IB Extended Essay

Global Politics

The impact of Russian information manipulation on the legitimacy of European democracy

To what extent did Russian information manipulation during the 2017 Catalan independence referendum affect the legitimacy of European democracy?

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Introduction

The 2017 Catalan independence referendum sparked global controversy over the validity of secession from a sovereign state. The democratic call for self-determination was struck down by the Spanish government and condemned by other European states due its violation of the Spanish rule of law. This triggered violent conflict to break out in Catalonia between Spanish and Catalan nationalists, fuelled by long-existing identity and territorial grievances. The strong divide between parties sowed the seeds for instability in Spain, wherein Russia was digitally present to benefit from. Kremlin-owned international media agencies such as RT and Sputnik tapped into the narratives of injustice and violence in Catalonia and distributed strategically framed information at a global level to create an unreliable image of European democracy.

The scope and dissemination of information in an age of globalisation has allowed it to become a powerful tool in global politics. Information can be manipulated to serve the political agenda of any actor, regardless of the 'truth' of the events that have occurred. Russian coverage of the referendum in Catalonia is an example of how manipulated information can take root in an open democracy and be used to strike the legitimacy of its governance. Thus, this essay aims to answer the following research question: To what extent did Russian information manipulation during the 2017 Catalan independence referendum affect the legitimacy of European democracy?

The significance of information manipulation and digital media on the world stage is tied to its ability to "manufacture consensus, automate suppression, and undermine trust in the liberal international order" (Bradshaw and Howard 1). Relatively unbounded from traditional perceptions of sovereignty and legitimacy, information dissemination from local to global

actors has the potential to transform the balance of power in international relations. As mentioned, manipulated information has interfered with democratic processes in multiple states and continues to sow doubt in democratic media institutions. Nevertheless, the phenomenon remains critically under-researched in IR studies. Investigations such as this essay are thus an effort to adapt IR studies to an increasingly interconnected and technologically advanced world.

Methodology

The sources used for this essay consisted completely of secondary research. Most IGO reports, articles and case studies that were used were written from a liberal perspective, which would entail an inherent condemnation of any undemocratic behaviour. Reports from the European Commission provided plenty of research on how authoritarian action is perceived from a democratic perspective, though the complicated nature of how manipulated information can be received made it hard to verify their accuracy. There was little formal research to be found on the matter from an authoritarian perspective, so this research was be used to establish the basis which Russia hopes to change. Considering that autocratic states need not be limited by liberal values in their pursuit for power, it was important to find other sources and employ theoretical frameworks that would support a more relativist perspective to balance the evaluation of the research question. Sources from Russian media agencies like RT and Sputnik allowed for the exposure of alleged 'democratic shortcomings', which brings up some fundamental questions about democratic structure that liberal sources do not. Nevertheless, the information from these sources will not be taken at face value due to their debatable reliability, but rather to prompt a discussion on why such measures are taken against democratic states.

To facilitate an in-depth analysis of the case study in terms of information manipulation, the essay used key concepts, perspectives and foundational theories such as offensive realism and relativism. The main concepts employed were power, sovereignty, legitimacy, globalisation and conflict. These concepts encompass the global scope of the essay, and how influence operations at the local level (e.g. facilitating conflict) can be used to alter international relations between states to their benefit. Furthermore, the concepts are further encased by the lens of realism, which limits the scope of the essay to focus on the power dynamics of information manipulation. Analysing the issue from a realist perspective gives room for equal justification of actions from both sides in the name of self-interest and the preservation of security, allowing for a more balanced representation of states. The offensive nature of information manipulation calls forth Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, which describes how states ultimately pursue hegemony among other states to ensure their own survival. This is appropriate to describe how Russia aims to make its offense the best defence. To accompany this approach, the general theme of relativism will appear throughout the argumentation in order to describe the pluralist nature of information in the current age, as well as how actions exist outside of the widely accepted liberal values.

The significance of information manipulation

Defining information manipulation

The manipulation of information about a state or event by external forces is an ambiguous concept, as different terms (e.g. "fake news", propaganda, disinformation) are used interchangeably despite describing certain methods and effects. A report from CAPS and IRSEM aids in clarifying the nuances of the terminology associated with this topic, as well as

providing a general, broad definition of information manipulation as "the intentional and massive dissemination of false or biased news for hostile political purposes" (Vilmer, Escorcia and Guillaume 12). Thus, for the purpose of this essay, information manipulation will be used as a proxy for many of these terms.

Political climate

In the current information age, state competition for power in global politics is becoming digitised. Whereas power previously mainly resided in the control of territory, it is now shifting toward the control of information and networks (Richmond). This shift has been facilitated by communication technologies and globalisation, as ideas are able to flow more quickly and freely between states. The intake of information cannot easily be controlled by state governments, meaning that foreign agendas have the potential to flourish within state borders and incite political mobilisation. Authoritarian states are cautious of this occurring against the state and chose to restrict free access to information in order to protect its political stability. In contrast, democracies must balance their respect for liberty and freedom of association with the protection of their own interests against information manipulation. While digital media could be deemed as direct forces of democracy, their role includes amplifying content that keeps populations disinformed and wary of democratic institutions.

Digital media has transformed the operation and structure of democracy, leaving behind "a deficit of trust, a culture of relativism and what is called the 'post-truth era'" (Bayer, Bitiukova and Bárd 11). A culture of risk has developed from mounting evidence appearing of foreign actors using media and information to meddle with the internal affairs of other states. Manipulated information is initially presented as equally valid to other information; it is done indirectly via the principle of pluralism, but also directly by states that create it and

present it as "alternative facts". This pushes a relativist narrative, wherein accountability is seemingly detached from 'universal' Western principles of fairness and genuineness. The development of the 'post-truth era' by these processes has sown doubt in the electoral integrity of democratic elections, as shown by the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and Brexit. This essay will proceed to explore the effectiveness of information manipulation in-depth by using the case of the Catalan referendum.

Part I: Lead-up to the referendum

Background information

On 1 October 2017, a referendum concerning the separation of the Catalonia from the Spanish state was held. The total electoral turnout came to be around 43% (2.3 million), wherein 90.2% voted Yes, 7.8% voted No and 2% were blank (Generalitat de Catalunya). This referendum was in direct violation of the Spanish constitution, and the Spanish government declared it illegal. Despite being suspended by the Constitutional Court, the Catalan autonomous government proceeded to organise the referendum unilaterally and declared independence on October 27th. The referendum was viewed as an act of disobedience, and the government ordered police forces to intervene in the voting process. The violent backlash of the Spanish police included destruction to polling stations and beating voters with batons. The crisis of the referendum escalated to a degree that Spain found it necessary to set Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution in motion, wherein Spain can impose direct rule on Catalonia.

Vulnerability factors

The conflict between sovereignty and the right to self-determination is at the core of the independence referendum. The concept of sovereignty refers to a state's full right and

authority to govern its own territory. It is one of the most robust principles of international relations, as the state is widely conceived as the most important actor and legitimised as such by the international community. In contrast, the idea of self-determination within sovereign borders does not enjoy the same recognition. Self-determination implies "the right of a particular group of people to determine for themselves how and by whom they wish to be governed" (Hannum). This form of governance is based more so on democratic and liberal principles, as there is a popular desire from a population to govern their own terrain. However, the right to self-determination struggles to be legitimised globally due to its vagueness. The principle of self-determination is understood among influential institutions such as the UN and the IJC as a fundamental right, yet their definitions fail to concretely address the initiation and execution of the process of determination, as well as what groups of people it concerns (Olomojobi and Omonye 146-147). Thus, the system toward gaining the right to self-determination is structurally permissible due to a lack of detailed grounds for its justification.

The vagueness of self-determination, and consequently secession, gives rise to multiple perspectives on the cause for Catalan independence. The most prominent ones are that of the Catalan and Spanish populations, which are respectively connected to the fulfilment of self-determination and the conservation of sovereignty. The Catalan perspective promotes their cultural distinctiveness, historical and economic grievances, and their undemocratic perception of Spanish governments as a justifiable cause for their secession from Spain (Alcalde and Aguiar 12-15). It can be argued that the will of the people is what makes a state legitimate; in this sense, Catalans use identity and history to inform the meaning and agency of their actions. On the other hand, the Spanish perspective is more protective of the secure nature of sovereignty, and chose rather to portray Catalonia as an offshoot and greedy, as well

as denying any democratic issues existing in Spain (Alcalde and Aguiar 12-15). Structures such as territorial sovereignty and the constitution are believed to take precedence over the desire for self-determination, given that they are legitimised in the current global order.

The soil for Russian interference

The polarisation caused by Catalan secessionism functions to create a suitable environment for the manipulation of information on Spanish affairs. Referenda have a particular potential for manipulation given that they often relate to controversial, divisive issues and output complex results - despite the vote appearing simple and binary (Vilmer, Escorcia and Guillaume 91). Catalan and Spanish identity politics manifested into two opposing nationalisms already prior to the referendum, wherein the former publicly contested the legitimacy of Spanish leaders and governance. By the time the referendum occurred in October, imagery of Spanish police exercising violence on to Catalan voters and protestors became a new means of further splitting both the national and international public. The new emphasis on violence led to stronger claims of seeking justice and liberty for the Catalan people, and how their democratic attempt to realise self-determination was being struck down by Spain. This is demonstrated by how Catalan news agencies reported heavily on the police violence against voters at the polling stations, while Spanish unionist news continuously attempted to overshadow this by discrediting the validity of Catalan independence claims (Cetrà, Casanas-Adam and Tàrrega 137). Thus, the imagery and discourse occurring at the time of election facilitated the destabilisation of Spanish politics, which becomes an invitation for external forces to get their foot in the door.

It is through digital media that Russia was able to gain a voice in Spain. The most relevant examples for the referendum would be Russia's state-run news agencies, Russia Today (RT)

and Sputnik. Both agencies are being held responsible for the majority of the sudden 2,000% increase in Russian digital activity related to Catalonia in the month prior to the referendum (Milosevich-Juaristi 2). A quantitative analysis of media activity during the crisis shows that the majority of RT and Sputnik's content was mainly pro-independence (Špalková 9-10). The same analysis reveals that half of RT's most shared posts focused on violent imagery of police while remaining ostensibly neutral. Sputnik was far more radical in the sense that all their most shared stories were in favour of Catalan independence. Furthermore, artificial, non-human accounts, known as bots or trolls, were created for the sole purpose of distributing this content. Only 9 of 100 most active accounts in spreading the news from RT and Sputnik were certainly classified to be real people. Another 7 were official Sputnik and RT accounts.

Part II: Defying democracy

Destabilising the power of democracy

The attractiveness associated with European democracy is anchored on its apparent peacefulness and stability as a model of governance (Zamfir and Dobreva). Its success in remaining sustainable and relatively conflict-free becomes exemplary for states to follow, cementing its value as a form soft power on the international arena. Further protected by the military might of the U.S. and enforced by the policies of IGOs such as the UN and EU, democracy is the most accepted contemporary source of legitimacy (International Baccalaureate Organization). Within the context of the current liberal order, exercises of power made in accordance with democratic values are more likely to be accepted by the international community. In turn, actors that act undemocratically will generally face condemnation from states that base themselves on democratic values, such as states in Europe and North America. A relevant example of this is the international sanctions imposed on

Russia by the U.S., the EU and other countries following their annexation of Crimea in 2014. Due to being embedded within the institutional framework of a democratic Europe, Russia's authoritarian action to undermine the territorial and democratic integrity of Ukraine was penalised via interdependence (Milosevich-Juaristi 2). Though Russian politics do not adhere to the principles of democracy, the balance of power is tipped in favour of democratic states in the West, leaving Russia with little choice but to accept the consequences. However, this threat to Russian security provoked an aggressive attitude in return in the form of information manipulation.

The referendum's conflict over justice for the Catalan region gave Russia the opportunity to proclaim the decline of a liberal democracy. A democracy's judiciary is its most trusted institution in government (Spaulding, Nair and Nelson). By eroding the public's trust in Spain's legal system, Russia is attempting to hit democracy at its most critical point. Contradictions between the protection of sovereignty and respect for democratic rights has put Spain between a rock and a hard place. Their choice to prioritise the former was justified by international bodies such as the EU, which claimed that the vote was an 'internal matter' which should not be interfered with (European Commission). The upsurge in violence in the region allowed Russian media agencies to present Spain as baring authoritative tendencies, calling out claims of "Francoist practice[s] unworthy of a democratic State" (Milosevich-Juaristi 3). This creates a hypocritical image of Spain and shows the limitations of its democratic standards, causing doubt over its credibility. In his article, Nye Jr. states that politics in an information age is a contest of credibility. He claims that, "attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable information from background clutter gain power" (Nye Jr. 99-100). By showcasing the limitations of

democracy in Catalonia at an international level, Russia pierces the perception that the liberal order is as reliable as it seems.

Realist approach

The attempt to weaken the influence of democracy can be tied to a 'zero-sum' game, wherein Russia tries to undermine the balance of power in its own favour. Mearsheimer expands on this principle in his theory of offensive realism, claiming that the goal of a state is, "to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states", and ultimately, to become the only great power in the system – the hegemon (Mearsheimer 2). This entails a method of using power projection as the best method of ensure a state's own survival, wherein offense is the best defence. Though military means are suggested to be the key means of shifting the power balanced in Mearsheimer's theory, there are limitations to this in the modern liberal order of Europe. Balancing is a key strategy that great powers use to prevent states from disrupting the balance of power (Mearsheimer 139). The EU has demonstrated their ability to keep Russian military in Europe at bay through sanctions, which significantly limits the options available for Russia offense. However, a new path opens up for Russia in digital space, where moves are harder to detect and trace back to a government-led operation. This strategy of fragmenting Europe at both national and international levels via information manipulation is something that Russia, as a large power, can more easily influence (Karlsen 6).

The weaponization of information can be described by a supplementary theory called 'sharp power', which is involves "efforts at censorship, or the use of manipulation to sap at the integrity of independent institutions" (Walker, What Is "Sharp Power"? 11). Moves are essentially non-violent but can inspire violence by encouraging certain attitudes and

contradictions. Amidst the referendum, the Spanish and Catalan divide was already strong on its own, but the added amplification of information helped to sustain its build-up to a crisis. Russia took advantage of the tendency that people have to seek information that aligns with their views for its own political benefit (Anderson and Rainie). Sophisticated tactics of disseminating manipulated information involve trapping citizens in situations that facilitate a confirmation bias, culminating into a stronger affirmation of 'us versus them'. All the while this is occurring, sharp power offenses are claimed to be relatively camouflaged by the openness of democratic environment of democracies. By the time of its detection, manipulated information by Russia has already had the opportunity to settle in Spain.

Part III: Effect of Russian information manipulation

The judiciary faults in Spain's democratic structure had already caused strain in the state's internal relations long before Russia's involvement, so it is difficult to fully attribute the conflict to Russian information manipulation. Hence, information manipulation only becomes somewhat useful when a traditional conflict over territory or justice is in place. The true effect of Russia's efforts is not concrete or quantifiable in its own regard; they never wished to secure Catalan independence, but rather to facilitate instability in Spain, and, by extension, Europe. By attempting to shake the soft power of democracy, Russia attempted to gain more credibility (and thus, legitimacy) as a great power. While contesting democracy has been made more possible through the transition into digital space, it remains a difficult task to make a significant impact in established democracies. Information manipulation is a more strategic exercise of power which does not bare immediate effects like military measures; it is sensitive to conflicts at hand and its effects may not be sustainable in the long run. However, when applied in multiple states and over a significant period of time, Russia may begin to establish relativism as a norm in international relations.

The legitimacy of democracy on the international level is hard to challenge as well, as great powers like the U.S. continue to build resiliency against undemocratic action (Commitee on Foreign Relations United States Senate 136). Likewise, democratic institutions like the EU and European political elites have been consistent with condemning the 'Russian threat', projecting their own image of Russia as a state not worth aligning one's interests with. This method appeals to the transparency and genuineness of democratic values which prevail in the current liberal order, functioning as a way to rebuild trust in the soft power of European democracy. Following a realist rationale, this can be viewed as an example of threatened states employing diplomatic balancing tactics to deter the aggressor from disrupting the balance of power (Mearsheimer 156). Using the dominant liberal values of the global order, Europe appeals to its legitimacy and credibility as a democratic bloc to seep the credibility of Russia as well.

It is questionable whether these efforts to 'redirect legitimacy' from democracies and toward Russia was beneficial to Russia's security. Information manipulation tactics may be effective in the sense that they can inspire some sentiments that are in line with Russian interest (i.e. losing trust in democratic institutions), but the outcome does not outweigh the risk of implosion in Russia. Russia must maintain an asymmetric order to ensure the survival of their own interests; authoritarianism must juxtapose democracy to make one more appealing than the other (Walker, Ludwig and Cardenal 9). Though Russia has a system in place that significantly limits the entry of foreign agendas, its focus on pursuing hegemony via offensive tactics takes attention away from its own defence. The uncontrollability of information flows goes both ways; should democracy infiltrate Russia's internal sovereignty, then Russia would have a greater security threat on its hands. Due to its hollowed public institutions, Russia has

no legitimate way of resolving an issue of instability (Brady). Waltz' theory of defensive realism would not deem that risk justifiable enough for a state to pursue its interests, though Mearsheimer claims that an aggressor cannot be deterred from the ultimate goal of hegemony (Mearsheimer 20).

Conclusion

In regard to the research question, Russian information manipulation during the 2017 Catalan referendum functioned to destabilise the legitimacy of European democracy. Democracy is the most accepted form of legitimacy in the liberal order, yet its influence on the global stage has increasingly been challenged by foreign powers via digital media. Due to rapid and uncontrollable information flows, international actors can be closely present at local and national levels to deliberately disrupt the affairs of a democratic state. Critical events like the Catalan referendum serve as an effective base for manipulation to occur, in the sense that contradictions between identity politics and a conservative international community can spark violence and outrage. Thus, the errors that stem from failed democratic processes are magnified to a global level by the aggressor, creating a perception of the state that is unworthy of the democratic standard. This translates to a strategy of divide and conquer, wherein a fragmented Europe via Spain and other information manipulation operations can more easily be influenced in favour of Russia. Though the fleeting nature of agency and information does not allow a Russian agenda to form a proper structure abroad now, it can begin to facilitate a trend of relativism and doubt in the legitimacy of European democracy. Thus, despite its current latency, information and communication technologies will continue to serve as critical tools against democratic states in international relations.

The use of liberally biased sources throughout this work contribute to the main limitation of the essay. It has been mentioned that these sources are not only used to inform, but to maintain the current structure and dominant values in international relations. Thus, this investigation of Russia and their motives would be based on presumptions from a democratic perspective and consistently be evaluated against 'Western criteria'. With access to some formal sources from Russia, perhaps the essay could avoid any possible misrepresentation of Russian interests. Furthermore, employing offensive realism as the main analytical framework bore its own challenges, as it had to be adapted to a new, more modern context. In order to somewhat equate information to a military weapon, the theory had to be supplemented with sharp power. Thus, the arguments in this essay may not necessarily agree with Mearsheimer's framework as he wrote it.

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