of action vis-a-vis one another’.<sup>243</sup> During such episodes, a diverse array of challengers can be expected to propose and seek to mobilise consensus around a particular conception of the field.<sup>244</sup> Therefore, those who undertake strategic action must be able to secure the willing cooperation of multiple groups, even if they differ on core beliefs, facts, and values.<sup>245</sup> To do this, it is common that actors form a coalition centred on a particular frame or storyline, i.e. interpretation of risk or threat. This type of ‘discourse coalition’<sup>246</sup> allows for shared ways of thinking about and discussing issues and, in turn, drives the argumentation process by empowering unequal and divergent actors.<sup>247</sup> In other words, actors interact with other actors to create ‘webs of meaning’.<sup>248</sup>

241 IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*; cited in Gills and Morgan, ‘Global Climate Emergency’, p. 885.

242 BBC Newsnight, ‘Why We’re Heading for a “Climate Catastrophe”’, [YouTube video] 8 October 2018.

243 Fligstein and McAdam, ‘Toward a General Theory’, p. 9.

244 Fligstein, ‘Markets as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institutions’, *American Sociological Review* Volume 61 No. 4 (1996): 656–73; David Snow and Robert Benford, ‘Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization’ in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (eds), *International Social Movement Research: From Structure to Action* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988): 197–218.

245 Fligstein and McAdam, ‘Toward a General Theory’, p. 7.

246 Maarten Hajer, ‘Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice’ in John F. Forester and Frank Fischer, (eds) *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (Duke University Press Books, 1993).

247 Ibid.

248 Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy*, p. 113.

We posit that the ‘climate emergency frame’ functioned as a shared ‘storyline’ used by divergent actors to effect change in the UK’s climate governance field. Originally propagated most notably by the social movement organisation Extinction Rebellion, the ‘climate emergency frame’ became endorsed by a range of challengers and, eventually, by incumbents as well. But, crucial to its persuasiveness, rather than it having ‘a stable core of cognitive commitments and beliefs’,<sup>249</sup> the ‘climate emergency’ storyline was vague on particular points, e.g. it simply ‘declare[d] a climate emergency’. Rather than sharing core beliefs, its proponents shared a particular way of thinking about and discussing climate change—as catastrophic; if we don’t act radically and act now the consequences will be dire.

An important next step in the rise of the ‘climate emergency’ was its ‘organizational appropriation’, i.e. the process by which the emerging conception of the threat of climate change came to be wedded to a specific organizational vehicle.<sup>250</sup> Here, the advocacy of the emergency storyline by opposition political parties allowed Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to make a play for ‘organizational appropriation’ when in May 2019 he introduced a motion in Parliament to declare an environmental and climate emergency. In his speech to the House, he asserted that ‘[W]e are living in a climate crisis that will spiral dangerously out of control unless we take rapid and dramatic action now.’<sup>251</sup> Action at the level of civil society—the unprecedented climate protests of 2019—brought about further consolidation of the emergency frame among both governance actors and wider UK and global audiences. ‘Innovative action’ (defined as action that violates accepted practices in support of group interests) by SMOs, such as the ten-day ‘shut down’ of central London by Extinction Rebellion in April 2019, and the strikes across the country organised by the UK Student Climate Network, in which roughly 300,000 students participated, further propelled the collective construction of the emergency framework.<sup>252</sup>

‘Settlements’ refer to new, or refurbished, field rules and cultural norms that arise following episodes of contention.<sup>253</sup> In response to the episode of contention that I have outlined, there are several apparent ‘settlements’ that are important to note. These settlements represent a significant change in

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249 Ibid., p. 103.

250 Fligstein and McAdam, ‘*Toward a General Theory*’, p. 17.

251 Corbyn, Jeremy, ‘*Jeremy Corbyn Declares Environment and Climate Emergency*’, [speech], 1 May 2019. [Accessed 11 July 2020].

252 Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts, ‘*“Enough is Enough”*: Biggest-ever Climate Protest Sweeps UK’, *The Guardian*, 20 September 2019. [Accessed 7 November 2020].

253 Fligstein and McAdam, ‘*Toward a General Theory*’, p. 10.

direction of UK climate governance. They include Parliament's declaration of a 'climate emergency' in May 2019 and the co-option of the emergency frame by incumbent actors in their public discourse;<sup>254</sup> the government's revision of its GHG emissions reduction schedule (bringing forward the target for net zero to 2050, instead of 80% by 2050); the commissioning of a Citizens' Assembly (UK Climate Assembly) by six cross-party House of Commons committees; and, most recently, the UK government's policy paper entitled 'The ten point plan for a green industrial revolution'.<sup>255</sup> Therefore, in summary, we can see how strategic framing in the form of emergency framing and the 'climate emergency' storyline was central in catalysing change in climate governance structures.

## Conclusion

This article's study and discussion reveal several important conclusions regarding how emergency framing is used to influence, legitimise, or delegitimise the United Kingdom's climate governance structures. First, although this study has shown that it is rare for incumbent actors to explicitly employ the emergency frame, emergency language is widely used to legitimise their policies of adaptation and resilience, therefore also effecting a broader legitimisation process for those government departments or actors. This can be seen in DEFRA and the MoD's implicit use of the emergency frame. The 'opportunity frame' is the preferred frame for the problem of climate change for incumbent actors BEIS and the Conservative Party: climate change provides an opportunity to promote investment in co-benefits. With these actors, the emergency language that is employed is downplayed or used to externalise climate change as a global problem requiring global joint action.

Second, explicit emergency framing and intense emergency language are a defining discursive feature in the policy documents of challengers such as ENGOs and Extinction Rebellion, and in those of the Labour Party. For these actors, it appears that the central function of emergency framing is to delegitimise present governance structures and incumbent progress in addressing climate change. This process of de-legitimation also works to legitimise the challengers themselves, by portraying their radical solutions as desirable and proper and in accordance with the scientific evidence.

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254 DEFRA's most recent policy paper for the 2020 Environmental Bill where they explicitly use the term 'climate emergency'.

255 This paper co-opts the language of Labour's 2019 'Environment Policy' paper (See BEIS, *The Ten Point Plan For a Green Industrial Revolution*, updated 18 November 2019).

Third, actors such as the CCC also employ emergency language in support of rapid emissions reductions but are arguably fettered by cautious professional norms owing to their status as an official public body, and they therefore refrain from the dramatic normative pronouncements common in the discourse of the challengers.

It is interesting to observe how the various ways emergency language is employed reflect the divergent mentalities of the various actors towards managing risk. The mentalities correlate with the respective positions of the actors within the field. The incumbents resist transformation through adopting the mentalities of pragmatic acceptance and sustained optimism, while the challengers display an unfettered inclination towards radical engagement in the form of advocating deep structural change.

Finally, the Strategic Action Field framework helps us understand how the emergency frame functions with regard to broader processes of change in the field of UK climate governance. Significantly, the emergency frame functions as the key storyline—We are in the midst of a climate emergency!—for a discourse coalition amongst unequal but socially-skilled challengers.

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# THE LONG DECADE OF DISINFORMATION

## A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

*Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It.* Richard Stengel. London: Grove Press, 2020.

*Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception and Manipulation.* Jim Macnamara. New York: Peter Lang, 2020.

*The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology and Disruptive Communications in the United States.* W. Lance Bennet and Steven Livingston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

**Keywords**—*disinformation, strategic communications, strategic communication, information campaigns, influence operations, information war.*

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## Introduction

‘Disinformation’ was well positioned to become the word of the year in 2020, as a key term that describes the notional framework within which this year would be remembered in history. The Coronavirus pandemic and the runoff in the US presidential elections were a perfect set-up for a perfect storm of disinformation. The possibilities for abuse, misuse, and exploitation of information, true or false, were endless. Disinformation, however, while widespread, turned out not to be the entire story of what has taken place in 2020. In a remarkable progression from 2016, experts, journalists, officials, and media executives were more empowered to implement policies that brought commendable achievements in curbing disturbing trends of disinformation.

It is possible that 2020 ended what future historians may call ‘the long 2010s’. This ‘long’ decade began with the 2008 financial crisis, the election of the first African-American US President, and the rise of social networks; and ended with a global pandemic, Trump’s losing the presidential elections, and the first, still self-imposed and flawed, mass attempt to crackdown on online disinformation. These events demonstrated how cyber-digital innovations revolutionised, for better or worse, the ways in which people consume and disseminate information, and transformed economy, society, and politics. This makes it an appropriate time to look at what has taken place in the field of information during this seminal year that ended a turbulent and transformative decade.

Disinformation was widespread in 2020. Social media overflowed with misleading or false information about the Coronavirus and the US elections. Enigmatic posts suggested that drinking water or eating garlic reduced the risks of Coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> After recovering from Coronavirus, US President Donald Trump claimed that he had a ‘protective glow’ and was ‘immune’ to the disease, contrary to scientific advice, and thus better suited for re-election.<sup>2</sup> These fallacies spread so fast that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) declared an ‘infodemic’ and ‘disinfodemic’.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Reality Check team, ‘Coronavirus: The Fake Health Advice You Should Ignore’, *BBC News*, 8 March 2020.

2 *Key News*, ‘Coronavirus: Donald Trump Claims He Has ‘Protective Glow’ and ‘Immunity’ From COVID-19’, 12 October 2020.

3 Jim Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception and Manipulation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), p. 2.

This is an endemic state of disinformation in which one has to ‘question not only the information that you are getting but also the means through which you get it’.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, on 3 November 2020, Donald Trump, the world’s most notorious spreader and amplifier of disinformation, lost to Joe Biden, whom he viciously nicknamed ‘Sleepy Joe’, mocking him for his dry demeanour and scrupulous attention to detail. Biden’s election was not only a symbolic victory in a contest between two personalities that treated scientific and fact-based truth in profoundly different ways. It was an indication that the enormous energy invested by researchers and officials in recent years towards understanding the problems of disinformation and delivering solutions had begun to work. Most policy steps taken during 2020 probably had no direct effect on the outcome of the election. But they signified that today we have both a greater willingness and better tools to tackle the problems of disinformation.

In 2020, media organisations and social media companies took steps to address their previous failures and mistakes, in some cases at a cost to themselves. Famously, Twitter increased its labelling of President Trump’s questionable tweets—including his claims about immunity to Coronavirus and election fraud—as ‘misleading’.<sup>5</sup> Twitter’s decision to curb Trump’s ability to use the platform for promoting disinformation signalled that social media giants were responding to pressure to act more like publishers and to take responsibility for the information that was shared by users and advertisers. This was an even greater achievement, considering that it was a self-imposed task by the social media company. It was introduced even though Section 230 in the US Communication Decency Act (CDA)—the revision of which many consider as imperative to fixing online disinformation—is still in force, stating that ‘no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information’.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Richard Stengel, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It* (London: Grove Press, 2020), p. 2.

5 *Sky News*, ‘[Coronavirus: Donald Trump Claims He Has ‘Protective Glow’](#)’; See Donald Trump’s [@realdonaldtrump](#) account on Twitter.

6 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 294.

An even starker example of disinformation that could have had a major impact on the course of the elections was a dubious report about Hunter Biden's allegedly recovered computer. On 14 October, the conservative tabloid *New York Post* published that it was given access to a computer whose owner was allegedly Joe Biden's son, Hunter, and which revealed emails that tied his father to his business dealings in Ukraine. Despite the potentially explosive nature of the materials, mainstream media did not leap to cover the story. The background tale of a broken computer left in a small repair shop in Delaware that had found its way into the hands of Rudy Giuliani and Steve Bannon raised many questions.<sup>7</sup> Journalists from several outlets reported that the *New York Post's* denial to grant them access to the primary materials retrieved from the computer put them off covering the story.<sup>8</sup> Facebook, on its part, intentionally decelerated its dissemination on the platform.<sup>9</sup>

The steps taken by mainstream journalists and social media executives were not perfect at stopping the dissemination of the story, although they improved on their performance during the 2016 election. Critics pointed out that the original *New York Post* story had received an estimated 54,115,025 views on Facebook,<sup>10</sup> and inconsistent policy across companies and platforms meant that the story had reached large audiences.<sup>11</sup> This criticism echoes a profound critique of mainstream and new media for playing into the hands of disruptive actors by amplifying their messages.<sup>12</sup> But in comparison to the hack and leak operation of Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails, coverage of the *New York Post's* story shows that some lessons have been learned. Mainstream media's amplification of DNC's emails, despite early signs that they were stolen by Russia's security agencies, according to Stengel and others, caused Clinton's campaign more damage than the hack itself.<sup>13</sup> The same cannot be said about Biden's story, which was covered by mainstream media largely suggesting links to a possible Russian disinformation

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7 Rudy Giuliani is the former Mayor of New York City and currently serves as Donald Trump's personal attorney; Steve Bannon was CEO of Trump's first presidential campaign and served as his chief strategist at the White House for seven months in 2017.

8 Ken Dilanian and Tom Winter, '[Here's What Happened When NBC News Tried to Report on the Alleged Hunter Biden Emails](#)', *NBC News*, 30 October 2020.

9 Alex Hern, '[Facebook leak reveals policies on restricting New York Post's Biden story](#)', *The Guardian*, 30 October 2020.

10 David Gilbert, '[Facebook Failed Miserably in its Attempt to Stop the Hunter Biden Story](#)', *Vice*, 23 October 2020.

11 Siva Vaidhyanathan, 'The Hunter Biden Story Was a Test for Tech Platforms. They Barely Passed', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2020.

12 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 11; Todd C. Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*, RAND Corporation (2018).

13 Stengel, p. 11.

attempt due to Giuliani's contacts with a known Russian agent in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Media responses to the two incidents showed that direct and blatant disinformation is better addressed today than four years ago.

This does not mean that the problem of disinformation is closer to being resolved. Far from it. Mainstream and social media are still guided by ideational and business imperatives that allow for mass manipulation of information. Moreover, the latest flare-up in conspiracy theories regarding alleged US election fraud shows the enormous power of alternative media outlets, which can deliver false information to millions, bypassing traditional media outlets.<sup>15</sup> There are also profound problems arising from audiences' points of view. The social, economic, and psychological conditions that allowed disinformation to escalate significantly in the 2010s are all still there. Authors agree that the ability of malicious actors to prey on target audiences was due to fundamental weakness in our societies—decline in social interaction, loss of trust in institutions, economic inequalities, and social marginalisation.<sup>16</sup> Or as Stengel puts it, these actors 'weaponised [...] grievance', which is still very much present in our lives.<sup>17</sup>

Three engaging books published this year by leading media practitioners and scholars, which are discussed in this essay, put the events of 2020 in historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives, and allow us to discern key trends and to identify conceptual gaps and blind spots in our understanding of the problem of disinformation. Richard Stengel, who served as the US Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and was formerly the editor of *Time* magazine, tells his story from a practitioner's point of view. By sharing his experience at the State Department during crucial years in the rise of disinformation between 2013 and 2016 he offers a peek into one of the world's prime institutions charged with addressing this problem in the international arena.

Lance W. Bennet and Stephen Livingston offer an academic socio-historical analysis by focusing on the rise of neoliberal economics in the US as a key factor contributing to the rise of disinformation. Their edited volume underlines that

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14 Shane Harris, 'White House Was Warned Giuliani Was Target of Russian Intelligence Operation to Feed Misinformation to Trump', *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2020.

15 Vera Tolz, 'Short Cuts: Troll Factories', *The London Review of Books* Volume 4 № 23, 2020

16 W. Lance Bennet and Steven Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) p. 8; Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communication*, p. 2.

17 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 2.

organisations that advocated neoliberal economic reforms had a leading role in the decline in public trust in authoritative institutions in liberal democracies. Jim Macnamara offers a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis that considers the psychological-sociological factors that contributed to this problem. He focuses on the role of Public Relations (PR) companies and on the tools they developed in manipulating audiences into consuming disinformation.

These three books illustrate the high levels of interest and calibre of expertise that disinformation attracted in 2020. And the conceptual gaps that still exist. These books suggest important lessons and fixes, some of which have been partially or wholly implemented in 2020, and some of which are still to be fulfilled. Yet, certain important points are missing from these accounts, which may indicate gaps in Western understanding of disinformation that need further research. In the current review, I shall identify five observations offered in these books and other recently published materials on the topic, and I shall highlight what these writings failed to observe. These points may serve as paths for researchers and practitioners to prepare for the complex future challenges that certainly lie ahead.

### Language Matters

Disinformation, or any other kind of manipulation of communications, is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1944 George Orwell wrote, ‘Hitler can say that the Jews started the war, and if he survives that will become official history’.<sup>18</sup> Orwell described the frightful rise of disinformation in the 1930s and 40s that was propagated by telegraph, printed media, and the radio. His fears of the ‘decay of democracy’ and the rise of a world where ‘two and two could become five if the Führer wished it’ reminds us of the long history of disinformation.<sup>19</sup> The first lesson that Orwell suggested to counter incidents where truth, facts, and language begin to drift was to use clear, definitive, and truthful words as a well-proven antidote to disinformation.<sup>20</sup>

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18 George Orwell in a letter from 1944, reprinted in *On Truth* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

19 Ibid.

20 Orwell, *Politics of the English Language* (originally appeared in 1946; reprinted London: Penguin Books, 2013).

The current sense that publics are unable to recognise a ‘common set of facts’ that constitute a mutually agreed reality<sup>21</sup> comes after decades of spinning and perception management by political elites and PR companies.<sup>22</sup> From commercial advertising to the US government’s handling of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, manipulative practices of using information for monetary or political advantage have come at the price of undermining the public’s trust in what is being said by traditional authoritative voices and institutions. As the British film maker Adam Curtis noted in his documentary *Hypernormalisation* (2016), ‘the version of reality that politics [in the West] presented to the people was no longer believable’. This growing gap between what is said and what takes place in real life became a ripe arena for organised attempts to manipulate information. For instance, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT (formerly *Russia Today*), currently one of the best-funded disinformation projects in the world, regularly echoes what Bennet and Livingston call the ‘culture of spin’ by saying ‘there is no objectivity—only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible’.<sup>23</sup> When confronted with intelligence reports about Russian election interfering in 2016, she reminded viewers of the Iraqi WMD report, as an indication that US intelligence cannot be trusted and as a reminder of the ongoing erosion of the social process of communications in the West.<sup>24</sup>

Macnamara observes that communications are not a mere exchange of information between two or more entities, but as American theoretician James Carey suggested, ‘a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed’.<sup>25</sup> If one uses Carey’s definition of communication, it becomes evident that communications are under real threat in Western societies; and indeed that destructive processes in the West pursued by various disruptive players began well before Simonyan started her work at RT.

Such terminological reconsideration calls into question the widespread use of the term ‘information war’ (which is also the title of Stengel’s book) to

21 BBC News, ‘[Barack Obama: One Election Won’t Stop US “Truth Decay”](#)’, 15 November 2020.

22 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*; Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*.

23 *Der Spiegel*, ‘[The West Never Got Over the Cold War Stereotype](#)’, 13 August 2013.

24 Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) report refers to the Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on the US Intelligence Community’s Pre-war Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, which have found serious problems with US intelligence work in the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. These shortcomings were acknowledged by the CIA. For Simonyan’s interview see, Lesley Stahl, ‘[RT’s Editor-in-Chief on Election Meddling, Being Labelled Russian Propaganda](#)’, *CBS 60 Minutes*, 7 January 2018.

25 Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*, p. 8.

describe contemporary disinformation. ‘Information warfare’ is an important concept in Russian strategic thinking. It describes the metamorphosis between information, international relations, and conflicts, where ‘the main battlefield [...] is perception’, and domains of information warfare (*informatsionnaya voyna/protivoborstvo*) and psychological warfare are maximised.<sup>26</sup> This term broadly corresponds with what Western political and military thinking refers to as strategic communications.<sup>27</sup> However, in the West ‘information warfare’ has been used normatively to describe Russia’s or other foreign actors’ hostile uses of information.<sup>28</sup> This lack of original theorisation of the term means that Western discourse needs a more precise theoretical framework to describe planned and methodical actions that use information to impact people and politics.

A term suggested in recent writing by researcher of Russian intelligence Thomas Rid could offer a basis for such a framework. Rid provides a good definition of Russian influence operations, which with some adaptations can help define influence in the current age. In his book on Soviet and Russian ‘active measures’, he characterises such operations as methodical work by ‘large bureaucracies run by intelligence agencies against an adversary’ that includes some elements of disinformation or forgery, and are aimed at specific goals vis-à-vis an adversary.<sup>29</sup> While, as in the case of ‘information warfare’, Rid’s definition of ‘influence operations’ is modelled on the Russian case (pointing to the pervasive involvement of security agencies), this definition is instructive in that it calls attention to the fact that influence operations are not ‘spontaneous lies’.<sup>30</sup> While lies are undesirable in public discourse, they are unlikely to exert political influence on large audiences. Hence, as Rid underlines, the danger that such operations pose to communications is their methodical nature, their backing by bureaucratic work, and execution in a coordinated or semi-coordinated manner.

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26 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Proliferation Papers 52 (Paris: Security Studies Center, November 2015), p. 26; Keir Giles, *The Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, (NATO Defense College, 2016) p. 16.

27 Ofer Fridman, ‘“Information War” as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications’, *RUSI Journal* Volume 165 № 1, 18 March 2020.

28 Joanna Szostek, ‘What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication’, *International Journal of Communication* Volume 14 (2020).

29 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), p. 8.

30 Ibid.

The distinction between spontaneous lies, unintentional errors, and premeditated disruptions to communications is imperative. As a veteran of Western journalism, Stengel calls for a distinction to be drawn between disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. Disinformation, according to Stengel, is the deliberate dissemination of information that is wholly or partially false in order to mislead or manipulate people.<sup>31</sup> Misinformation is different in that it does not have a deliberate purpose and is a result of unintentional action.<sup>32</sup> And propaganda can consist of either true or false information, but in both cases the information provided to the audiences serves a political purpose.<sup>33</sup> Such terminological clarifications can help facilitate better discourse and begin repairing communications.

### **It's the Economy, Stupid!**

The wave of populism that took place in the 2010s has been described by many as a result of the shortcomings of neoliberal economics and the stalled economic recovery after 2008 of middle and lower class taxpayers.<sup>34</sup> The main thrust of literature has focused on the causal link between the economic downturn, the breakdown of democratic institutions, and the rise of populist and nationally infused politics, while leaving the informational dimension of the crisis aside. Bennet and Livingston rightly point to the central place of the methodical manipulation of information that is at the heart of the political and economic crisis. They portray the gordian knot between economics, politics, technology, and disruptive communications, which together set the stage for 'The Disinformation Age'.

The poor state in which we find our communications space, according to Bennet and Livingston, is a result of several decades of neoliberal economic politics, which eroded the public's trust in democratic institutions. As they put it, 'a mix of money, multi-levelled political organizations, and strategic communications helped elect a growing number of politicians who [...] sold

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<sup>31</sup> Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 289.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, (New York: The New Press, 2016); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (Tim Duggan Books, 2018); Christophe Guilluy, Malcolm Debevoise (trans.), *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France* (Yale University Press, 2019).

the free market political agenda [...] and [...] utopian vision of “free markets make free people”<sup>35</sup> They show that even before the 2008 economic crisis, as the promises of freedom and prosperity did not materialise for most people, neoliberal organisations, charities, and think-tanks turned to aggressive and disruptive influence campaigns, the aim of which was to ‘engineer democracy against unhappy masses’.<sup>36</sup> These domestic influence campaigns aimed at ‘systemic devaluing of institutions of truth telling’, which followed a profound erosion in the public’s trust in state institutions and the media.<sup>37</sup>

The decade’s long decline in public trust is a well recorded and disturbing phenomenon that is widely thought to contribute to the recent wave of disinformation. Macnamara notes a Harvard University study from 2015, which found abysmally low levels of trust among Americans towards their state institutions. For instance, among young adults (age 18–29) only 14% expressed trust in Congress and only 20% trusted the federal government.<sup>38</sup> International barometers point to similar trends outside the US, with only 47% of respondents placing trust in their governments.<sup>39</sup> These findings make Macnamara’s book and Bennet and Livingston’s volume eye-opening accounts into how the dynamics of disinformation developed in the West, in many cases because of deliberate actions by PR companies and the propagators of neoliberal economics.

The link between neoliberal economics and disinformation is a gripping account that requires much attention. But it is not the entire story. It is highly likely that without thorough economic reforms, alleviation of decades of injustices, and reduction in social disparities, disinformation and political influence campaigns will continue to be an attractive option for disruptive actors who pursue a variety of political and economic goals. These accounts circumvent the connection between neoliberal economics, disinformation, and identity-focused politics. They see the latter as a symptom rather than a root cause of the current crisis. Such an omission presents a lacuna in understanding the mutually reinforcing processes of breakdown in trust, disruptive economics, disruptive communications, and disrupted identities.

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35 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 24.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

38 Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*, p. 3.

39 *Ibid.*

## Identity, Security, and Trust

It is hard to imagine the current wave of disinformation without the alluring power of identity mobilisation. When the shadowy Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) purchased advertisements on Facebook in the run up to the 2016 US presidential election, they placed content that aimed to stir emotions on both sides of the political spectrum. One advertisement featured a border sign saying ‘No Invaders Allowed!’, another endorsed the Black Panthers as fighters against the Ku Klux Klan; and a third displayed a photo of Muslim women wearing *burqas*, calling the *burqa* a ‘security risk’ that should be banned in the US.<sup>40</sup> While Russian messages may seem varied, they had one thing in common—they made emotional appeals to national, religious, and racial identity as their most favoured rallying point.

Recently, former US National Security official Fiona Hill wrote that ‘Russian operatives did not invent our crude tribal politics; they invented internet personas to whip them up’.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the Russian IRA did not invent the US alt-right’s national discourse or left-wing identity politics, but neither did it target them by coincidence. Russian influence campaigns targeted identity because it is a sore spot in US politics. As Vladimir Putin himself suggested when Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016:

A significant part of the American people has the same ideas [as us...]. People who sympathize with us about traditional values [...] The newly elected president subtly felt the mood of the society...<sup>42</sup>

These identity-related fault lines in American and other Western societies go deeper than Bennet and Livingston’s analysis of the neoliberal economic roots of disinformation and the erosion of trust in institutions.

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<sup>40</sup> Scott Shane, ‘[These Are the Ads Russia Bought on Facebook in 2016](#)’, *The New York Times*, 1 November 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Fiona Hill, ‘[The Biggest Risk to This Election Is Not Russia, It’s Us](#)’, *The New York Times*, 7 October 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘[Administratsiya SSHA Vinit vo Vsekh Neudachakh na Vneshniye Faktory](#)’ [Putin: ‘[The US Administration Blames All Failures on External Factors](#)’], interview on *TASS TV*, 23 December 2016, accessible on YouTube.

Globalisation and neoliberalism, where economic logic and the need for flexibility and adaptability overpowered all other aspects of social life, undermined the day-to-day routines and long-term relationships that formed individuals' continuity of identity and what the sociologist Anthony Giddens referred to as 'ontological security'.<sup>43</sup> The precarious psychological conditions that emerge once these routines, relationships, and identities are undermined are detrimental to peoples' sense of security and trust.<sup>44</sup> These conditions are known, on the individual level, to induce anxiety. And on the political level, they are found to stimulate populist calls for strengthening national identity,<sup>45</sup> and are 'intimately linked to the emotional significance of identity mobilization'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, individuals who were 'freed' by the neoliberal project were also put under the constant ideational pressure to stay flexible, competitive, and adjustable. For many this became a daunting experience and an anxious existence. And they increasingly reverted to political mobilisation along identity lines as a way to manage their fears and the breakdown in trust.

Hence, identity cannot be decoupled or left aside from any discussion on the erosion in public trust and the rise of disinformation. The current economic and political order that purposely undermines routines, relationships, and the continuity of identities is a glaring hole within the neoliberal global project. It produces vulnerabilities in audiences that cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Unfortunately, this aspect of disinformation has not received enough attention in scholarly debates and needs further developing.

## Audiences Matter

The relative neglect of the interplay between identity and disinformation is mirrored in the overall insufficient attention paid to audiences. Stengel's book, for instance, reveals the high volumes of energy and thought that were devoted to developing messaging and counter-messaging to the information campaigns of Russia and the Islamic State (IS). Yet the audiences that these messaging campaigns were aimed at were rarely considered. This disparity reveals a general

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43 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

44 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

45 Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

46 Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology* Volume 25 No 5 (2004): 741–67.

tendency to focus on the perpetrators of influence campaigns and their strategies and techniques, rather than on the audiences they are targeting. The focus on the perpetrators is one of the problems of viewing disinformation as a new type of 'war'. While studying the aggressors might be appropriate for traditional military and security issues, information and influence campaigns—especially online and on social media—are reliant on a sender-receiver mechanism in which the receptiveness of the audience is crucial.

Although authors acknowledge the importance of audiences' receptiveness to disinformation, they offer little insight. Bennet and Livingston note that 'unhappy masses' become easy prey for influence efforts,<sup>47</sup> while Stengel acknowledges that grievances become fertile ground for promoting disinformation.<sup>48</sup> These assertions might be generally true, but they offer little perspective on the mechanisms that make certain people more susceptible to disinformation.

Not all individuals who live in conditions of neoliberal economics are upset or vulnerable to disinformation as understood in Bennet and Livingston's analysis. Indeed Browning and Joenniemi caution against such a simplistic approach when it comes to the interaction between neoliberal economic disruptions to the continuity of identity and the rise of populism and disinformation.<sup>49</sup> They warn that such an approach could result in a simplistic securitisation of identity, which assumes that any hardship, reform, or economic overhaul, results in anxiety and support to populist politics. But this is not what is happening. Anxiety and revanchism appear in audiences who are unable to resolve reflexively disturbances to identity over time. It is in these situations that audiences demand help and support to overcome enduring, structural conditions that make them vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation.

The media literacy of audiences that support disruptive international actors, such as IS or Russia, is also habitually underestimated. Stengel mentions that in one of his briefings with US intelligence officers, he was encouraged to see IS's limited appeal to Sunni audiences.<sup>50</sup> Sunnis in Northern Iraq, he was told by US

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47 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 27.

48 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 9.

49 Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity', *Cooperation and Conflict* Volume 52 No 1 (2017): 31–47.

50 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 146

intelligence officers, were not convinced by IS messages and propaganda; they just hated the Iraqi government more and feared Shia Iranian militias. ‘They see ISIS as brutal; they don’t see them as corrupt. They see the Iraqi government as corrupt *and* brutal’, he was told.<sup>51</sup> These Iraqi Sunnis were neither manipulated by disinformation, nor were they ardent supporters of radical Islam. They were ordinary people caught between bad choices.

Something similar can be said about East European Russian-speaking audiences. Szostek points out how labelling them as one undistinguishable mass of ‘vulnerable audiences’ that are susceptible to Russian influence campaigns was misleading and resulted in inappropriate policy choices. She shows how many Russian speakers in Ukraine who consumed media content from Russian state channels approached the news critically and were in fact seeking to diversify the channels through which they receive their information.<sup>52</sup> She shows that many of these individuals held pro-Russian views despite a good level of media literacy. Their problem was not one of communications. They substantially disapproved of Ukrainian policies and favoured the Russian side.

As this wild and long decade of disinformation draws to a close, paying more attention to audiences is one of its most valuable lessons. Researchers and officials should not underestimate people’s ability to spot and counteract disinformation independently and should not assume that they are passive and gullible. Not all problems are communications problems. By paying more attention to audiences, one is more likely to discover which is which.

### **This is NOT Cold War 2.0**

The current disinformation wave is popularly referred as the return of the Cold War.<sup>53</sup> Such a simplification of what is taking place these days overestimates Russia’s role in the current crisis and demonstrates there is still a lack of a developed theoretical framework to explain the current wave of disinformation.

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51 Ibid., p. 147

52 Szostek, ‘[What Happens to Public Diplomacy](#)’.

53 Robert Legvold *Return to Cold War* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016); J. L. Black and Michael Johns (eds), *The Return of the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

The disproportionate attention that Russian disinformation activities receive in popular discourse skews the analysis of current day disinformation, although Russia does have some advantages in this field. Russia is not the architect of global disinformation; it is not even a leader in this field.<sup>54</sup> Bennet and Livingston rightly note that in some ways ‘Russia was late to the party’ of disinformation, which was in full swing when it first started making noticeable strides to influence politics in the West in the mid-2010s.<sup>55</sup> However, the Russian state has tactical and strategic relative advantages in the field of disinformation. From a tactical point of view, Russia has a large reserve of highly trained computer engineers and social media manipulators (trolls), who are working on the cyber black market and can provide ad hoc or more consistent support to state-backed operations. Strategically, Russia has a community of researchers, officials, and academics, which is more willing to deliberate, conceptualise, and theorise for itself the meaning and place of political influence in contemporary social life.

Vladimir Putin’s former aide and Kremlin ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, who writes short stories and novels under the pen name of Natan Dubovitsky, published in 2014 a short story on a new type of ‘non-linear war’.<sup>56</sup> In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, this story attracted much attention in Western writing, where in many cases it was taken too seriously and out of context. Surkov’s dystopia described wars that were no longer waged between states, but between localities, classes, and even generations. He wrote:

Now four coalitions clashed [...] all against all.

And what a coalition they were! Not the same as before. Rarely states joined sides in their entirety. It happened that several provinces were on one side, several on the other, and some city or generation, or gender, or professional community of the same state—on the third. Then they could change positions. Go to any camp they liked. Sometimes right in the middle of a battle.<sup>57</sup>

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54 Tolz, ‘Short Cuts’.

55 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 280.

56 Natan Dubovitsky [pseud. of Vladislav Surkov], *Bez Naba* [Without Sky], *Russkij Pioneer*, 12 March 2014.

57 Ibid.

Surkov's story should not be read as a policy doctrine or a strategic plan. It shows the ability to think abstractly about the revolutionary transformations that are taking place in our world. It demonstrates how some Russian thinkers and state agencies were quicker to realise and internalise that the digital-cyber revolution had changed the world in profound and irreversible ways, where a standoff between two camps, as in the Cold War, was impossible.

Contemporary disinformation, whether we brand it as war or not, is borderless, transnational, and interconnected. Globalisation, neoliberal economics, and information technologies made the transfer of money, people, and ideas faster than previously seen in world history. This means that disinformation can not only move faster, but that labelling it as 'domestic' or 'foreign' becomes less relevant. This is not to say that there are no liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, or pro-democratic forces and forces that want to erode democratic values and institutions. But in today's world it would be much harder to chart two distinguishable camps that can be rallied against each other. More likely, what the world is experiencing is an internal dialectic within different global forces that pull towards different directions of future development.

The West's aversion to theorising and conceptualising political influence puts it at a disadvantage. In the West, most influence efforts were carried out by commercial and partisan actors, and state-led efforts focused mainly on countering radical Islam.<sup>58</sup> Western thinkers are cautious about articulating conclusively what they consider to be unwanted political influence. Stengel, for example, notes that disinformation is problematic because it attacks 'the marketplace of ideas', which is essential for democracy to flourish.<sup>59</sup> But such a vague conceptualisation can be easily rebuffed by astute propagandists such as *RT*'s Simonyan; she argues that *RT*, whose motto is 'Question More', serves the marketplace of ideas by conveying Russia's point of view.

Szostek notes that while Russian goals in influence campaigns can be projected and articulated, 'Western states are hesitant to specify their own end goals in relation to audiences'.<sup>60</sup> The West's unwillingness to commit to a straightforward definition of what is the present danger, together with its vague set of goals,

58 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 191.

59 Ibid., p. 12–13.

60 Szostek, 'What Happens to Public Diplomacy?'

dooms it to feel continuously that other players have the upper hand. There is no evidence that the West is 'losing', nor are there any benchmarks to test this sense of calamity, and hence there can be no tools to repair the situation.

### **Conclusion: Towards the Next Wave of Disinformation**

The 2010s wave of disinformation was crude and unsophisticated. It was mounted by multiple state, partisan, and commercial actors. These actors took advantage of the deregulated media space that was still coming to terms with the consequences of the digital-cyber revolution, and the West's slowdown in economic performance after the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>61</sup> These disruptive actors flooded the media space with lies, half-truths, forgeries, distortions, and manipulations, which gave rise to toxic discourses and populist politics. While this was a dangerous trend, it was not particularly complex. And thus, the adjustments that were needed were more apparent to experts. Some of them have already been made.

However, the structural problems that facilitated the rise of disinformation in the 2010s are worsening. The ongoing pandemic and its economic fallout are deepening the underlying conditions that allowed for disinformation to reach such highs in the past decade. They suggest that ahead of us are even more complicated tasks in reigning in the ever-increasing flows of information. Inequalities and grievances have become more apparent by the disproportionate number of victims the pandemic claimed from poorer classes and ethnic minorities. In many countries the pandemic revealed the weakness of political leadership and further decreased trust in institutions, especially among the young.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, ever more spheres of life are moving online, and it is projected that post-pandemic, economic recovery will be driven by the tech industry.<sup>63</sup>

While our sense of ontological security continues to deteriorate, disruptors are likely to increase their dissemination of more sophisticated disinformation at higher volumes. It is now time to think of deeper economic, political, social, and philosophical remedies that our societies need in order to protect a world where two plus two will always remain four.

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61 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 279.

62 Federica Cocco, 'The Kids Aren't Alright', *The Financial Times*, 17 November 2020.

63 Rana Foroohar, 'Covid Recovery Will Stem From Digital Business', *The Financial Times*, 4 October 2020.

# THE RISE OF ATROCITY PROPAGANDA: REFLECTIONS ON A CHANGING WORLD

## A Review Essay by James P. Farwell

*Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, Second Edition. Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (eds). New York: Routledge, 2020.

*The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (eds). London: SAGE, 2020.

**Keywords**—*strategic communications, strategic communication, propaganda, atrocity propaganda, public diplomacy, ISIS, Mexican drug cartels*

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## Introduction

This year, two landmark books were published on the topics of public diplomacy and propaganda. They come at a time in which nations recognise that the use of information and soft power—non-kinetic means of influence—are taking centre stage in the global competition for influencing target publics. Public diplomacy and propaganda provide two complementary, well-used sets of tools for gaining influence. Today this is essential, as engagement and conflict take place more often than not in battle spaces occupied by civilians as well as combatants. This evolution is increasingly relegating armed force to the role of supporting a Strategic Communications narrative.

Routledge Handbooks has continued its contribution to the discourse on public diplomacy with a collection of essays, the *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, Second Edition. SAGE Reference has published its own collection of essays, *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*. Both illuminate these distinct but related topics. Combined, they provide vigorous actionable insights. Treating the books as complementary is interesting, as both public diplomacy and propaganda seek to influence public attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

### *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*

This volume of essays examines diverse aspects of public diplomacy and takes a look at how various nations have employed it in the modern era. The quality or usefulness of the essays is somewhat uneven, but the ones that stand out make the book worth reading. Public diplomacy, observe editors Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, is a key tool through which international actors advance their ends. The book's essays describe actions different nations have taken to boost their image and to assert influence among foreign audiences. Public diplomacy embraces building relationships, engagement with publics and civic organisations, citizen and corporate diplomacy, nation branding, and persuasion. Persuasion is a key to success in this arena. It requires credibility and policies that build trust. Success in public diplomacy means that you will have support when you need it.

President George H.W. Bush's ability to assemble a broad coalition to wage the 1991 war in Iraq well illustrates adept public diplomacy. I had the opportunity a few years before his passing to visit with General Brent Scowcroft, who served as 41's former National Security Adviser. I asked what he thought was

Bush's greatest strength. Scowcroft answered reflectively. Bush, he reported, understood that at the point you needed friends, you already had to have them. He recounted one afternoon sitting in the Oval Office with the President, who turned to him and asked: 'Who should we call today?' Scowcroft wondered what he wanted to achieve. Bush shrugged and said, more or less, 'doesn't matter who, we're just staying in touch'. He didn't need a problem to solve. His agenda was building friendship and trust. It paid off during Desert Storm. Bush was a gifted diplomat and his record is a testament, I think, to what adroit public diplomacy can achieve.

The topic of public diplomacy is too large for a single theory or geographic model, and its applications are diverse. The Routledge book describes key practices defining the concept. Here are a few of the stand-outs that merit close attention.

Patricia Goff notes that notions of 'cultural diplomacy' are elusive, as the lines that separate it from terms such as 'propaganda', 'public diplomacy', and 'soft power' blur, and different governments view the notion differently. Goff feels cultural diplomacy is more effective when not associated with the state. Thus, the BBC's distancing itself from the British government made it more credible. Goff makes an important point in arguing that such diplomacy can have a huge impact on shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

Although some associate cultural diplomacy with the visual arts, literature, and classical music, she argues that popular culture—films, TV, popular music—matter more. Goff treats these as forms of public diplomacy, but both public diplomacy and propaganda are types of Strategic Communication that seek to influence opinions and shape behaviour in order to achieve a desired effect or end-state; distinguishing between the two is arguably the sort of head-of-the-needle debate better suited for students of Thomas Aquinas. What's important is to recognise and understand the impact.

The first leader to recognise the power of film in shaping attitudes was Vladimir Lenin. He put films on train boxcars and shuttled them around Russia to drum up support. During World War Two, John Ford turned President Franklin Roosevelt's speech extolling the 'Four Freedoms', defining core American values, into powerful films that endorsed Roosevelt's effort to anchor preserving *freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear* as a unifying mantra.

Luigi di Martino focuses on ‘listening’. He characterises this as a core activity in public diplomacy, reframed to distinguish it from propaganda, and used to implement or adjust strategy. He describes types of listening—apophatic, active, tactical, background, surreptitious. It’s academically interesting, although operationally listening to what other states, societies, and cultures believe, say, and do is common sense. Di Martino has codified elements of the notion.

Other sections of the book include descriptions of arts diplomacy, its use in public diplomacy and persuasion, citizen diplomacy, and corporate diplomacy. This second edition also delves into what nations in different areas of the world (Africa, Latin America, the Arab World) do to promote branding and to raise a positive image profile. Recounting what each does lies beyond the scope of this commentary. Each nation has its own idiosyncrasies.

The *Routledge Handbook* is a good introduction to public diplomacy. Still, streamlining content to make room for greater in-depth analysis, questioning what works, what doesn’t, and why—as well as what we can learn from public diplomacy—would allow this book, and its fine experts, to provide more and deeper insights.

*The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*

The Sage collection of essays on propaganda is comprehensive and this book is important. Most of the essays are top-tier. They describe well how propaganda has been defined and employed since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The handbook offers insights into how different nations, cultures, and political movements (including those that employ political violence) exploit propaganda.

While no one disputes the value of astute public diplomacy, propaganda today carries a negative connotation. It was not always so. Propaganda’s original meaning was current in the era of Pope Gregory XV, who in 1622 founded the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fidei [Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith]. A negative connotation became attached to the word during and shortly after World War I, associating ‘propaganda’ with spreading lies to shape behaviour. Actually, ‘propaganda’ in the original sense of the word can propound worthy or evil ideas, depending on who’s communicating, how, and for what ends.<sup>1</sup>

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1 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion & Power* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

The editors of the SAGE volume call propaganda ‘weaponised advocacy’. They identify five criteria that qualify communication as propaganda. First, it requires institutional backing, whether from a state or from a terrorist group seeking to establish a state. Second, it solicits action from the masses. Third, it doesn’t ask for informed belief or usually employ rational appeal; it uses emotive content and rejects non-emotive forms of persuasion. Fourth, story trumps truth. In the editors’ minds, propaganda is false—a distinction not everyone accepts in comparing it to influence operations or Strategic Communications. Fifth, it exploits fear and the notion of an existential threat, a declaration that seems exaggerated. It might do that but does not need to.

The editors see target audiences as willing accomplices to their own persuasion and view propaganda as ‘psychological resources to affirm and reinforce the conviction of those who construct it’.<sup>2</sup>

If Strategic Communications comprises ‘everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’ then public diplomacy and propaganda can be thought of as subsets of strategic communications, with actions defined as one or the other falling somewhere on a continuum between persuasion and coercion.

I define ‘public diplomacy’ as the use of personal interaction between state diplomats with other diplomats or officials, cultural action (e.g. film, tv, books, food, dance, music), corporate and individual action to promote actions consistent with a national agenda, and ‘propaganda’ as words, deeds, images, and symbols that aim to mould or shape public opinion to influence attitudes and opinions, in the interest of influencing behaviour to achieve a defined objective or, in military parlance, end-state.

Among the many outstanding essays in the SAGE book, I found two particularly thought-provoking, which have prompted me to consider the rise of ‘atrocious propaganda’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Neville Bolt explains the Anarchist origins of ‘Propaganda of the Deed’, analysing the use of violence in an attempt to overthrow the state apparatus in a number of countries throughout Europe, and in Russia and the US. It was communication without speech—shock doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Baines, Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (London: SAGE, 2020), p. xxvi/612; Kindle Loc. 477/21842.

Bolt recounts the successful assassinations of fifteen leaders of nation states between 1880 and 1914 motivated by the desire to bring down the hierarchical state, which the Anarchists saw as a threat to the sovereignty of self-organising communities. The idea was to goad the state into using excessive means of reprisal and thus undermine its own moral legitimacy.

The Anarchists believed that the deed, and not the mere word, was the most direct path to undermining what they saw as corrupt power. They believed the construct of the state was evil and they wanted to destroy it. Their passion was persuasive to the other revolutionaries and to sympathetic members of the intelligentsia. The Russian anarchist, and later Bolshevik, Vera Zasulich was acquitted after she confessed to shooting and seriously wounding the governor of St Petersburg, because the jury believed she acted in pursuit of an honourable cause.

Bolt insightfully points out that the tensions between Anarchists and Communists and their failure to exert a unified vision across a spectrum of leftist political tendencies—from the pacific to the messianic—restricted the historical influence of Propaganda of the Deed. The establishment, which controlled the gates to mass communication, naturally denounced the violence and won the information war.

Emily Robertson's concise description of Australian and British 'atrocious propaganda' shows how these two states spared no effort to dehumanise the Germans and to depict them as bestial in order to inspire enlistments. As soon as it was discovered, the propaganda was denounced for its lies and lurid appeal to confirmation bias. Allied propaganda drew upon the ideological grammar established during the religious wars in Europe between Protestants and Catholics. Politicians and the media frequently discussed German atrocities.

The Allies portrayed their own efforts as a 'just war' against a ruthless and militaristic enemy that raped women and put children to the bayonet. Propaganda tales talked about a Corpse Conversion Factory that turned the bodies of dead German soldiers into soap. Germany's Zeppelin attacks on cities and their sinking of British passenger vessels accorded some factual basis for these lies. The strategy worked. Hatred of 'the Hun' unleashed mass protests and riots in the US against naturalised Germans. It helped tilt American opinion; the population was relatively equally divided between citizens of Anglo and German descent and the US could have entered the war on behalf of either side.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Control of money and the media made the difference. The US in that era was dominated by an East Coast elite that was pro-British. The Midwest had large numbers of citizens descended from Germans.

The British came out on top, thanks to east-coast, pro-British elites who dominated money, power, and media.

Morality ran through Allied propaganda in both World Wars. That notion remains pivotal in modern information warfare. Seizing and maintaining control of the ‘moral high ground’ is essential in influencing global attitudes, where every living room is a battlefield in the struggle to win support and demonise enemies in seeking dominant influence.

The essays in these two formidable volumes set me to thinking about different kinds of political violence and the difference between those who own up to their violent actions and those who don’t. Those who openly admit to and even brag about their violent acts, do so for differing reasons. We can only guess at the reasons of those who stay silent.

I delve into the ways in which political violence has evolved in the modern day. Given a central platform in the culture of political challengers ISIS and the Mexican drug cartels, the use of political violence blurs the lines between cultural expression and coercion. In contrast to cultural diplomacy as described by Goff, the drug cartels glorify the coercive violence they use to dominate as a way of life, creating a top-down narco culture that is the persuasive arm of their campaign.

To understand what is unique about violence as ‘atrocity propaganda’, we must first differentiate it from other types of political violence. While the following terms are used variously in different contexts, for the purposes of this essay I use them as defined here.

- ‘Political violence’ is *the deliberate use of aggressive or lethal acts to attain political goals*. Under the broad category of political violence, we can include such subcategories as acts of war, war crimes, terrorism, propaganda of the deed, atrocity crimes, and atrocity propaganda.
- ‘Atrocity crimes’ are defined in international law as falling into the categories of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. ‘Crimes against humanity’ include a number of subcategories such as extermination, deportation, torture, and rape, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* (New York: United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2014), p. 1–2.

- ‘Terrorism’ is defined by NATO as ‘The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.’<sup>5</sup> While ‘acts of terror’ are not necessarily political, ‘terrorism’ is. In some cases, violent acts are not claimed by their perpetrators.
- ‘Atrocity propaganda’ is political violence that is also explicitly a media event.

Over the past two centuries political violence has been used by different groups with different motivations. While the assassinations committed by the Anarchists may have been shocking acts of terror, what differentiates the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Propaganda of the Deed from terrorism and atrocity crimes is that the Anarchists never targeted civilian populations, only representatives of the state they sought to destroy.

During the First World War, propaganda was used assertively by Britain and Australia to recruit armies in the interest of winning what they deemed an existential conflict. The Allies alleged German atrocities and built a communication campaign around these stories to recruit soldiers and sailors. They knew they were perpetrating lies but concluded that the public interest in enlarging the armed forces outweighed the virtues of truth. They made no apologies, because they believed this was done with honourable intent. After the war, the lies were exposed, triggering a fierce backlash. People felt that the propaganda had perpetrated a political fraud. That was the last time for many decades that propagators took pride in their information warfare strategy. While states employed propaganda about the atrocities committed by their enemies to rally support, state challengers like ISIS and the cartels brag about the atrocities they themselves commit.

Twenty years later, attitudes among states still did not permit openly acknowledging mass cruelties and the killing of non-combatants. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin ruthlessly carried out genocide during the Second World War, but rather than publicising such actions for propaganda they took pains to conceal them. On the other hand, both leaders publicised intra-party massacres—Hitler’s destruction of Röhm and the Sturmabteilung and Stalin’s Great Purge of 1936–38. Stalin

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5 NATO International Military Staff, ‘[NATO’s Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism](#)’, 19 August 2016

also recommended at the Tehran and Yalta conferences killing 50,000 German officers to ‘send a message’, and at Yalta Roosevelt was ready to drink a toast to that idea. At the same time Hitler concealed the Holocaust and numerous other mass killings; Stalin concealed the Katyn Forest massacre of Polish military officers and the murder of Ukrainian nationalists.

One concludes that each leader was operating on the basis of some internal calculation, judging which of his acts of political violence would be applauded and which would prompt global condemnation; while mass murder and genocide served their political purposes, they tried to conceal them. This inhibition seems to have held true for the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the late 1970s.

While acts of war such as the US bombings of large cities in Germany and Japan using conventional weapons and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did target civilian populations, media downplayed the harm done to non-combatants.

Attitudes seem to have undergone a drastic shift in the 1990s, when the Interahamwe Hutus in Rwanda glorified the atrocities they perpetrated against the Tutsis, in order to normalise ethnic hatred and to incite other Hutus to join in the murders.<sup>6</sup> This is arguably the first modern example of a dominant political force using atrocity propaganda—in the new sense of purposely exhibiting their own hideous deeds—to support their seizure of power.

One might expect that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no one would glorify atrocities, even if they did commit them. For a state to be seen as legitimate it must accept its ‘Responsibility to Protect’ its own citizens, and for a global power that responsibility extends to the citizens of other states if their own states are committing violence against them. For example, Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria has used chemical weapons against his own people but has denied doing so.<sup>7</sup>

The US and China both exert enormous resources towards giving their policies and actions credibility and legitimacy. China’s concept of the Three Warfares—legal warfare, media warfare, and psychological warfare—is premised on operating from the moral high ground. A detailed discussion of that lies elsewhere, but any assessment of Western or Chinese policies must take into account their success in holding that moral high ground.

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<sup>6</sup> Farwell, *Persuasion & Power*. The Rwanda episode is discussed in the book with more detail about the use of radio by the Hutus to try and exterminate the Tutsis. For that reason, I skim over it here.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Assad denies use of chemical weapons’, *BBC*, 13 April 2017.

In this century, atrocities are again proudly exploited for political gain by violent Islamic extremists and by Mexican drug cartels. The rationale for their actions differs but the goal is the same: seizure of power. ISIS is motivated by an appetite for political power embodied in a Caliphate, justifying its actions through its interpretation of Islam. The cartels are more transactional. They have a broadly defined culture, and while their profits reportedly reach \$39 billion a year, a key aspect of their ambition is the seizure of political power.<sup>8</sup> Their actions extend well beyond high-intensity crime. Like ISIS, the cartels are public about committing atrocities and take pride in publicising them as political acts.

### **The power of ISIS' communication strategy: public violence and social media**

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or ISIS) adopted the tactics of atrocity propaganda; and they took pains to confirm reports that they committed murder and rape. Atrocity has defined and glorified ISIS' efforts to establish a modern caliphate.

ISIS employs atrocity propaganda for confluent purposes. In June 2014, ISIS violence in Mosul intimidated civilians and caused an Iraqi army, although made formidable at the time the US withdrew its forces in 2012, to turn tail. Ill-judged, partisan politics by the Shia-led central government drove out competent military leaders and hollowed out the Iraq army's capabilities.

That paved the way for the ISIS incursion, which many feared might topple the central government. Atrocities perpetrated by ISIS helped quell opposition. But as Graeme Wood powerfully argued in a piece published by *Atlantic* magazine,<sup>9</sup> ISIS atrocities were rooted in an interpretation of Islam, whose *takfiri* doctrine justifies purifying the world through the commission of murder, with Muslim 'apostates' singled out for death. In the ISIS world, the Caliphate commands obedience. Graeme's lengthy analysis merits close reading.

An aspect of revolutionary thought that can be traced back to the French Revolution is also in play here, namely the felt need to destroy the old order and all its manifestations to clear the field for the construction of a pure new society, uncorrupted by the evils that called forth the revolution in the first place. Salafist

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Radden Keefe, "Cocaine Incorporated," *New York Times Magazine*, June 15, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *Atlantic*, March 2015. Wood is not one of the essayists in the book on propaganda.

Muslims desire to reconstruct the pure *ummah* of the first generation—the companions of the Prophet; ISIS places this desire in an apocalyptic context and looks on what has become of Muslim society as corrupt and in need of cleansing.

Let's take a look at ISIS propaganda—it is multi-dimensional, addressing audiences across the Muslim world, in the former Soviet Union, and in the West with different products in different languages. At its height, ISIS used social media to intimidate its enemies with images of gore, beheadings, and executions.<sup>10</sup> Often leveraging the opportunities provided better than Western governments could,<sup>11</sup> ISIS employed social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to build support among potential recruits by sharing the experiences of ISIS fighters and supporters,<sup>12</sup> and to communicate with young people online.<sup>13</sup> One cannot separate ISIS' positive appeals to potential recruits from its atrocity communication. It employed an integrated approach in an 'effort to be both loved and feared'.<sup>14</sup> Some propaganda images depicted fearsome warriors capable of unspeakable atrocities, while others portrayed a softer, humanistic side showing foot soldiers eating *Snickers* candy bars and cuddling kittens.<sup>15</sup> (In Somalia, al-Shabaab employed similar tactics.) Propaganda designed for home audiences showed positive scenes of community building and good governance in action—countless images of schools, markets, housing, cleaning up corruption.

ISIS stands apart among Islamic violent extremists for its skilful use of media. It advertises its Arabic-language *Twitter* feed, *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*,<sup>16</sup> to keep both members and recruits abreast of current activity. ISIS supporters put out an Arabic language Twitter hashtag, #theFridayofSupportingISIS.<sup>17</sup> It used this connection to mobilise supporters around the world, to wave the group's flag

10 Maya Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists', *Global Post*, 26 June 2014; Michel Weiss and Hassan Weiss, *Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), Kindle Loc. 105/4871; Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger: *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015).

11 Anne Speckard and Molly Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Militant Jihad on Instagram', *Homeland Security Today*, 21 July 2020. ISIS has used Instagram adroitly, and praises its 'superior use' of social media.

12 Ahmet Yiğitalp, 'ISIS Religious and Extremist Propaganda on Social Media: Twitter', *Small Wars Journal*, 22 October 2020.

13 Makenzi Taylor, 'ISIS Recruitment of Youth via Social Media', *Global Affairs Review*, February 2020; Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists'; Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), p. 15–22. The platforms Atwan identifies include Muslimbook—a closely guarded version of Facebook—KiK, WhatsApp, Nasher.me, and Manbar.me.

14 Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists'; Thomas Molony, 'Social media warfare and Kenya's conflict with Al Shabaab: A Right to Know?', *African Affairs (Oxford)*, April 2019.

15 Vice News, 'Beheadings, Snickers and a Couple of Kittens', *GOOGLE +*, 18 June 2014.

16 Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.

17 Lydia Smith, 'Islamists Terrorize the Public in 140 Characters', *International Business Times*, 24 June 2011.

in public, to film themselves, and to upload clips on social media platforms.<sup>18</sup> Facebook became aggressive in taking down ISIS posts in 2015.<sup>19</sup> Still, even in 2020, ISIS has found ways to evade detection on the platform.<sup>20</sup> Twitter initially proved frustratingly tolerant but finally got going.<sup>21</sup> At one point ISIS social media activity averaged 200,000 uploads per day.<sup>22</sup> ISIS spread a ‘seductive narrative and employed powerful iconography’<sup>23</sup> and is using it to recruit, radicalise, and successfully raise operational funds, all of which undermine Western states’ efforts to contain these groups.<sup>24</sup>

ISIS’ social media was, at its apex, ‘responsible for inspiring thousands of men from all over the world to join the group’.<sup>25</sup> Foreign terrorist organisations used social media to persuade US citizens to travel abroad to engage in terrorist activity,<sup>26</sup> at least 100 travelled to Iraq and Syria.<sup>27</sup> ISIS accelerated recruitment by allowing communication with foreign fighters engaged in battle. This enabled recruits to learn what the experience on the ground was like—or what they wanted people to believe it is like.<sup>28</sup> Recruits gained access to facilitators, who explained how they could get to Syria and Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Through this approach and others, over 20,000 Westerners from Europe, and also from Afghanistan, Syria, Tunisia, and other places have flocked to fight for ISIS.<sup>30</sup>

Foreign Policy Institute expert Clint Watts argues that while ISIS’ social media helps provide a window into what is going on in Syria, where poor security renders media coverage sparing, ISIS did not care that they were visible to the enemy.<sup>31</sup> Its members ‘want to communicate back to their families that they are

18 J.M. Berger, ‘How ISIS Games Twitter’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 16 June 2014.

19 Lisa Daftari, ‘Facebook Purges Pages Offering Priceless ISIS Plunder For Sale’, 11 June 2015.

20 Gordon Corera, ‘ISIS “Still Evading Detection on Facebook”, report says’, *BBC*, 13 July 2020.

21 Alanna Petroff, ‘Hundreds of ISIS Social Media Accounts Shut Down’, *CNN Money*, 15 February 2015.

22 John Greenberg, ‘Does the Islamic State Post 90,000 Social Media Messages Each Day?’, *Politifact Poynter Institute*, 19 February 2015; Berger, ‘The Evolution of Terrorist Propaganda: The Paris Attack and Social Media’, *Brookings*, 27 January 2015.

23 Gebeily, ‘How ISIL is Gaming the World’s Journalists’.

24 Barack Obama interview with ABC News chief anchor George Stephanopoulos in Arlette Saenz, ‘President Obama Vows to “Completely Decapitate” ISIS Operations’, *ABC News*, 13 November 2015. The President said, ‘From the start our goal has been first to contain, and we have contained them.’ He acknowledged that more needs to be done to “completely decapitate” their operations.

25 Ian Black, Rania Abouzeid, Mark Tran, Shiraz Maher, Roger Tooth, and Martin Chulov, ‘The Terrifying Rise of ISIS: \$2bn in Loot, Online Killings, and an Army on the Run’, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014.

26 Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, ‘Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts’, *The New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

27 Justin O. Smith, ‘The War Keeps Coming Home’, *The Counter Jihad Report*, 18 July 2015.

28 Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Digital Caliphate*.

29 Rukmini Callimachi, ‘ISIS and the Lonely Young American’, *The New York Times*, 27 June 2015.

30 Smith, ‘The War Keeps Coming Home’.

31 Clint Watts of the Foreign Policy Institute interviewed by Scott Simon, ‘ISIS Runs A Dark Media Campaign On Social Media’, *National Public Radio*, 6 September 2014.

participating<sup>32</sup>. Undeterred, ISIS continues to call for so-called homegrown supporters to commit acts of violence within the United States.<sup>33</sup> Epitomising these calls to action are the July 2015 attack that killed four US Marines in the state of Tennessee and the December 2015 mass shooting at the Inland Regional Center, a non-profit for people with disabilities and their families in San Bernardino, California. In the past few years, Kurdish and American troops have inflicted serious military setbacks to ISIS, although by projecting strength and gaining visibility it is determined to make a comeback.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps ISIS has seen its best days. But as Yogi Berra said, 'It ain't over until it's over.'<sup>35</sup> The jihadist group remains a threat, is stocked with cash, and may—no one really knows—still have at least 10,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, and perhaps more.<sup>36</sup> The underlying political and social dynamics that gave rise to it, and its appeal to Muslims by touting its ambition to establish a new caliphate, may well see the emergence of successor groups. The tactics ISIS uses are cutting edge and complex. It currently employs sign-up menus to gain personal data about new users<sup>37</sup> that mimic some of the most advanced social media services available, such as Thunderclap,<sup>38</sup> used by the Barack Obama Campaign in 2010.<sup>39</sup> They use these platforms to create an 'explosion of simultaneous tweets big enough to send a ripple across Twitter's 140-million-strong user base'.<sup>40</sup>

In response, the West has been aggressive in shutting down sites, cracking down on recruitment, and employing counter-propaganda in alliance with Arab partners and especially the Iraqi government. The Shi'ite majority in Iraq doesn't like ISIS. ISIS doesn't share or accept their culture, values, hopes, and dreams; its appeal is to Sunnis, a minority in Iraq, but one whose interests

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32 Ibid. (emphasis added).

33 Ibid.; Statement of FBI Director Christopher Wray before House Homeland Committee, 'Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland', 30 October 2019.

34 Ashish Kumar Sen, 'ISIS Determined to Make a Comeback—How Can it Be Stopped?', *US Institute of Peace*, 13 August 2020; Sajad Jiyad, 'ISIS is Making a Comeback, and Iraq's Central Government May Not Be Able to Handle It', *Business Insider*, 7 June 2020. Apparently ISIS is replicating its tactics in 2012–13, moving skilled fighters into Iraq from Syria. All this is transpiring as President Donald J. Trump has ordered a further drawdown of already thin US forces in that part of the region. Not surprisingly, military leaders are expressing caution as they try to slow the withdrawal.

35 '20 Great Yogi Berra Quotes', *Authentic Manhood*, 24 September 2015.

36 Edith Lederer, 'Over 10,000 Islamic State Fighters Active in Iraq, Syria as Attacks "Significantly" Increase: UN', *Military Times/Associated Press*, 25 August 2020; 'IS "Caliphate" Defeated But Jihadist Group Remains a Threat', *BBC*, 23 March 2019.

37 Berger, 'How ISIS Games Twitter'.

38 THUNDERCLAP, <https://www.thunderclap.it/>. This link is no longer available.

39 Amina Elahi, *How Social Media Strategy Influences Political Campaigns*, 5 September 2013.

40 Jeff Bercofici, 'Thunderclap, a New Tool For Amplifying Your Tweet Into a Sonic Boom', *Forbes*, 31 May 2012.

the Iraqi government must address to create a stable future. Under Saddam Hussain, Baath Party membership had been a prerequisite. While many joined for ideological reasons, many others joined only to advance their careers. When the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority blocked all Baathists from public sector employment in 2003, they also effectively denied many Iraqi Sunnis future prospects for their families. While ISIS and the evils it perpetrates must be eradicated, Sunnis must be given a path forward in Iraq.

A US State Department campaign entitled ‘Think Again Turn Away’ tried to win over the hearts and minds of ISIS members. It denounced ISIS as a dead end that would leave recruits dead or widowed. It tried to engage adversaries in social media. It backfired. A *Time* magazine analysis concluded it was ‘not only ineffective, but also provides jihadists with a stage to voice their arguments—regularly engaging in petty disputes with fighters and supporters of groups like IS [...], al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab’.<sup>41</sup> One ISIS loyalist countered charges of ISIS brutality with the message: ‘REMEMBER HOW YOU AMERICA ARRESTED AND HUMILIATED OUR BROTHERS IN IRAQ AND HUMILIATED THEM IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY!!’ [original in caps]. The State Department felt that it was appealing to ‘moderates’ but was in fact giving ISIS a platform from which to undercut its campaign.

The key lesson here is that a campaign to discredit an adversary must take all audiences into consideration. Westerners condemn ISIS genocide, but for ISIS the violence is justified as a response to wrongs perpetrated against Islam. Those who commit public violence tend to do so in the name of a moral cause.

### **The Responsibility to Protect**

The concept of humanitarian intervention was developed in 2001 by the ad hoc International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in response to the mass atrocities committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. At the World Summit in 2005 UN member states unanimously adopted the idea that nations have a moral ‘responsibility to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity’.<sup>42</sup> When atrocities are being committed against a population, a nation that happens to be in a position to intervene is faced with a choice between protecting the

41 Rita Katz, ‘[The State Department’s Twitter War with ISIS is Embarrassing](#)’, *Time*, 16 September 2014.

42 The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, ‘[Responsibility to Protect](#)’; Global Centre For the Responsibility to Protect, ‘[What is R2P?](#)’.

victims or refraining from action. What consequences might flow from the decision taken? These are thorny questions with no easy answers. International responses have often been found wanting.

The failure to call out the Nazis, who tried at the end to conceal their horrific genocide, and the failure to bomb the railroad tracks that brought Jews to the camps, stand out as a great moral dereliction by the Allies. I am not a holocaust expert and recognise there are many who would argue that nothing would have stopped the Nazis from carrying out their genocide, the core of which took place over a period of one year. In March 1942, 75–80% of all victims were alive. By February 1943, only 20–25% were. Could focused information warfare during that year exposing the Nazis' heinous campaign of genocide combined with bombing train tracks that carried victims to the death camps have exerted a chilling effect? Perhaps not. A series of essays collected in 2000 identified a host of military reasons that bombing the camps didn't seem practical. The Allies lacked today's precision bombing capability. Bombing the camps might have killed lots of victims and it isn't clear whether the camps were the right target, as opposed to the trains. We cannot be certain about what should have been done; history does not reveal its alternatives.

The Nazis represented a determined force of evil; they were not easily deterred. However, their efforts to destroy evidence of their crimes suggests, to me at least, the possibility that a focused campaign of strategic communications exposing Hitler's diabolical plan to the world, combined with intense *bombing* might have deterred him. Were he not concerned about exposure, why not carry out the genocide in public? No one tried, so we'll never know. I agree with the stinging assessment offered by Pope Francis in denouncing the Allied failure to bomb the railway routes that took Jews—as well as Christians, the Roma, and homosexuals—to their death. 'Tell me,' the Pope said, 'why didn't they bomb' those railroad routes? Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has echoed these sentiments. Were there risks to pilots? Would an intensive track bombing campaign have diverted vital resources from tasks important to defeat the Nazis? Yes. But the Allies had an overriding moral imperative to take all measures to stop the genocide. They had a responsibility to protect. The failure was egregious.

We have grown no wiser several generations on. In 1994 President Bill Clinton shunned urgent pleas from his wife Hillary and others to stop genocide in

Rwanda, which he could easily have done.<sup>43</sup> He later excused himself, stating that this failure to act was his greatest mistake as President. As Secretary of State to President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton championed the notion of a Responsibility to Protect. In 2011 she took decisive action to prod the US and NATO to intervene in eastern Libya. However, the political debacle that followed, and still plagues Libya today, shows the pitfalls of failing to devise, execute, and stick with a coherent strategy to avoid the collapse of a state. It's not clear who was responsible for that, but subsequent events have created not stability but an on-going civil war in that nation.

The Secretary of State arguably paid a stiff price for Muammar al-Gaddafi's murder. Among President Vladimir Putin's motives for meddling in the 2016 US Presidential election was a deep personal hostility toward Mrs Clinton over Libya. Russia had abstained from a United Nations resolution authorising intervention there but had made clear that under no circumstances should any action be taken to overthrow Gaddafi's regime. Clinton's callous remark after his murder—'we came, we saw, he died'<sup>44</sup>—helped to seal Putin's hatred and determination to discredit her.<sup>45</sup>

At heart a moralist, not a practitioner of realpolitik, in 2013 President Barack Obama warned the Bashar Assad regime in Syria that using chemical weapons against civilians would cross a red line. Assad used them but instead of punishing him, Obama demurred. His failure to make the warning stick and, at best, his ambiguity in engagements with Putin, inspired the Russian leader to conclude that he could seize Crimea without repercussions. It also further complicated the conflict in Syria. One lesson with regard to asserting a moral responsibility to stop atrocities is that taking action to do so requires careful strategic thinking and a backbone of steel.

The need to stop atrocities raises vital questions. Actions have consequences. So does inaction. Just south of the US border Mexico's drug war is also challenging our understanding of the responsibility to protect. The public use of political violence as atrocity propaganda by the drug cartels has taken on new dimensions.

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43 See: Farwell, *Persuasion & Power* (Washington: Georgetown U. Press, 2012) and the sources it cites.

44 Corbett Daly, 'Clinton on Qaddafi: "We came, we saw, he died"', *CBS News*, 20 October 2011.

45 It is evident that, like most people, it did not cross Putin's mind. Putin never considered the possibility that Donald J. Trump would win the 2016 election.

## The Mexico Drug War<sup>46</sup>

Understanding why and how cartels employ atrocity propaganda requires understanding the war. The war is about power and ideology, money and greed. It's a war over turf among the cartels. Estimates of the profits the trade generated vary, but all agree they are huge. The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) long ago was estimating profits for Mexican and Colombian traffickers between \$8,3–\$24,9 billion per year. The US Justice Department has placed it as high as \$39 billion in the US alone.<sup>47</sup> Citing the National Drug Intelligence Center, *Global Security* puts the revenues at between \$17 billion and \$38.3 billion annually.<sup>48</sup>

Mexican cartels are also engaged in a war of ideas. They are fighting to establish their ideology, territorial control, and power over the Mexican state. The order of battle among the cartels has shifted, as leaders are killed or sent to prison, competitors seize territory, cartels splinter, and new leaders emerge. The Sinaloa cartel was perceived during the 1980s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the most important. Led by Trevino Morales, the now displaced Los Zetas, drawn from Mexican army special operations personnel, used terror as its calling card.<sup>49</sup> As the Zetas influence diminished, in its place the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has emerged among the most powerful cartels. It controls the movement of over a third of all drugs consumed in the US.<sup>50</sup>

The violence has destabilised Mexico. It has created, as James McCune and Elsa Kania have observed, 'a culture of impunity and lawlessness' that pervades many Mexican communities, where police are intimidated and powerless and the media has censored itself.<sup>51</sup> Cartels use *narcomantas*, *narcovideos*, *narcomensajes*, and *narcocorridos*, political pardons, and religious imagery to intimidate, frighten, romanticise, and warn.

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46 The research for this section draws on work that the author, Darby Arakalian, and Antoine Nouvet did in connection with the SecDev Foundation, and that Ms Arakalian and the author have done together on the topic for other venues.

47 Patrick Radden Keefe, 'Cocaine Incorporated', *New York Times Magazine*, 15 June 2012.

48 'Mexican Drug War', *Global Security.org*, 2019; George Friedman, 'Mexico and the Failed State Revisited', *Stratfor*, 6 April 2010; Malcom Beith, *The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord*, (New York: Grove Press, 2010), p. 78. These numbers are earlier dates but similar to current statistics.

49 Melissa del Bosque, 'The Fall of Los Zetas: How FBI Narcos Took on Mexico's Most Violent Drug Cartel', *Mirror*, 28 November 2018.

50 Kevin Sieff, 'Mexico's Jalisco New Generation Cartel Blazes a Bloody Trail in Rise to Power', *Washington Post*, 11 July 2020.

51 James McCune and Elsa Kania, 'Turf War and the Mexican Government's Strategy', in *The War on Mexican Cartels*, Harvard Institute of Politics, September 2012; Beith, *The Last Narco*; Grillo, *El Narco*; Ricardo C. Ainslie, *The Fight to Save Juarez*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

They define an ideology and support cartel efforts to seize political power, effectively establishing a ‘state within a state’ in parts of Mexico.

The formation of a new culture and state in Mexico stems from a constant battle between the Mexican government and the political and ideological warfare the narcos employ in order to attain legitimacy. As María Mendez notes,<sup>52</sup> the cartels seek legitimacy by introducing ideas, beliefs, myths, and values that align with their tactics.<sup>53</sup> The narcos are constantly renegotiating their role in society and assert their identity by any means they can find.

The creation of a narco culture and a narco state emanates from deeply rooted alienation, discrimination, and the rejection of a lower, poorer class in Mexico. Facing failure from governments and systems that violate impersonal trust,<sup>54</sup> the rise of the narco and narco culture is more than a phenomenon, it is a reaction to the impunity of the privileged and disenfranchisement of the poor. Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, a Mexican graduate student from the King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, argues that this extensive identity and complex movement can be tied directly to social inequality and the incessant need to have reparations. Sapiña argues that narcos are a consequence of such inequality. She says: ‘Oppression by the higher classes and a complicit government with ties to the cartels that legitimises them, the narco becomes a consequence of a complicit society. The narco ideology is based in a constant search, or even crusade, for economic, cultural, and ideological reparations.’<sup>55</sup>

Arguing that this need by some cartel members for reparations comes directly from their absolute disassociation from Mexican society due to their pariah status, Sapiña says there is an ‘if you can’t stop them, join them’ mentality that gives some cartels a pass in order to manage the broader cartel problem. She observes:

Mexican governments in the past have decided which cartels to affiliate themselves to in order to control the others.

52 María Méndez, ‘Drogas, Pobreza y Derechos Humanos: El Impacto Social Del Narcotráfico’ [Drugs, Poverty, and Human rights: The Social Impact of Drug Trafficking], (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2009).

53 Translation by Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, King’s College London.

54 Structured and functional, impersonal trust describes the connection between individuals and the institutions and systems that are meant to represent them; it is this trust from which they gain legitimacy. Francesca Granelli, *Trust, Politics and Revolution: A European History* (London: IB Tauris, 2019).

55 Author’s interview with Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, 22 November 2020.

Politicians and even the army are involved in narco-trafficking; it becomes a society in the complete scheme for corruption. The famous narco phrase “*plata o plomo*” (silver or lead) is not as nuanced as people might think; it explicitly states that, even if an individual does not seek or desire to be corrupted, you have to affiliate or die. Sometimes it is no longer a question of choice, but of survival.

Greed may drive cartels, but what has made them effective is their ability to recruit and mobilise younger, alienated Mexicans through messaging what the cartels offer that the state does not: social mobility, hope, opportunity, and prosperity. It is a type of atrocity propaganda given the Draconian quid pro quo that the mobilised youth must submit to. Thus, Sapiña further observes, ‘It is tragic, but this is the new Mexican Dream’.

Cartels articulate a story defining themselves, rooted in the romantic 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of a bandit preying upon the rich and a national history in which wealthy Mexicans and foreign investors have controlled much of the economy.<sup>56</sup> Cartel ballads and music videos stem directly from the Mexican folk tradition of romanticising revolutionary heroes, except that today’s songs glorify drug lords.<sup>57</sup>

The songs [*narcocorridos*], videos, social media, and messages communicated through signs and banners [*narcomantas*] present a populist patina that celebrates the humble origins of cartel leaders and their exploits. Scholar Ricardo Ainslie points out that their strategic communications has shifted the terrain ‘for a political left long accustomed to an adversary defined as the nation’s elites and long accustomed to viewing itself as a movement that defended the downtrodden’.<sup>58</sup>

The narratives help define a specific culture that is attractive to teenagers and younger people whom the cartels vigorously recruit. It is manifest in the attire: garish cowboy hats, ostrich-skin boots, loud sneakers, brightly coloured baseball hats, tight dresses, gaudy jewellery, lavish homes, fast cars, alcohol, and a glamorous life that offers the best food, most beautiful women, and most compelling action.

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56 Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012), Kindle loc. 418/5194.

57 Ibid.

58 Ainslie, *The Fight to Save Juarez*, Kindle Loc. 4206/6219.

In short, the cartels offer a way of life that actualises a macho identity and a sense of pride to which recruits have no other means of access.<sup>59</sup>

Writing in *Milenio*, Tijuana author Heriberto Yépez has accurately observed that the cartels evolved from being an economy to embodying an ideology that saturates society. The term narco, ‘drug trafficker’ [*el narco*] and ‘drug life’ [*lo narco*] conflate. Yépez argues that narco used to be an adjective that described one aspect of Mexican culture. Now it *is* culture: ‘narco and culture are synonyms’.<sup>60</sup> The cartels offer meaning and concrete opportunity that directly influence norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

### Forms of Cartel Strategic Communications

Strategic communications are ‘words, deeds, images or symbols to mold and shape public opinion, influence it, and to shape behavior in order to achieve desired effects or end-states’.<sup>61</sup> The cartels tend to conduct their strategic communications through:

- *narcomantas* [message banners]
- *narcomensajes* [murder victims as messages]
- *narconideos* [music videos]
- pardons of key state officials involved in narcotrafficking (for example, General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda)
- creation of religious deities as alternatives to existing ones

These strategies, described in more detail below, serve overlapping goals:

- intimidate competitors and the state
- threaten police and officials who do not cooperate
- project dominance and confidence
- establish legitimacy among the people, even in the face of grotesque violence
- show machismo

59 Grillo, *El Narco*, Kindle Loc. 3641/6409.

60 Quoted by Josh Kun, ‘Death Battle’, *The American Prospect*, 5 January 2012.

61 Farwell, *Persuasion & Power*, p. xviii–xix.

- recruit foot soldiers
- hold sway over the government and over the state as a whole
- exercise extreme power over the state and almost absolute exertion of control over the governance of the country
- demonstrate a connection to spirituality
- legitimisation of goals through powerful and culturally relevant imagery

The brutal violence of their methods is similar to the terrorist tactics more familiar in the Middle East. As journalist Antonio Sampaio has aptly noted, violence itself serves as a message through which ‘small and large groups negotiate their positions in an overcrowded criminal space. Brutal violence is used to communicate warnings, threats, and territorial claims’.<sup>62</sup> Strategic messaging provides a different dimension to cartel efforts to seize power while articulating its own set of social norms that define expectations for their behaviour.

### **Narcomantas**

*Narcomantas* are simple posters or banners hung in public spaces, perhaps off a pedestrian bridge over a busy downtown thoroughway. Cartel groups often install them before sunrise, so Mexicans see them during their morning commutes. *Narcomantas* are becoming more sophisticated. Once hand-written and poorly spelled, banners are now more commonly machine-printed.

Cartels often install *narcomantas* simultaneously in various locations to achieve greater reach and penetration of a message. In September 2013, the Gulf Cartel hung thirty *narcomantas* in 25 municipalities bearing the same message.<sup>63</sup> They post in high-traffic areas and in symbolic locations such as government buildings, and almost always sign them.

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62 Antonio Sampaio, ‘Mexican Cartels: Crime or Terrorism?’, *kingsofwar.org*, 30 June 2012. This article is no longer available.

63 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 12 September 2013. The material posted during this period has now largely been removed and has not been accessible since spring of 2014.



Figure 1. One of thirty Gulf Cartel *narcomantas* hung on 11 September 2013.<sup>64</sup>

Cartels use *narcomantas* strategically and tactically to build support, inoculate against criticism, and discredit competitor cartels. In September 2013, a Gulf Cartel *narcomanta* attacked Los Zetas cartel while pledging respect for the state and families (see Figure 1):

Thank you to the people of Zacatecas state for enduring the war we've waged as of late against the scum Zetas cartel [...] likewise, our respect to the state authorities and your sacred families [...] we are all together in this against the Zetas.

There, the goals were to establish legitimacy by communicating social responsibility, calculated restraint, and shared burden with the government, while threatening a rival and intimidating the state through co-optation. The mass distribution demonstrated organisation and strength. Seeking legitimacy goes hand-in-hand with cartel efforts to seize political power that

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<sup>64</sup> Photo posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 12 September 2013.

challenges both the state and rival cartels and affords them freedom to operate while arguing that their actions benefit the population and are designed to achieve goals beyond merely enriching themselves. It may be empty propaganda, but the cartels seem actually to believe what they say.

*Narcomantas* are also used to counter-message. On 27 July 2013 an alleged Zetas ‘renegade’ faction put up a banner declaring that it rejected ‘previous Zetas *narcomantas* that attempt to say that the Zetas are united [...] in fact, they are in disarray’.<sup>65</sup>

The Mexican government takes down *narcomantas* quickly,<sup>66</sup> especially when they denounce police corruption, involvement in extortion, and kidnapping for profit.<sup>67</sup>

### Narcomensajes

Often laid over or near the body of a murder victim, a *narcomensaje*—a narco message—is a post-script note to a violent event. It is usually a shorter, simpler message than a *narcomanta*, written on cardboard, paper, or cloth, in cyberspace, or perhaps painted onto a vehicle. *Narcomensajes* provide clues that give meaning to what may seem like senseless acts. Like *narcomantas*, their goal is to intimidate the public or to pressure authorities to change policies.<sup>68</sup> They may also provide an explanation for the carnage, such as ‘this is what happens when you work with such and such rival cartel’.<sup>69</sup> *Narcomensajes* reportedly first appeared in August of 2005. Today they are ubiquitous.<sup>70</sup>

Although associated with physical banners, a *narcomensaje* may be sent digitally. A Gulf Cartel unit based in San Luis de Potosí e-mailed and posted on-line a photo and message to the online narco news blog, *Tierra del Narco* stating that it was ‘cleaning up the plaza of Zetas like this guy’ (*Figure 3*. below).<sup>71</sup>

65 Post by website administrator, *Historia del Narco*, 27 July 2013.

66 ‘Ejército retira narcomantas en Torreón; mantiene en reserva su contenido’ [Army withdraws narcomantas in Torreón; keeps its content in reserve], *Proceso*, 24 July 2013.

67 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, October 2013.

68 Sampaio, ‘Mexican Cartels: Crime or Terrorism?’.

69 Story reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 18 September 2013.

70 Anabel Hernandez, *Narcoland*, (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 218.

71 Reported on *Tierra del Narco*, 2 July 2013.



Figure 2. An unsigned *narcomensaje* found on 18 September 2013, along with two blanketed bodies.<sup>72</sup>



**Digital narcomensajes:**

Figure 3. Digital narco message e-mailed to a narco news blog on 2 July 2013, by CDG (left).<sup>73</sup>

Figure 4. Photo of *narcomensaje* (right) that was distributed by the Knights Templar via their Facebook fan page on 15 September 2013.<sup>74</sup> These posts have since been removed.

Figure 5: An unsigned *narcomensaje*. This *narcomensaje* was issued on 15 October 2014 in Cancun to the CERESO Director.

<sup>72</sup> Photo posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 18 September 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Photo posted by *Tierra del Narco* on 2 July 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Photo is from a screenshot of the original *narcomensaje* on the *Knights Templar Facebook page* taken by the author in September 2013. The page is no longer available.

The Knights Templar cartel uploaded one on its Facebook page warning all ‘who may snitch to Los Viagras’—a rival group—‘are hereby warned that they will pay the consequences’ (Figure 4).<sup>75</sup>

*Narcomensajes* are the most frequently used form of narco-communiqué, possibly due to their comparatively low production value and the high volume of murders that cartels claim to commit. Who composes them? *Narcomensajes* are often issued by ‘unknown’ authors. Authors whose identity and affiliation are intentionally or unintentionally obscured wrote nearly 40% of *narcomensajes* compared to 13% of *narcomantas* and 15% of *narcovideos*. And, 26% of those whose authors were identified refer to smaller actors in the narco war, rather than to major cartels. Still, one must avoid hasty generalisation. This 26% may include communiqués between individuals who are members of larger cartels but do not bother to indicate affiliation due to the intimate nature of such communiqués.<sup>76</sup> For example, one *narcomensaje*<sup>77</sup> signed by ‘El Chino’ states to the head of a *Centro de Readaptación Social* (CERESO, a local prison) in Cancun: ‘You have 24 hours to let out that mutt ‘El Pipo’ from jail or you will pay the consequences. This is the first warning, the second will be personal.’ (Figure 5. below). Such a communiqué might involve a larger narco cartel, but the meaning would be understood only by an inside observer. In any event, the relative intimacy of *narcomensajes* is remarkable and chilling.

## Narcovideos

*Narcovideos* are video communiqués. They vary in content, style, and purpose. Some are quickly made movies—produced in two weeks—packed with muscular men toting big guns, narco-fashion, pick-up trucks with big engines, voluptuous women, and lots of violence. Reportedly cartel leaders love watching them. Other videos depict executions, oratory lectures by cartel units or leaders, and the filming of goodwill gestures such as the delivery of aid to natural calamity victims or the distribution of Christmas gifts to the poor. They are relatively recent in vintage. Anabel Hernandez gives an indication, dating one of the first *narcovideos* to only December 2005.<sup>78</sup>

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75 A screenshot of the original *narcomensaje* was taken by the author on 15 September 2013.

76 SecDev Foundation research, 2015-2020

77 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 20 October 2013.

78 Hernandez, *Narcoland*, p. 218.



Figure 6: A snuff video—a *narcovideo* beheading and communiqué by the Zetas Cartel. It was posted online on 3 August 2013 but has since been removed.<sup>79</sup>

An infamous form of such communiqués is the ‘snuff’ video, arguably, if one wants to be picky, a technically inaccurate term as the murders occur off-screen. In these, cartels force rivals or opponents to confess crimes, disclose names of rivals, or denounce corrupt officials. Victims may be submitted to humiliation, pain, or death as retribution.<sup>80</sup>

The impact is possibly heightened by leaving the climax to the viewer’s imagination. Most of the videos in the June–December 2013 period featured interrogation of captives, surrounded by heavily armed men with physical violence occurring off screen.

*Narcovideos* may serve as public announcements. Prior to June 2013, two new groups, *Los Aliados* and *Pueblo Unido Contra la Delincuencia* (PUCD), made announcements that they would ‘hunt down’ the *Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* and the Zetas, respectively.<sup>81</sup> ‘This will be the first time you hear of our name’, declares a seated PUCD spokesperson surrounded by two dozen heavily armed men. He declares war on the Zetas and personally warns the Governor of Tabasco to ‘clean up his act’ to bring an end to the violence (*Figure 7*. below).<sup>82</sup> PUCD and Aliados also figure in the *narcomantas* and *narcomensajes* from June–December 2013. *Narcovideos* of this sort provide particularly useful source material for identifying the origins and motives of new actors in the conflict.

79 Photos are screenshots taken by the authors of the *narcovideo* posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 3 August 2013.

80 Narcovideo reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 3 August 2013.

81 PUCD video, *YouTube*, 15 May 2013; Los Aliados video, *YouTube*, 26 March 2013.

82 PUCD video, *YouTube*, 15 May 2013.



Figures 7. and 8. 'Public Announcements' *narcovideos*. Los Aliados (left) and PCUD (right) making 'public announcements' to Mexicans in 2013 and issuing statements to government authorities and rivals via videos posted on YouTube.<sup>83</sup>

*Narcovideos* may serve as propaganda. In September 2013 the Gulf Cartel filmed a montage of themselves delivering aid to hurricane victims, while in December 2013 they filmed their delivery of Christmas gifts.<sup>84</sup>

*Narcovideos* almost always originate in digital form and are disseminated through cyberspace. This may help them to gain greater circulation but makes identifying their provenance and 'newness' more difficult. Since viewers re-circulate them freely as 'new material' even on dedicated narco news sites, verifying their provenance requires careful research. For example, in August 2013, *Blog del Narco* released over 40 videos of 'interrogations, executions, and shoot outs'.<sup>85</sup> Yet the post failed to state which videos had been released previously. This study's examination revealed that fully 90% of those viewed had been released weeks, months, and even years earlier.

In another instance, a *narcovideo* showing the Zetas beheading a young woman who allegedly worked for the Gulf Cartel was circulated as part of a list in October 2013, prompting a news-making denunciation by the Prime Minister of Great Britain.<sup>86</sup> In actual fact, the video was at least five months old, having originally been released sometime prior to June 2013.<sup>87</sup> The recycling of *narcovideos* occurs often, making it difficult for journalists and researchers to determine what 'news' is.<sup>88</sup>

83 Photos are screenshots taken by the authors of the 3 August 2013 *narcovideo* posted online on YouTube.  
84 Gulf Cartel video of hurricane aid delivery, YouTube, 22 September 2014; Gulf Cartel video of Christmas goodwill, YouTube, 27 December 2013.

85 The authors manually reviewed the content published on *El Blog del Narco* on 3 August 2013.

86 'Elimina Facebook video de decapitación de una mujer en México' [Facebook deletes video of beheading of a woman in Mexico], *Proceso*, 26 October 2013. The same *narcovideo* was published among the over 40 videos released on 3 August 2013, on *El Blog del Narco*.

87 At least one version of this *narcovideo* was reported as early as 30 April 2013, on the narco news blog [Mexico Rojo](#).

88 For example, a *narcovideo* of Zetas executing four female operatives of the Gulf Cartel that was released by *El Blog del Narco* as new on 15 October 2013, had come out as early as 5 June 2013.

Like some *narcomensajes*, some *narcovideos* are anonymous. Anonymity in *narcomensajes* appears to be more consistently deliberate, rather than the product of censorship or incomplete reporting. A video from August 2013 showed a walkie-talkie discussion between a cartel lieutenant called Diablo and his gunmen.<sup>89</sup> Evidently the video was created for a tailored audience, with the producers seeing no need to provide context or identification for a broader Mexican public.<sup>90</sup>

### Political Pardons of ‘Untouchable’ Heads of State

Direct government affiliation can be seen in cases such as that of the ex-Secretary of National Defence, Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, who was arrested by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) on charges of narco-trafficking upon his arrival in Los Angeles on 16 October 2020. Identified as ‘El Padrino’, he stands accused of trafficking heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines, and marijuana, and of multiple violations of human rights. A career military man, he was appointed

Secretary General of the Secretariat of National Defence of Mexico as soon as Enrique Peña Nieto took office as President of Mexico at the end of 2012. In 2020, he was exposed as ‘El Padrino’ or ‘Zepeda’ in material acquired by the DEA; this led to an uproar and a confrontation between the DEA and the Mexican government.<sup>91</sup> After issuing a stern warning that jeopardised the DEA’s presence in Mexico, the government has dropped the charges against him.<sup>92</sup> This complicity leads to a clear testing of the power and authority the Mexican state has over the subversive narco state. This is where political leverage becomes a form of strategic communications—the narcos have demonstrated that they have more power and more money and will protect their own. Government officials become subservient both to their own desire for personal gain and to the demands of the narcos, which is made clear through Cienfuegos Zepeda’s release.

89 A video posted on *El Blog del Narco* on 20 October 2013 was actually released earlier, with the earliest version of this video identified by the authors released on 6 August 2013 on YouTube.

90 A similar video shows the assassination of an apparent citizen blogger associated with the news platform *Valor Por Tamaulipas*—a social media page that crowd-sources information for citizens on situations of danger—shot at point black range by a masked executioner in army fatigues after announcing to viewers that ‘this is the price you’ll pay for working with *Valor Por Tamaulipas*’. (an image of this video is found in Section VI). The video’s apparent goal is to arouse fear in general, rather than fear specific to a cartel.

91 Background information from BBC News Mundo: ‘[Salvador Cienfuegos: Quién Es El General Mexicano Acusado De 4 Cargos De Narcotráfico En EE.UU.](#)’, [Salvador Cienfuegos: Who is the Mexican General Accused of 4 counts of Drug Trafficking in the US?], *BBC News Mundo*, 16 October 2020.

92 Background information from Alan Feuer and Natalie Kitoreff. ‘[¿Cómo Logró México Que Estados Unidos Retirara Las Acusaciones Al Exsecretario De Defensa Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda?](#)’, [How did Mexico get the United States to drop the accusations against former Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda?], *The New York Times*, 18 November 2020.

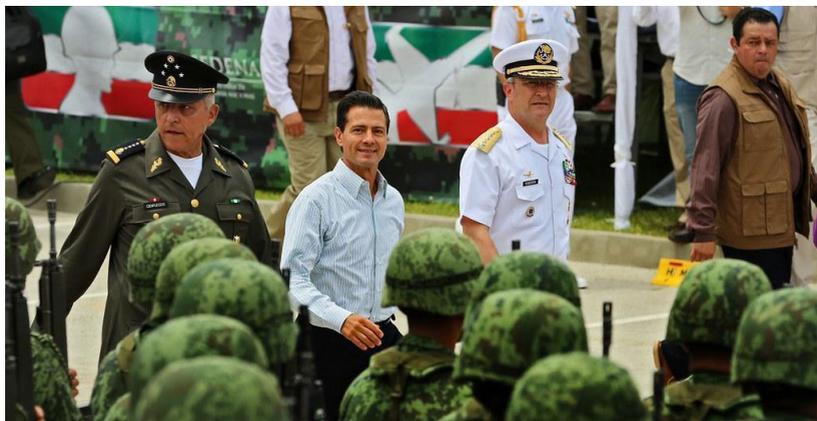


Figure 9. (From left to right) ex-Secretary of Defence Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda and Mexican ex-President Enrique Peña Nieto at the inauguration of the Mazatlán Military Hospital on the 29 August 2016.<sup>93</sup>

### Creating Religious Deities as Alternatives to Existing Ones

To continue fuelling their social legitimisation and to assert further their cultural affluence as a state within a state, narcos rely on the creation of culturally relevant stories and narratives that fall into the paradigm of the counter-value ideology they have created. The saints, Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte are two key figures that represent and even romanticise the narco narrative. The story of Jesús Malverde, possibly a fictional figure, followed the paradigm of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bandit in Sinaloa as a Robin Hood figure who sided with the poor against the rich.

The folklore surrounding him sheds light into understanding the actions and romanticisation of cartel behaviour. Malverde was reborn in the people's consciousness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an uncanonised 'saint' who performed miracles for those in desperate situations. The adoption of Malverde as the patron saint of the narcos in 1980 exemplifies asymmetrical power relationships with the government and a 'pursuit of miracles to escape the status quo'.<sup>94</sup> The reverence of Malverde displayed by cartels suggests a strategy through which they seek legitimacy for their actions, and to position themselves as a populist opposition to the government.

93 Image Credits: Creative Commons.

94 Gerardo Gómez Michel and Jungwon Park, 'The Cult of Jesús Malverde: Crime and Sanctity as Elements of a Heterogeneous Modernity', *Latin American Perspectives* Volume 41 No 2 (2014): 202–14



Figure 10. A shrine to Jesús Malverde in Culiacán, México.<sup>95</sup>

Comparatively, Santa Muerte represents the direct female personification of death that has also become a patron saint of the narcos. Kevin Freese argues that, to her followers and believers, she is a counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe; for them, she exists within the context of Catholic theology.

Freese links the myth of Santa Muerte to the material and practical associations that this figure has in Mexican society, and more specifically to the organised crime community in Mexico. He argues that the followers of Santa Muerte are closely associated with crime and those directly affected by it. They call upon her for protection and power, even when committing crimes. ‘They will adorn themselves with paraphernalia and render her respect that they do not give to other spiritual entities.’<sup>96</sup>

These two saints represent the deformed perspective and cognitive dissonance that narcos employ for legitimisation. Well positioned within socio-cultural narratives, these two figures could be considered a form of Strategic Communications by the narcos deployed to generate empathy for their cause, which they believe to be ideologically just, due to their complete disenfranchisement and ostracisation from mainstream Mexican society.

95 Image Credit: Tomas Castelazo.

96 Kevin Freese, ‘The Death Cult of the Drug Lords: Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed’ (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2005).



Figure 11. A procession in Tepito, Mexico City venerating Santa Muerte.<sup>97</sup>

## Citizen Response

The Mexican state has not proven effective in fighting cartels. Its current President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has no coherent strategy for winning this war and has stated: ‘We will fight them with intelligence and not force. We will not declare war.’<sup>98</sup>

For years, citizens have used blogs and social media such as Facebook and Twitter to share news about the activities of the narcos.<sup>99</sup> They have capitalised upon the anonymity of cyberspace, and its ability to bring together data at unprecedented speed, scale, and granularity in what might be termed ‘horizontal citizen-to-citizen’ violence prevention. Citizens employ internet communications technology—anonously, for their own protection—to use crowd-sourcing techniques for real time reporting and information sharing and to inform the police about actual or suspected crimes. The two most common forms of this are citizen reporting systems and blogs. *El Blog del Narvo* is a good example of this approach. Related sites such as *Notinfomex/Narcoviolenca* and *Nuestra*

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97 Image Credit: Thelma Datter.

98 Carrie Khan, ‘As Mexico’s Dominant Cartel Gains Power, The President Vows “Hugs Not Bullets”’, *NPR*, 23 July 2020.

99 For more on this, see Jorge Soto and Constanza Gomez Mont, ‘#DemocracyMX: Impacts of Cyberspace on Mexican Civil Society, Drug Cartels and Government’ in Robert Muggah and Rafal Rohozinski (eds), *The Open Empowerment Era: From Digital Protest to Cyber War* (Open Empowerment Initiative America, 2013).

*Aparente Rendición* advocate non-violence. The Center for Citizen Integration outs suspected cartel members.<sup>100</sup>

The cartels recognise the power of citizen reaction and have tried to choke off citizen online empowerment. In 2011, they committed symbolically powerful crimes showing the killing and disembowelling of bloggers. One body set alongside a keyboard and mouse was left with a *narcomensaje* warning of the risks of online reporting.<sup>101</sup>

But the cartels are finding that citizens are tough minded. A second generation of citizen initiatives has added safety measures to reporting. Foreign-based organisations such as ‘Community RED’, as well as local ones such as ‘Hancel’, have leveraged technological savvy to develop and improve digital security tools and collaboration within Mexico. While Freedom House’s 2013 evaluation of digital safety among Mexican journalists and bloggers found persistent threats and an ‘urgent’ need for digital safety, new initiatives are protecting Mexico’s thriving horizontal citizen-to-citizen violence prevention.<sup>102</sup>

Online videos that appear to be released by citizen groups have denounced corruption by local politicians and extortion by cartels. Images of family members and girlfriends of cartel members have been uploaded with evidence linking them to organised crime. In one case, an actual photo of an excel sheet showing the quantity and value of bribes paid by the Knights Templar to local officials, including police officers, was anonymously sent to the *Blog del Narco*.

Citizen opposition has gone beyond ‘naming and shaming’ cartels. It has launched frontal campaigns against them. In Michoacán, self-defence forces—paramilitaries—have established Facebook pages on which they post material, collect information on the Knights Templar and successor organisations,<sup>103</sup> rally support, denounce corruption and other state activities that hinder their cause, and issue public communiqués.<sup>104</sup> Spokespersons speak openly against the Knights Templar cartel, with their faces unmasked and their locations plainly visible.

100 Robert Muggah and Gustavo Macedo Diniz, ‘Digitally Enhance Violence Prevention in the Americas’, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Volume 2 No.3 Art. 57 (2013): 1–23.

101 Borderland Beat, 5 April 2013.

102 Jorge Luis Sierra, *Digital and Mobile Security for Mexican Journalists and Bloggers* (Freedom House and the International Center for Journalists, 2013).

103 In 2013, the leaders of this cartel were killed, or, as with one of its leaders, Ignacio Renteria Andrade, alias ‘El Cenizo’, arrested by Mexican authorities. The organization today persists in a weaker, fragmented form. See: ‘Knights Templar’, *Insight Crime*, 5 May 2020.

104 The Open Empowerment Initiative tracked six such Facebook pages between June and December 2013. All are centred on Michoacán state.

This movement is about more than countering cartel narratives. Citizens are increasingly battling to shut down narco cartel online platforms. The social media presence of the Knights Templar was short-lived. A study conducted by Antoine Nouvet for the SecDef Foundation in 2016 observed the shutdown of several Knights-Templar-affiliated Facebook pages that included not only outright fan pages of the cartel, but also a fan page of Knights Templar *narco*corridos that had been online since February 2012. A game of whack-a-mole during this period ensued as Knights Templar pages reopened and would then rapidly go offline, due to what some Facebook users noted were ‘successful complaints brought to Facebook to close these criminal social media platforms’.<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of this drama is the absence of the state. The protagonists are cartels, anti-cartel paramilitaries, and the digital cheerleaders of either faction, as well as the mediation roles that private-sector platforms such as Facebook play.<sup>106</sup>

Critical to managing the drug wars is to reclassify them. Many incorrectly characterise cartel violence and drug trafficking as high-intensity crime. They are that, but they also qualify as low-intensity conflict carried on by organisations that are properly characterised as terrorists. How one characterises the cartels governs what resources and authorities apply. Under the current situation, law enforcement’s hand are tied. We harbour no doubt that the cartels, who have killed arguably over 200,000 innocent civilians and operate freely in American cities, constitute an existential threat to this nation’s future. That holds true as well for Europe, which is connected through cartel activity.

The drug war may not be winnable by those who oppose the cartels. The cartels are too wealthy, too politically connected, and too militarily powerful. But the war can be managed. Their use of atrocity propaganda has proven integral to cartel culture and their ability to commit high intensity crime and seize political power. But citizens have shown a willingness to fight back. What’s striking is that the punch-back has come from *citizens*, not the state. President Obrador has shown relatively little mettle in taking on the cartels and high-level corruption—as witnessed by the arrest and release of Mexico’s supposed top ‘drug fighter’, General Cienfuegos. Events of this sort manifest such pervasive corruption as to neuter state efforts to prevail.

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<sup>105</sup> Facebook user’s response to a query on January 2014, on a Knights Templar fan page.

<sup>106</sup> The dilemmas faced by platforms such as Facebook in complex contexts such as these are something the SecDev Foundation has researched in more depth in Syria’s ongoing civil war.

## Conclusion

The two books on public diplomacy and propaganda are well done, with essays by distinguished authors who offer important insights into the notions that this essay has addressed. In my view, nations have come up short in coming to terms with the challenges. It's time to rethink.

One might expect that, in the world as it existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, states and other powerful actors might have found it easier to commit atrocities because they could more easily have been concealed or misrepresented, whereas in today's globally connected world, one might reasonably expect universal condemnation of atrocities and that parties seeking to gain and sustain credibility and legitimacy would refrain from committing them.

For states, this may be true. China's use of concentration camps against the Uighurs renders this more complex; Beijing has consistently represented their campaign to wipe out Islamic culture as benign education and training for good jobs. They seek to justify what amounts to cultural genocide by associating Uighur resistance with al-Qaeda and ISIS, thereby depicting all Uighur Muslims as terrorists. In contrast, non-state actors such as ISIS and its cohorts around the world, and the drug cartels, have glorified themselves in their employment of atrocities to enhance their public image as powerful and determined forces.

It turns out that civility is an elusive constraint on what some groups will do. Whether for religion, greed, politics, or other motives, atrocities will be committed, and different groups will proudly credit themselves for committing what the civilised international community would characterise as war crimes.







