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**2017 CATALAN INDEPENDENCE
REFERENDUM: THE PROJECTION OF
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVES BY
RT AND SPUTNIK**

Bachelor's thesis

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Abstract

During the recent years, Russia has been accused in meddling in the internal affairs of Western countries on several occasions. Claims of Russian information campaign have also surfaced related to the Catalan independence referendum, held on 1 October 2017. Although there have been some analyses the author is not aware of any wider academic research examining Russian information activity related to the referendum.

The aim of the thesis was to identify the strategic narratives that Russia disseminated to the English-language audience in relation to the Catalan independence referendum, and connect them with broader Russian foreign policy interests. The author, *inter alia*, seek to ascertain why Russia was interested in Catalonia in the first place and how it is used various communicative tools to achieve its goals. The author set a hypothesis that Russia was taking advantage of the events in Catalonia to enfeeble the European Union.

To test the hypothesis the author conducted a poststructuralist discourse analysis on the content of Sputnik and RT that was published between 1 September and 31 October 2017. Apart from the news articles, television coverage of RT was also analysed. The coverage was viewed through the prism of the strategic narratives theory by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle in connexion with the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe.

The author ascertained that the tense and at times violent conflict in Catalonia gave Russia a pretext to amplify the tensions and direct the coverage towards the European Union. Russia first argued for the intervention of the EU to give the conflict an international dimension. As the EU remained a bystander, Russia actively projected an identity narrative of the EU as hypocritical and not living up to the democratic values it serves to epitomise. EU was shown in decay and in the process of disintegration with an intent to weaken the West's hegemony and by doing this strive for a multilateral world order where the role of Russia would be increased. The hypothesis was thus confirmed.

The work contributes to the wider efforts of elucidating the range and technique of Russian information activities and demonstrates that Russia has vested interest not only in its close neighbourhood but also further away where it is not and active player itself.

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Introduction

Since the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, the West has witnessed Russia grow more forceful and fearless in its foreign policy undertakings. Russia has been accused in meddling in the internal affairs of Western countries on several occasions. In January 2017, the United States intelligence community assessed that Vladimir Putin had personally ordered an “influence campaign” to harm the electoral chances of Hillary Clinton and “undermine public faith in the US democratic process” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017). Across the Atlantic, Emmanuel Macron, following the French elections in 2017, accused Sputnik and RT acting like “agents of influence and propaganda” that spread “serious falsehoods” (Politico 2017).

Claims of Russian political meddling have also surfaced related to the Catalan independence referendum, held on 1 October 2017. Spanish government has contended that Russia-based groups used social media to spread “misinformation” related to the referendum (Cotovio and Grinberg 2017). A report by El País claimed that the RT used its Spanish-language portal to “spread stories on the Catalan crisis with a bias against constitutional legality” (Alandete 2017). This was corroborated by the head of the German domestic intelligence service BfV on 17 May who said it was very probable Moscow had carried out a disinformation campaign to encourage voters to back splitting from Spain (Keeley, 2018). Mira Milosevich-Juaristi (2017) argues that Russia applied a combination of various instruments of information warfare, concentrating primarily on transmitting both true and false messages on social networks. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has denied these claims, arguing that the accusations are an example of the “rampant anti-Russian hysteria in the West” (Ara 2017). A report sent to the UK Parliament’s “fake news” committee also states that these claims are based on misinterpretation of data resources and poor research methodology (McGrath 2018).

Apart from analyses concentrating on social networks and Spanish-language RT the author is not aware of any wider academic research examining Russian information activity related to the Catalan referendum. The thesis seeks to contribute to this effort by concentrating on the narratives that Russian government-sponsored international media outlets Sputnik and RT disseminated to the English-language audience.

The main aim of the thesis is to identify the strategic narratives that Russia disseminated to the English-language audience in relation to the Catalan independence referendum and connect them with Russian foreign policy interests, i.e. the broader Russian understanding on how the international system ought to function. The author, *inter alia*, seeks to ascertain why Russia was interested in Catalonia in the first place and how it is used various communicative tools to achieve its goals. The hypothesis is that Russia was taking advantage of the events in Catalonia to enfeeble the European Union.

The author views the coverage of Sputnik and RT through the prism of the strategic narratives theory by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013; 2017) in connexion with the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). In their novel approach, Miskimmon et al. argue that the analysis of narratives is central to understanding the major dynamics in international affairs, especially the power of persuasion. The theory gives priority to the role of communication in international relations and takes into account the changing media ecology of the 21st century making it thus appropriate to the study of Russian information activities. As the theory of strategic narratives is largely based on poststructuralist studies of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe's theory was chosen for it gives the essential tools to study the pro-Russian discourse.

To examine the strategic narratives disseminated by Russia, the author conducted a poststructuralist discourse analysis on the content of Russian international media outlets Sputnik and RT. In addition to the news articles related to Catalonia that were published on Sputnik and RT's websites, television coverage of RT found from its Youtube page was also analysed to get a more complete view of the coverage. The period under study is 1 September to 31 October 2017. Altogether 422 news articles (257 published by Sputnik 165 published by RT) and 51 videos were analysed (Appendix 1).

The thesis commences with a theoretical chapter that first outlines the main tenets of the strategic narratives theory and then continues with a more specific explanation of the perception of the world by Russia and its role in it. The second chapter comprises of a critical literature overview of the goals and tools of Russian information activity. The author will then move on to conduct a discourse analysis on the media coverage of Sputnik and RT to identify the main narratives disseminated by Russia. The chapter concludes with a discussion linking the empirical part with the theoretical framework.

1. Theoretical framework

The first part of this chapter outlines the basic features of the strategic narratives theory – the types and characters of strategic narratives, their place in the realm of international relations and relation to the construction of order and information infrastructure. The second part continues with a more specific explanation of how Russia perceives the world and its role in it. It is mainly based on the work of Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin (2017) and Laura Roselle (Roselle 2017).

1.1. The theory of strategic narratives

“Make America Great Again”, climate change, Fukushima’s “end of history” – the world consists of different narratives. Storytelling – what happened and will happen in life and how we should perceive the world around us – has been integral to how people simplify and organize their understanding of the complex processes taking place. The concept of narratives has been studied more extensively from the second half of the 20th century.

Todorov (1977, 45) views narratives as frameworks that allow us to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation, giving meaning to all parts of the whole. ÓTuathail (2002, 617) sees narratives in connection to stories: “storylines are sense-making organizational devices tying the different elements of a policy challenge together into a reasonably coherent and convincing narrative”. It is up to the narrator to decide the content of the message – what aspects should be included and how they should be presented (Antoniades et al. 2010, 4).

Narratives are central to the understanding of international relations and world order. They are distinguished by a specific structure, entailing an initial order, a problem disrupting that stability, and a resolution that re-establishes the order, though the end-state might differ from the initial situation (Antoniades et al. 2010, 4). Narratives consist of (1) characters or actors (agents), (2) setting/environment/space (scene), (3) conflict or action (act), (4) tools/behaviour (agency), and (5) resolution/goal (purpose) (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 7). They do not necessarily need to possess an identifiable author since the narrativity of events and situations is dependent on the interpretation of the audience. For example, there was no author of the end of the Cold War but events could still be interpreted using features inherent to narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 13).

Arsenault et al. (2017, 192) propose that for a narrative to be strategic they must have a coercive effect – akin to law – of assuring that “the story predicted or ordered by the narrative will take place or threatening severe consequences to relevant actors if it does not.” The strategic narrative concept is influenced by Lawrence Freedman (2006, 22) who focused on the strategic deployment of narratives to counter opponents in military conflict. He saw strategic narratives as a tool to challenge the legitimacy of enemy forces.

Strategic narratives have a twofold effect. They first act as tools of political communication used to persuade international actors and shape their behaviour in an observable way. “If your strategic narrative is convincing, allies will commit resources, publics will re-elect your party to continue your foreign policy, and enemies will realize their prospects are bleak unless they change course” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 17). In addition to that, the processes of strategic narratives are also central to the identity and interests of the international actors by constituting the experience of international affairs. “If your state convinced another state to commit to specific policies and actions on a consistent basis, [...], then the other state may come to take on the identity of a state that carries out such policies naturally, as an expression of their values” (ibid., 103). In that sense strategic narratives theory is constructivist because reality (e.g. hierarchy, order, events) is viewed through lenses and prisms, rather than directly and unmediated. “If anarchy is what states make of it, then what they make of it depends on the narratives they experience reality through” (ibid., 108).

In the long term, political actors – usually elites – use strategic narratives to shape the understanding of policies and events and give determined meaning to the past, present and the future to achieve political objectives (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2–5). They use strategic narratives to project their vision of the world and their place in it (their identity) and thus alter the international system to their benefit. “The hope for political actors is that strong narratives will triumph over counternarratives, that legitimacy will be strengthened, that power will be heightened” (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 1).

Miskimmon et al. (2013; 2017) distinguish between three types of narratives: system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. **System narratives** articulate how a political actor understands international order, the structural basis of the world: who the main players are, how the system should function, which actors pose a challenge to the

system. (Bially Mattern 2005; Hurrell 2005; Roselle 2017). A classic example of it would be a narrative of the Cold War that set out a vision of a bipolar world with two opposing ideologies (capitalism vs. socialism) vying for world dominance. Arab Spring or The War on Terror fall into this category.

Identity narratives concern the identities of actors in international affairs. They lay out the values and goals of the political actors and shape perceptions of what is appropriate for them to do in a given context (Holsti 1970; Thies 2012a and 2012b, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017). The identity of actors in international affairs is in a process of constant negotiation and contestation (Roselle 2017, 58).

Policy narratives seek to influence the development of policies and “outline how an actor views the appropriate response to address a political challenge or crisis and articulate a position based on material interest (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 112). They aim to establish a common-sense understanding of why a policy is needed and desirable and how it will resolve the underlying issue (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 8). Policy narratives, like identity narratives, may support or undermine system narratives: “Building a broadly-based coalition for war supports a very different narrative about the international system than does a unilateral and preemptive use of force” (Roselle 2017, 58).

It should be stressed that system, identity and policy narratives are all linked to each other and should therefore be in harmony (coherent and plausible) in order to be effective. “Contradictions between narratives at different levels can undermine the effectiveness of strategic narratives related to policy” (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 8).

Strategic narratives are vital for our expectations and understanding of the international system and world order. They indicate our understandings of actors and polarity and the identification of great powers, they also highlight expectations about the behaviour of kinds of states (e.g. great powers and rogue states). (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 67). They also set the terms for collaboration and cooperation in the order and make predictions about rising and falling powers, threats, enemies and allies (ibid.).

Strategic narratives offer explanation for three aspects of international order: (1) they contribute to how order is conceived, (2) they are involved in the production of order, and (3) the maintenance of order (ibid., 61, 89). Based on the material power distribution,

international actors aim to shape perceptions and understandings of the world to condition favourable behaviour from other actors. The success of great powers largely rests on their ability to convince others of the legitimacy of their narratives of the international system.

When looking at international relations, strategic narratives alongside material resources play a central role in determining whether great powers are able to shape a new systemic alignment. Through the use of strategic narratives powers can project their values and interests to extend their influence and change the discursive environment in which they operate. “These are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about ‘who we are’ and ‘what kind of system we want’” (Antoniades et al. 2010, 2).

Narratives are continuously contested and negotiated. The contestation might involve eliminating the rival’s narratives by destroying the conditions that make them plausible. Sometimes, though, it might be more useful to keep the opposing narratives alive to add legitimacy by comparing the narratives: “The credibility of the strategic narratives of the US and USSR during the Cold War was enhanced by the opportunity to compare, contrast, and denigrate the other’s narrative” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 104). For a narrative to be successful it needs to capture the audience’s attention and be convincing. A degree of ambiguity is also needed so that audiences can interpret the ideas in ways most preferable to them. (ibid., 110–113).

International actors use various types of media, such as the diplomacy or propaganda, to persuade other actors through the formation and projection of strategic narratives. Due to that reason, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2013, 151) see the media ecology – understood as environment, sum of all media devices – as an intrinsic part of the international relations that ought not to be downplayed. As James Carey (1989, 87) put it: “reality is a scarce resource...the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display that resource.” To control the projection of the strategic narratives, political actors seek to control and shape the conversations in the media ecologies by distributing their narratives and directing communication towards topics and frames most suitable for their agenda (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 150–152). The work of strategic communication and public diplomacy falls into this sphere. In addition, they must also compete to control and steer the overall infrastructure of these ecologies itself since it privileges certain voices and certain ways of communicating over others: “They must

ensure supportive voices have an opportunity to be heard [...] and that oppositional voices are side-lined, or at the very least countered.” (ibid., 170).

Media ecology conditions how the information is spread in the society. A change in that structure (e.g. rapid technological development) is also accompanied with a change in the distribution and form of authority and power. With the advent of digital media, media ecologies have undergone a significant realignment during the last decade (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 10). This has changed radically who is able to project narratives and allowed for more competition to challenge the narratives of great powers of the system. “Not only have we witnessed the recent proliferation of transnational television channels such as Al Jazeera, Telesur, [...], BBC World and CNN International, but many of these media organisations also provide platforms and interactive features allowing for forms of public participation and conversation” (Antoniades et al. 2010, 7).

Political actors are now able to communicate directly with the audience in other states instantly and continuously. Due to that reason these media organisations act as tools for strategic narratives by transmitting content overseas (ibid.). They also allow a “new ‘bottom up’ public diplomacy by enabling publics to interact and, perhaps, ‘influence’ each other independently of government communications, with ‘soft power’ reconceptualised as horizontal and dispersed” (ibid.).

1.2. Russian strategic narratives

Many academics and authors see the world order currently in a transition process moving towards new post-Cold War power dynamics. The move towards a multipolar international system has also been noted in Russian Foreign Policy Concepts of 2013 and 2016 that stress that the global economic and political dominance of the traditional western powers is eroding fast (Foreign Policy Concept 2013, 2016). Miskimmon et al. (2013, 64) argue that a central concept shared by many approaches to international order is the balance of power between the powerful units in the system. As Michael Barnett (2010) notes, this power balance has not been achieved in the post-Cold War world of US hegemony yet. There are debates taking place about the longevity and stability of the US-led world order with some scholars such as Bacevich (2002), Layne (2006) and Nye (2003) arguing that US is making use of its current world dominance to the detriment of

its future standing. According to Barry Buzan (2011), the world is entering a new period without superpowers.

According to Miskimmon et al. (2017) the new power dynamics will be mainly achieved by the contestation and projection of different strategic (system, identity, policy) narratives by the international actors. Robert Gilpin (1981) has argued that whereas history has shown the great power contestation to be a violent process (hence the term “hegemonic war”) the international system is changing, and great powers do not seem to seek global dominance anymore, looking for international recognition of their great power status instead.

With the demise of the Cold War, binary narratives of good vs. evil, capitalism vs. communism etc. were no more enough to tie states together into opposing camps as they used to (Roselle 2017, 60). In fact, both the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev (1988), and the United States, George H. W. Bush (1990), used the phrase “new world order” to describe a new era in international relations which would be based on increased cooperation between the power blocks. “In the 1990s changes in the international system opened space for the articulation of new strategic narratives about the international system itself” (Roselle 2017, 60).

According to various authors (English 2000; Mankoff 2009), Russia was going through a major transitional period in the 1990s, trying to find its place in the world. Different system and identity narratives were intensely contested. As Bennett (1999, 306–309) argues, there were three competing system narratives put forward by different camps in Russia. The liberals, particularly Andrei Kozyrev, emphasised the importance of maintaining good relations with the West and did not favour any use of force in the near abroad. The pragmatists like Ivan Rybkin or Grigory Yavlinsky were willing to use force only as a last resort and argued that Russia had to balance its priorities between the West and Eurasia (ibid.; Light 1996, 46–47). Nationalists such as Alexander Rutskoy saw Russia as a leading power in the region that ought to be more assertive in fighting for its interests (Bennett 1999, 323).

The political elite led by Boris Yeltsin embraced the Western liberal narrative whereas the public was not as enthusiastic (Clunan 2009, 54–55). These opposing narratives conflicted during the Chechen Wars. Roselle (2017, 57) argues that the war in Chechnya

challenged the emerging liberal narratives that emphasised cooperation. Great power narratives were reasserted and renewed as the use of force was seen the primary way to counter the perceived security threats. While the Russian political elite and the public first wanted to see its country as part of the European community this narrative began to crumble in the mid-1990s “as the Russian leadership began to question the willingness of Europe, and especially of the United States, to include Russia in a substantive and meaningful way in a European community” (ibid., 79).

This shift of narratives played into the hands of Vladimir Putin who has since taken a more assertive foreign political stance, turning away from identity narrative of Russia as a Europe oriented liberal democratic country (ibid.). To justify the use of force in Chechnya, Russia has since started to return to its great power status in the world. Perceiving a threat to the security and order in Russia, the public has also sided to show considerable support for the authoritarian leadership of Putin (Roselle 2017, 74–79).

The Cold War era great power narratives that reemerged during the Chechen Wars were also reasserted as Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and continue to undermine the system narratives that emphasise international cooperation and shared interests (ibid.). These narratives also continue to play a major role domestically as leaders try not to “look weak”. Roselle (2017, 79) suggests that “narratives that emphasise cooperation with the West might not resonate with the public if this cooperation is perceived as weakness”.

Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2017, 115–116) identify the three main Russian strategic narratives of the international system: (1) the narrative of multipolarity and polycentrism; (2) the narrative of prestige, equality and mutual respect; (3) the narrative of the Common European Home.

The narrative of multipolarity and polycentrism promotes the emergence of a polycentric world order. Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 marked that “Russia shall seek to achieve a multi-polar system of international relations that really reflects the diversity of the modern world with its great variety of interests” (Foreign Policy Concept 2000). Miskimmon and O’Loughlin note (2017, 116) that more recently reinforcing the multilateral world order has meant countering the dominance of the US and the West by stressing the relative decline of the West and the rise of the rest of the world. “Globalisation has led to the formation of new centres of economic and political power.

Global power and development potential is becoming decentralised, and is shifting towards the Asia-Pacific Region, eroding the global and political dominance of the traditional western powers” (Foreign Policy Concept 2016). Legvold (2017, 1026) contends that the West has underestimated the threat coming from Russia that seeks to challenge the existing world order.

The narrative of prestige, equality and mutual respect demands for greater recognition of Russian standing in the world by the West. It contends that Russia should play a more active role in the international arena, being part of the other great powers in reinforcing world order. This was first promulgated in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2000 which claimed that Russia should be more active in solving international challenges both on the regional and global level (Foreign Policy Concept 2000). In the Foreign Policy Concept of 2016 this was furthermore asserted as “consolidating Russian Federation’s position as a centre of influence in today’s world” was mentioned as one of the main foreign policy objectives of Russia (Foreign Policy Concept 2016).

The third Russian strategic narrative that Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2017, 116) bring forth is the narrative of the Common European Home that resents the fact that Russia has not been fully included in the post-Cold War European order (e.g. NATO and the EU). “Exclusion has been a common narrative in Russian foreign policy documents and public speeches since the 1990s” (ibid.). The authors note that it is difficult to construct an inclusive Common European Home narrative since the system and identity narratives of the EU and NATO are framed to counter the Russian narrative due to its aggressive foreign policy actions in the region (ibid.).

On the surface, there are signs of potential Russian and Western narrative convergence in highlighting the importance of international law, democracy and the centrality of markets. The problem though is in the interpretation of these concepts which makes the possibility of any cooperation between the West and Russia difficult. “Those outside Russia may simply not believe Lavrov when he says Russia’s ideological affinity to ‘democratic principles’ reflects the same affinity in the West, for instance” (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 114). Hill (2016) marks that this could lead to an endless cycle of miscommunication and frustration on both sides.

2. Sputnik and RT: tools for Russian information activity

The activities and coverage of Sputnik and RT could be examined as part of the much broader context of Russian information warfare which has intensified since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine over three years ago (Richter 2017; Darczewska 2014). One of the main tenets of the Russian information thought is the speech of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Valery Gerasimov from January 2013. Talking to the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, Gerasimov contended that political goals can no longer be achieved through conventional means but through the “widespread use of disinformation, of political, economic, humanitarian, and other non-military measures deployed in connection with the protest potential of the population” (Gerasimov 2013). The Iraq War and the Arab Spring, both allegedly instigated by the West, served as a proof to Gerasimov that it is only a matter of days that a nation could be transformed into an arena of bitter conflict and descend into chaos (ibid.).

Many authors (Giles 2016, 37; Pomerantsev 2014; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 6) see that the main goal of Russian information campaigns has been to create doubt and confusion. NATO Chief of Communications, Mark Laity (2016), has explained that “The aim [of Russian disinformation] is to make you trust nobody and bury you in various explanations of a story.” Stefan Meister (2016, 3) argues that the Russian media outlets are geared towards “revealing” the weaknesses of Western societies and influencing politics within member states with the ultimate aim of “paralyzing and sabotaging the decision-making processes of EU and NATO, organizations that depend on consensus”. Pomerantsev (2015, 16) sees the underlying goal of Kremlin’s propaganda to engender cynicism: “Cynicism is useful to the state: When people stop trusting any institutions or having any firmly held values, they can easily accept a conspiratorial vision of the world.”

Thornton (2015) believes Russia has developed a “new generation of warfare”, Darczewska (2014) and Snegovaya (2015) see it as a re-invention of the Soviet Cold War-era model that was based on reflexive control, a means of conveying to an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action (Thomas 2004, 237). Reflexive control can also be seen as one of the primary goals of Russian disinformation campaigns (Bjola and Pamment 2016, 6; Snegovaya 2015, 10).

RT, founded in 2005, is registered as an autonomous non-profit organisation that is funded by the Federal Agency on Press and Media Communications of the Russian Federation (Richter 2017, 23). Sputnik, launched in 2014, is part of the Rossiya Segodnya news agency, owned and operated by the Russian government, created by an Executive Order of the President of Russia (Pizzi 2013). According to the Decree of the Vladimir Putin, the mandate of the agency is to “provide information on Russian state policy and Russian life and society for audiences abroad” (RT 2013). Although “Rossiya Segodnya” directly translated from Russian to English as “Russia Today”, the agency is officially “in any way related” to RT (ibid.). Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of Rossiya Segodnya, concurrently also serves as the editor-in-chief of the English-language RT though (BBC 2013). Thus, Sputnik and RT could be viewed as part of one system.

During the recent years, Russian government has heavily invested in the international media to enhance its soft power (Lankina and Niemczyk 2015). RT’s budget has grown from \$30 million in 2005 (Richter 2017, 23) to about \$310 million with plans for an increase of \$19 million over the years of 2017–2019 (The Moscow Times 2016). According Margarita Simonyan, Sputnik’s budget was about \$90 million in 2015 (Nehezina 2014).

Table 1. Popularity of international broadcasters in social networks.

Broadcaster	Number of likes/followers (10.05.2018)		
	Facebook	Twitter	Youtube
RT	5 127 955	2 700 000	2 551 673
Sputnik	1 206 254	221 000	39 038
BBC News	46 525 551	23 400 000	2 459 955
France24	8 645 160	3 010 000	642 509

RT’s presence is active on social media (Table 1), especially on Youtube, where it became the first television news channel to break one billion views (Richter 2017). However, the true extent of its viewership is difficult to pin down for the network has exaggerated its popularity in the past (ibid. 32). Furthermore, the majority of its most viral videos are not political in nature, featuring natural disasters, accidents, crime, and natural phenomenon instead. “RT’s political news videos, featuring the content by which it seeks to shape Western opinion and thus justify its existence, accounted for a mere 1 percent of its total YouTube exposure, with fewer than 4 million views” (Zavadski 2015).

RT first started out as Russia Today, intended to adhere to the professional formats developed by TV channels such as BBC or CNN to give the Western audiences the “the perspective on the world from Russia” (Sputnik 2005). The channel rose to international prominence during the Russo-Georgian war when it covered the conflict from a highly defensive, pro-Russian position (Richter 2017, 8). Simonyan later admitted that Russia Today waged an information war to defend the actions of Russia in Georgia and described its role as the soft power equivalent of Russian Ministry of Defence (Gabuev 2012).

In 2009, the network changed its name to RT and shifted its focus to international news, rebranding itself as a challenger to Western hegemony (Pomerantsev 2015, 56-57). “The Western world as we knew it and appreciated it, with its Western values, no longer exists,” Simonyan has previously said (Alandete 2018). RT’s slogan, “Question more”, that implies bias in Western media was developed by McCann, the same advertising firm that once helped the US sell the Marshall Plan (Rutenberg 2017). Following RT one might stumble upon ad’s saying “Subscribe to RT newsletter to get stories the mainstream media won’t tell you”. Sputnik also has a similar slogan of “Telling the untold”.

Regarding the tools of disinformation used by Russia, Marcel von Herpen (2016, 1) has noted that besides outright lies (fake news), Putin’s regime also heavily relies on half-truths and truths out of context. Sometimes the sources that are quoted are in fact non-existent (Kragh and Åsperg 2017) or previous disinformation is used as a source of legitimacy, leading to echo chambers of disinformation (Bjola and Pannent 2016, 5). Another technique that has made a comeback from the Soviet era is that of whataboutism that aims to divert attention away from the main issue at hand, often creating a vague analogy of something that looks vaguely similar to something in the West (Bader 2017). This would for example include comparing the human rights situation in Russia with that in the US (e.g. pointing to the use of death penalty). The main goal of it is to give an impression of Western hypocrisy and double standards to delegitimise its claim to moral authority (Headley 2015). Russian media has also relied on various conspiracy theories to foster distrust in the official versions of the mainstream media (Yablokov 2015). “Conspiracy theories serve RT’s counterhegemonic agenda by functioning as a ‘weapons of the weak’ against the Western socio-political order, and thus draw audiences who are already distrustful of this ‘global machine of control’” (Richter 2017, 13).

3. Empirical part

In this chapter the author will first present the methodology of the thesis. The author will then move on to conduct a discourse analysis on the coverage of Sputnik and RT to find out the specific strategic narratives broadcasted by the Russian media during the Catalan crisis. By imagining that the nodal points are interrelated to each other in imaginary chains of equivalence, six different sets of nodal points were identified. The chapter concludes with a discussion linking the empirical part with the theoretical framework.

3.1. Methodology

The author conducted a poststructuralist discourse analysis on the content of Sputnik and RT to identify the strategic narratives that Russia projected in regard to the Catalan referendum.

Miskimmon et al. (2003, 16) rely on the use of poststructuralist studies of discourse in international relations. They argue that the way discourses function in international relations, and the way these could be used in analysing narrative contestation rests on three main premises. First, the fact that discourses are never quite fixed for they produce power relations and there would always be some groups with the intent of challenging the discourse. Second, Miskimmon et al. (2003, 17) contend that “discourses give meaning to material objects and institutions that then become anchors of those discourses”. Third, discourses create subject positions that are filled with different actors, creating in- and out-groups with competing identities and interests. Overall then, the unfixedness of discourses, the meaning-making process and the creation of different identity groups all create politics. “Political leaders then step in to craft these discourses into narratives. If the raw materials of narrative produce political differences and struggles, then so too will the narratives formed from them. Hence, the very stuff of narratives, their ontological foundations, make political contestation inevitable.” (Miskimmon et al. 2003, 17)

Narratives feature a sense of movement, a causal transformation, a before and an after, that distinguishes them from discourses. Miskimmon et al. (2003, 7) understand discourses as almost static blocks, the raw material for communication, that are used to construct narratives from. “Actors can only form and project a narrative based upon the discourse available to them in their historical situation, so discourses have a structuring

effect upon narrative action.” Actors use discourses to craft narratives with the aim to influence others’ behaviour and opinions (Miskimmon et al. 2003, 7).

The main tenet of the discourse analytical approaches that derive from structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic philosophy is that our access to reality is always through language. It is through language that representations of reality are created (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 9). This does not mean though that reality is not real. Although a stone can be both understood as a projectile or as an object of aesthetic contemplation, it is still the same physical object (Torfing 1999, 94).

Another key pillar of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory is that these can never be quite fixed for the language is fundamentally instable. “Different discourses – each of them representing particular ways of talking about and understanding the social world – are engaged in a constant struggle with one other to achieve hegemony, that is, to fix the meanings of language in their own way.” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 6–7).

Discourses are then involved in a never-ending fixation process within a field of discursivity (everything that is outside of the discourse). It is in these drifting relations with each other that discourses attempt to construct a more stable (partially fixed) centre (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112; Andersen 2003, 51). Torfing (1999, 98) explains that “every discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity by expanding signifying chains which partially fix the meaning of the floating signifier”. These privileged signifiers capable of assigning meaning to other signifiers in the chain of signification are the nodal points (*points de capitons*) (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112; Torfing 1999, 98). Through these other signs are ordered and get their meaning from. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 26).

Meanings of floating signifiers are fixed within a paradigmatic chain of equivalence. “The more predominant the logic of equivalence is, the stronger and the more important becomes the particular social antagonism for the structuration of the social. Thus, the infinite expansion of a chain of equivalence tends to establish a clear-cut political frontier which divides the discursive space into two camps: friends and enemies” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 131; Torfing 1999, 126). Although the attempt by socialist forces to construct the proletariat as the equivalence of the people has failed, it was successful to confront one set of equivalences (the people) with another (the white imperialists) in the

anticolonial struggles in the Third World. Other types of popular antagonisms could be the polluters vs. the environmentalists, white vs black, patriarchal structures vs feminists etc. (Torfing 1999, 127).

In studying the projection of Russian strategic narratives through the coverage of Sputnik and RT, the author identifies the different nodal points of the pro-Russian discourse in the articles and videos, and focuses on ascertaining how the pro-Russian discourse is constructed on the basis of imagining that the nodal points are interrelated to each other in imaginary chains of equivalence (e.g. relating the government of Mariano Rajoy to the fascist government imposing repression).

As the Catalan referendum took place 1 October, a time period from 1 September 2017 to 31 October 2017 (a month before and after) was chosen for the analysis to get an adequate view of the Russian media coverage. The author used Sputniknews archive (sputniknews.com/archive) to identify all the articles that related to Catalonia on that period. For the coverage of RT, identifying the relevant articles was a more cumbersome process for there exists no such archive. Instead, the author used RT search option (rt.com/search) using the keywords of “Catalonia”, “Catalan”, “Barcelona”, “Madrid”, “Spain”, “referendum” and “independence”. In order to get a more complete view of the Russian media coverage, Catalan-related videos published in RT’s Youtube channel were also studied. Due to the limitations put on the bachelor’s thesis, the pictorial material published by Sputnik and RT was not studied, nor did the author examine any radio or television shows.

Overall, a total of 257 articles were published in Sputnik between 1 September and 31 October, compared to 165 articles in RT portal. In addition, 51 videos were analysed from English-language RT’s Youtube channel (see Appendix 1). About 40% of all the articles were published in the period of 25 September – 6 October, i.e. a week before and after the referendum.

3.2. Discourse analysis

3.2.1. Madrid's repressive measures and the ghosts of General Franco

The events surrounding the Catalan referendum in September and October 2017 were unprecedented on many levels: mass protests, arrests of Catalan officials, confiscations of referendum materials and the eventual violence that erupted on 1 October (Appendix 2). According to the Catalan authorities, a total of 844 people requested the services of the Catalan emergency health service on 1 October (Rodríguez and Congostrina 2017). Four people were hospitalized, including one man losing the vision of an eye due to a rubber ball, the rest suffered mainly minor injuries (RTVEs 2017). On the other side 111 Guardia Civil (Spanish law enforcement) agents were injured (Serra 2018).

Staying neutral and finding the right balance to cover these events is certainly difficult, it should be kept in mind that both Spain and Catalonia have legitimate interests (rule of law vs freedom of expression) that influence their behaviour. When examining the coverage of Sputnik and RT this was not the case. The coverage was clearly biased in favouring the arguments put forth by the independence supporters and discarded the arguments of the Spanish government. For example, there were no pro-unity voices covered in RT in September apart from citing Spanish officials such as Spain's state prosecutor or members of the government (e.g. RT 21.09.2017; Sputnik 26.09.2017) whereas opinion leaders with pro-independence agenda were rife (Appendix 3). The narratives that dominated were mainly focused on the authoritarian nature of the Spanish government and the legitimate rights of the independence supporters.

When the violence erupted in 1 October, Sputnik and RT were quick to make the most of it, publishing numerous videos that showed the clashes between the Guardia Civil and the independence supporters. Some of the most brutal videos included Guardia Civil attacking protesters, kicking people on ground or tearing crying women from their hair (e.g. RT 1.10.2017a; RT 1.10.2017b). While it is expected and normal of the media to cover the police brutalities extensively and question whether the use of force was indeed proportional, Sputnik and RT went even further, editing some of the videos to amplify their emotional effect (e.g. Sputnik 1.10.2017a; RT 27.10.2017). For example, in a news broadcast in RT published on 10.10 (RT 10.10.2017a) Hollywood-like action soundtrack was put on the background and the police violence was showed in slow motion to stress

the use of various weapons e.g. police batons and riot shotguns. The video then continued with showing some of the injuries that people suffered such as rubber bullet marks on their bodies. It is possible that the video was edited to an extent for the shots looked unusually cold in colours.

Other means were also used to play on the emotions of the viewers. A news broadcast on RT on 1 October 2017 (the day of the referendum and clashes) commenced with Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy thanking the security apparatus and the police forces for “carrying out their duty and the mandate they received from the authorities” (RT 1.10.2017c). Although it can be heard that the tone Rajoy used was rather normal and modest, the narrator of RT made it sound otherwise, using quite an aggressive tone that made the whole speech look rather ominous. Another video of interest was a broadcast on RT the day after Spanish police stormed and occupied several Catalan ministries and arrested officials) (RT 21.09.2017). Rajoy was narrated by the same man who again made the prime minister sound ominous and malicious. What was more interesting was the RT news presenter Nikki Aaron who narrated the news story emotionally, downplaying the arguments put forth by the authorities in Madrid¹, therefore clearly siding with the independence supporters.

Apart from relying on journalistic sources, social media content was also integrated into the articles, such as pictures and videos posted on Twitter (Sputnik 1.10.2017b; RT 20.09.2017). Although mediating social media enabled Sputnik and RT to generate more content it also lowered the threshold of verification whether the videos provided were indeed authentic. The Spanish foreign minister Alfonso Dastis has later claimed that some of the pictures of the clashes that circulated on the internet were fake (BBC 2017a). Since it is not the focus of this thesis, it is unknown to the author whether there were any fake pictures or videos provided by Sputnik or RT.

In addition to amplifying the events in Catalonia in form, Sputnik and RT also increased the consequences of the events substantively. As the overwhelming majority of experts and opinion leaders who were given time and space in Russian media were pro-independence leaning (see Appendix 3), narratives critical of the Madrid government

¹ The most vivid example is 3.55 when she condemningly exclaims that Madrid has declared the upcoming vote “illegal!”.

dominated. Some of the nodal points of the pro-Russian discourse identified for example included Madrid as authoritarian and repressive, democracy in Spain deteriorating, Madrid's actions as coup d'état, police violence. There were plenty of articles, including one opinion piece, published where the actions taken by the Madrid government were juxtaposed to those of the Franco regime.² In two of the videos published in RT's news channel titled "Spanish nationalist protesters give Nazi salute during rally against Catalan independence" (RT 30.09.2017a) and "Viva Espana!: Fascist salutes seen at pro-Spanish unity demos in Barcelona" (RT 8.10.2017a), far-right protesters were shown giving Nazi salutes in pro-unity/anti-independence rallies in Madrid and Barcelona. Although these far-right activists were small in numbers compared to the overall participation in the rally, this was not mentioned.

One of the features of Sputnik and RT's coverage was also the use of Julian Assange as the principal international commentator for the events unfolding in Catalonia. Assange is known to be a tool of Russian information activity, having previously also appeared on RT (European Parliament 2016, 6). He is also a vocal supporter of Catalan independence. An article in Sputnik featured four different tweets from Assange comparing the situation in Catalonia to world's first internet war. He argued that what was happening in Catalonia can be described as the most significant Western conflict between people state since the fall of the Berlin wall (Sputnik 30.09.2017). The same article was also published in RT, featuring tweets from Edward Snowden (RT 30.09.2017b). Julian Assange's tweets were cited altogether in 10 articles.³ Assange was also frequently covered in Spanish-language Sputnik. According to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, between 11 and 27 September, headlines in Spanish-language Sputnik gave Assange more prominence than either the President of Catalonia Carles Puigdemont or Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy (DFRLab 2017).

² Some of the relevant news headlines: "Has Spain reverted to Franco-style military dictatorship?" (RT 2.10.2017a), "Catalonia Standoff: Spanish Constitution, 'Sons of Francoists' vs Independence" (Sputnik 2.10.2017), "Jail and execution: Madrid makes veiled threat to Catalan leader by raising predecessor's fate" (RT 10.10.2017a), "Invoking Article 155 Is 'Worst Attack' on Catalonia in Centuries" (Sputnik 21.10.2017), "Catalan crisis escalated by repressive actions of Spanish government – analysts" (RT 22.10.2017).

³ RT 17.09.2017; RT 1.10.2017d; RT 16.10.2017; RT 17.10.2017a; Sputnik 1.10.2017c; Sputnik 1.10.2017d; Sputnik 11.10.2017a; Sputnik 11.10.2017b.

3.2.2. A dream of independence supported by the masses

Apart from amplifying the violence and presenting the government in Madrid as repressive, one of the key features of the coverage of English-language Sputnik and RT was that most of the articles were either neutral or biased towards the pro-independence camp. This is exemplified by the fact that only 12 opinion leaders (people that Sputnik and RT asked opinion from) out of 85 argued against the independence.⁴

The people that gave their opinion to Sputnik or RT belonged mostly to two different groups: they were either academics/political commentators or politicians (Appendix 3). The politicians interviewed came overwhelmingly from three backgrounds: they were either politicians from non-mainstream/fringe parties, Europeans with separatist aspirations, or pro-independence Catalans (Appendix 3). The use of predominantly pro-independence or separatist-leaning opinion leaders was also reflected in the overall coverage of Sputnik and RT with narratives such as “democratic rights of the Catalans”, “attack on democracy”, “will of people” or “freedom of expression” dominating. It was oftentimes argued that the referendum was not about achieving independence or self-determination but in fact about democracy – about making one’s voice heard.

The coverage of Sputnik and RT intended to arouse feelings of sympathy towards the pro-independence supporters. Sputnik and RT made it look like a conflict between pro-independence Catalans with legitimate concerns and right to self-determination, and anti-independence Spanish forcing the abstract-sounding rule of law and constitution on the Catalans. This mindset was encouraged by the way Sputnik and RT associated itself emotionally with the pro-independence Catalans. The news channels mostly presented the stories from Catalan standpoint. Pro-independence rallies were much more extensively broadcast with pictures of young and old people in a happy mood, Catalans singing together the national anthem, concerts taking place etc. The reporters were oftentimes in the midst of the crowds making street interviews, asking people of their opinion and emotions regarding the referendum.

⁴ This does not necessarily mean that all the other opinion leaders were pro-independence. In fact, many of the opinions presented were either neutral or addressing different questions (such as narratives accusing EU of hypocrisy).

The pro-unity rallies, on the other hand, were usually mentioned casually, although the opinion polls showed that support against the independence was higher than for the independence.⁵ There were no street interviews, no pictures of the children or the old – rather, if there was any coverage it tended to be negative, showing the pro-unity supporters as rowdy, nationalist and violent. One of the videos commenced with showing the rowdy Spaniards burning flares, tearing and burning the Catalan flags and spitting towards the camera, then continuing to cover the peaceful students protest at the University of Barcelona (RT 23.09.2017). Another example of media associating themselves with the independence supporters is video (RT 6.10.2017) that showed the reporter standing in the midst of independence supporters, “a peaceful march, hundreds of people who have come out to speak against the police brutality”. She then pointed her finger to show that there were also pro-unity protesters across the street and police in between them “to avoid any kinds of trouble”, leaving the viewer the impression that if there were to be trouble, it would be initiated by the pro-unity supporters.

As there were practically no pro-unity opinion leaders interviewed and no coverage of the opinions of average pro-unity supporters (although the majority according to the opinion polls), the dominant way pro-independence and anti-repression arguments were countered was through the central government in Madrid. Madrid’s government was mostly either referred to impersonally or embodied by the police forces or by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaria⁶, Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis and Attorney General Jose Manuel Maza were also mentioned. Madrid’s arguments were oftentimes given in an official form, referencing and citing press releases or broadcasting short clips of speeches from the press conferences. This meant that the emotionally charged viewpoints of the people and of the opinion leaders often clashed with the politically correct and tedious-sounding arguments (such as constitutionality, need to restore law and order) put forth by the Spanish elite, presenting

⁵ A survey conducted in June showed that independence was supported by 41% of Catalans whereas 49% opposed it (Cerulus 2017). Two polls published by El Pais in the end of October showed the support for independence 33.5% and 29% respectively (Trujillo and Toyer 2017).

⁶ On 27 October Santamaria was given the task of overseeing the functions of the Generalitat of Catalonia after PM Rajoy dismissed President of the Generalitat of Catalonia Carles Puigdemont.

the pro-unity camp as “others” – distant and alien both to the pro-independence Catalans but also to the audience of Sputnik and RT.

Apart from narrating the events largely from the pro-independence standpoint, Sputnik and RT sometimes also showed their bias by distorting important information and even lying. This was exemplified by the fact that although it was repeatedly stated in October that about 90% of the people had voted in favour of independence, the majority of the time RT (but also Sputnik) failed to mention the turnout figures which due to the boycott of unity supporters were as low as 43% (and therefore questioned the legitimacy of the referendum). RT also neglected the turnout figures in the previous referendum held in 2014, which were 41% (Jackson, 2014), thus presenting the audience a picture of a popular movement of Catalans who have long sought independence from Spain. The same kind of distortion of facts was also evident in the RT coverage of the declaration of independence by the Catalan government on 27 October (RT, 27.10.2017a; RT, 27.10.2017b; RT, 27.10.2017c) when RT broadcasted a narrative that 72 MPs had voted in favour in independence, 10 against, and only two had abstained. Although presenting it as an overwhelming victory for the independence supporters, RT neglected the fact that out of the 135 MPs, 53 MPs (the lawmakers from the pro-unity parties) had in fact left the chamber minutes prior to the vote to boycott it. Thus, the resolution had actually been passed by only 70 MPs out of 135 MPs. Sputnik was more objective in their coverage, mentioning the boycott in the majority of articles.

Apart from neglecting important pieces of information, outright lies were also broadcast by RT on one of the occasions. In a news broadcast of mid-September (RT 16.09.2017) the news presenter argued that the independence is not actually wanted by not so few as “according to numerous polls, 80% of the people will be voting in favour of independence”. Anna Arqué, a pro-independence activist also added that “the majority of the members of the Catalan parliament are in favour of independence”. Apart from presenting these arguments, the broadcast mainly addressed the question of deterioration of democracy in Spain.

3.2.3. Criticism of the independence movement and the Russian position

The coverage of Sputnik and RT was not completely one-sided as there were also some opinion leaders, 12 out of 85, who hold critical views towards the Catalan independence, some of them arguing for the supremacy of the Spanish constitution, others were critical towards the legitimacy of the referendum in light of the low turnout (43% due to the boycott of unity supporters). A majority of these viewpoints were published in the second half of October.

One of the most critical articles in Sputnik (Start 19.10.2017) was an interview with Carlos Flores Juberias, a constitutional law professor at the University of Valencia, who argued that what Spain is actually doing by dismissing the Catalan government is preserving national unity and supremacy of law and defending the rights of its citizens against the authoritarian government in Barcelona: “[In the illegal referendum] the votes were counted by the Catalan government, with absolutely no independent supervision, with no judicial control, no international intervention. The result was two million in favor of independence, which is less than half of the electorate. This has not stopped Puigdemont from pursuing independence, even though he has the Constitution, the courts, the institutions, and most of the Spanish and Catalan citizens against it.”

The pro-unity voices and arguments were getting somewhat more space in Sputnik and RT in October as the situation in Catalonia evolved. In addition to the opinion pieces that were critical of independence, the nature of the broadcast of Sputnik and RT also changed. Rajoy’s voice was not narrated as ominous as aggressive anymore, there was even a video (RT 21.10.2017) featuring a modest female voice narrating Rahoy. A street interview from one of the pro-unity marches was also broadcast in RT in the end of October (RT 30.10.2017). On 17 October an article titled “Are Catalan nationalists copying Maidan's ‘propaganda’ handbook? (VIDEOS)” was published in RT comparing the video promoting Catalan independence with that of the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine (RT 17.10.2017b). On 8.10 Daniel Hoegger, senior policy fellow at the Swiss-based think tank Forum on Foreign Policy argued that Catalan independence is not relatable to that of Kosovo (RT 8.10.2017b).

An interesting feature of RT’s broadcast in October was that it began to ridicule the President of Catalonia Carles Puigdemont. Two of the videoclips (RT 10.10.2017b; RT

11.10.2017) featured shots of Puigdemont in the Catalan Assembly suspending the referendum with a silly-sounding music in the background. The third one (RT 27.10.2017d) criticised the fact that three weeks after the referendum Catalan independence was still under question with Puigdemont having left the final decision to the Catalan parliament. A Twitter video was shown that featured a tiny Puigdemont (called “tiny-mont”) doing a silly dance. Critical tweets of him then followed.

The pro-independence bias in Sputnik and RT was actually contrary to the Russian official position regarding the events in Catalonia which viewed the developments in Catalonia as the internal affair of Spain that should be solved “in strict compliance with Spanish law, in the interests of a united and prosperous Kingdom of Spain and with due respect for the rights and freedoms of all Spanish citizens” (MFA of Russia 2017). Russian viewpoint on the issue was brought out only a couple of times in the time period whereas the pro-unity positions of various Western countries (including NATO) were often mentioned. In one of the articles (Sputnik 27.10.2017a) that featured a live feed of different countries responding to the independence declaration of Catalan parliament, Russian position was clearly hidden from the audience with Russian FM spokesperson only noting that Russian “position on the issue has been consistent, and it has not changed. It has been repeatedly posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry’s website.”

3.2.4. The hypocrisy and double standards of the European Union

Apart from the Sputnik and RT’s coverage of the tensions between Barcelona and Madrid there was another storyline that got a lot of attention – that of the European Union’s. The coverage of the European Union’s role in the crisis (or rather, its inactivity) was rather latent at first but gained more traction as the events unfolded. Throughout the coverage in September and October Sputnik and RT put special emphasis on the need of the international community (especially the EU) to step in and mediate the conflict between Barcelona and Madrid (e.g. Sputnik 3.10.2017; Sputnik 5.10.2017).

First appeals for the EU to step in and act came already before the referendum on 28 September as Madrid was stepping up its measures to foil the referendum by arresting officials, sending in extra police and seizing ballot papers. The Catalan Foreign Affairs Chief Raül Romeva argued that the EU should respond to Spain’s harassment of civil rights organisations and journalists and it was “the EU’s duty as a repository of

democratic values to put pressure on Madrid to allow the plebiscite” (Sputnik 28.09.2017a; RT 28.09.2017a) In addition, Catalan President Carles Puigdemont accused the EU of “turning its back” on the repressions unfolding in Catalonia (RT 28.09.2017b). These views and calls for action were widely published and broadcasted.

The calls for action grew considerably stronger on the referendum day as there were violent confrontations between Guardia Civil and the independence supporters. An article published on 1 October (RT 1.10.2017d) concentrated on a tweet by Julian Assange urging the European Commission to strip Spain of the rights of an EU member state by activating article 7 of the Lisbon treaty. The article then continued with the opinion of Greek MEP Stelios Kouloglou who thought the EU should interfere and mediate the conflict. Apart from the various Catalan pro-independence politicians, similar opinions were also shared by for example Marco Zanni, an Italian MEP from the Five Star Movement (Sputnik 3.10.2017a), Michaël Modrikamen, president of the Belgian People’s Party⁷ (Sputnik 3.10.2017b), and various other opinion leaders.

As it became clear that the EU is not acting in Spain, articles blaming the EU for not interfering and accusing EU of hypocrisy began to crop up. “Had this happened in the Middle East or in South America or if this happened in some of the new member states, we would have EU members and leaders lining up with the most vicious words of condemnation,” Matt Carthy, Sinn Féin MEP said in an interview (RT 3.10.2017).⁸ The coverage also accused EU of double standards when dealing with independence movements (e.g. Malic, 30.10.2017; RT 1.10.2017d). In a widely referenced article (RT 2.10.2017b), the Serbian president draw parallels with Kosovo: “How come that in the case of Catalonia the referendum on independence is not valid, while in the case of Kosovo secession is allowed even without a referendum.” In another article headlined “Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days? – former British diplomat” (RT 4.10.2017) Marko Gašič had an answer to that question: “I believe the EU would behave

⁷ A eurospectic, Russia-friendly right-wing populist Belgian unionist party with one member in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. They received 1,5% of the votes in the last general elections.

⁸ Similar views of hypocrisy were also shared by Lorenzo Consoli (RT 28.09.2017c), Stelios Kouloulou (RT 1.10.2017d), Ray Finch (RT 3.10.2017), Polly Boiko (RT 18.10.2017), Bart Claes (Sputnik 12.10.2017), John Wight (Wight 2.10.2017), Nebojsa Malic (Malic, 30.10.2017), Marco Bassani (RT 23.10.2017), Jonathan Davis (Sputnik 27.10.2017b), Alfred De Zayas (Sputnik 27.10.2017c).

in exactly the same way again because [Kosovo] is not an area that belongs to the club, the rich man's club, as Spain does.”

The most authoritative comment (RT 19.10.2017) criticising EU of its double standards featured Vladimir Putin's speech at Valdai Discussion Club on 19 October. Putin argued that the situation in Catalonia should not have come as a surprise since it was EU's unanimous support for Kosovo that had been the turning point that bolstered separatist sentiments in Europe. “It turns out that in the eyes of some of our colleagues, there are legitimate fighters for independence and freedom, and then there are separatists, who cannot defend their rights even through democratic procedures,” he said (ibid.).⁹

3.2.5. The European Union responsible for the crisis

European Union's inactivity and hypocrisy towards the Catalan crisis led to conclusions that the EU has lost its credibility as the warden of democratic rights, as it so self-describes. This opinion was shared by two of the most frequent columnists in Sputnik and RT, John Wight and Steve Keen¹⁰. Wight argued that “the EU also bears responsibility for any potential violence, as it showed unanimous support to the Spanish government's actions” (RT 27.10.2017e). Keen added that the EU has basically aligned itself with authoritarian tendencies in its own member states (Sputnik 27.10.2017d).

There were many explanations provided for the cause of Catalan crisis. While these explanations rest their claims on different if not opposite ideological foundations, a distinct characteristic that united them was the antagonism and criticism of the EU. John Wight (Wight 11.10.2017) for example saw neoliberalism, expressed in the “draconian” austerity measures following the 2008 economic crisis, as the main cause for both the activation of the Catalan independence movement, but also for Brexit and the spread of various nationalist and Eurosceptic parties. Jonathan Davis (Sputnik 27.10.2017b), on the other hand, viewed the encroaching socialism and government intervention that followed the 2008 economic crisis, as the root of evil. “The reason why Catalonia wants to leave Spain, [...], is exactly the reason [...] why the Americans voted for Trump, because the

⁹ The Valdai Discussion Club is a Moscow-based think tank. Putin has participated in its meetings each year. Daniel Drezner (2016) has described Valdai as “the highest-profile Russian equivalent to Davos.” Full speech available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_5rAikrZUo.

¹⁰ John Wight had a total of 6 appearances in Sputnik and RT in September and October. Steve Keen's articles were published on 3 occasions. For more, see Appendix 3.

people are fed up with what governments and socialists are doing to us. [...] It's the elite against everyone else and that is why. [...] The people are finally waking up.”

Marco Zanni (Sputnik 3.10.2017a) and Karel Vereycken¹¹ suggested the Catalan crisis would have a positive effect in the eyes of some Eurocrats, allowing the EU to become even more centralised and undemocratic. In “Why Catalan Independence Vote Part of Broader Plan to Split Europe Up” (Blinova 6.10.2017), Vereycken argued that Brussels is in fact supporting the idea of Spain’s disintegration for it would be easier for the EU to manage small entities rather than big nation-states. “For the hardcore Europeanists the large historical nation-states of Europe have to be broken up into smaller entities of about 5 to 8 million inhabitants [e.g. Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders] in order to get the European population into accepting a EU empire-like supranational super state,” he pointed out.

Steve Keen saw a more explicit link between the Catalan crisis and the EU, arguing that EU’s economic failures, especially the Euro, are to blame for separatist movements across Southern Europe. “Catalans blame Madrid for their economic malaise. But the real culprits are in Brussels, Frankfurt, and Berlin” (Keen 31.10.2017). He argued that the Eurozone is effectively generating inequality among its member states as there is no treasury and no way of equalising the impact of trade balances (Sputnik 27.10.2017d). This inequality leads to more tensions and economic deprivation in some countries, exemplified for example by the high unemployment rates in Spain and Greece¹², thus prompting the desire for secession (Sputnik 24.10.2017).

The clearest links between the EU and the Catalan crisis were provided by David Coburn (RT 27.10.2017a), UKIP MEP from Scotland, who noted that people are disheartened by the fact that the decision-making has been taken away from their hands. Instead of Madrid, he argued, Catalans should be angry of the EU: “All the decisions they think are made in Madrid, [...], they’re made in Brussels. Madrid does what Brussels tells them.” As Madrid is only a rubber stamp for Brussels, the question of whether to leave Spain is secondary: “If Catalans want some kind of change they have to get out of Europe as well.”

¹¹ Marco Zanni is an Italian MEP from M5S, Karel French is the Vice President of the French Solidarité and Progrès party that advocates Euroscepticism, protectionism and anti-imperialism. The party is not represented in the parliament.

¹² The rate of unemployment for Spain was 16,7% in October 2017, youth unemployment was 38,2% (Eurostat 2017a). The corresponding figures for Greece were 20,7% and 40,2% (Eurostat 2017b).

3.2.6. Disintegration of Europe

Together with questions of what caused the Catalan referendum there were also discussions and opinions on what the future of Europe in general would look like if Catalonia were to split from Spain. Most of the opinion leaders in Sputnik and RT had a negative outlook to it. Dr. Russell Foster, for example, argued that the possible breakaway of Catalonia, one of the most economically powerful regions in Spain, would have catastrophic consequences for Spain and lead to the biggest disaster for Europe since the World War II (Sputnik 6.10.2017a). Marco Bassani thought (RT 23.10.2017) the independence would cause a domino effect with long-lasting consequences:

“I think we’re witnessing the disintegration of this kind of European order. There will be a confederation in Europe clearly in like 10–15 years from now, but not based on the nation-states that we know. If Catalonia and Spain break apart, then a lot of things will happen. That will have definitely a domino effect with Veneto, Scotland and all sorts of other regions. There might be easily 35 to 45 new countries coming up.”

One of the key features of Sputnik and RT’s coverage in October was their keen interest towards other secessionist movements in Europe. The possible “domino effect” was addressed in about 20 articles, covering secessionist movements in Åland (Sputnik 10.10.2017), Balearic Islands (Sputnik 28.09.2017b), Bavaria (Sputnik 6.10.2017b), Brittany (RT 1.10.2017e), Canvey Island (Sputnik 16.10.2017), Flanders, Lombardy, Veneto, Scotland, Yorkshire and Wales (Sputnik 27.09.2017). Some of this coverage was exaggerated, featuring interviews with pro-independence parties without mentioning that these parties only possess marginal levels of support among the population. This could leave the readers with the impression these secessionist movements are much more serious than they actually are. Some of the examples would include the leader of Future of Åland party in “Catalonian Referendum Sparks Separatist Hopes on Finnish Archipelago” (Sputnik 10.10.2017), leader of the Yorkshire Party in “Forget Catalonia – Yorkshire wants independence! UK Parliament to debate new devolution” (RT 10.10.2017c) and chairman of the Bavarian Party in “German 'Catalonia'? Prospects of Independence Referendum Scenario in Bavaria” (Sputnik 6.10.2017b).¹³

¹³ Future of Åland party got 7,4% of the votes in the 2015 Åland parliament elections (JCI 2017). Yorkshire Party got 3,8% in Rotherham constituency in 2017 UK general election (BBCc 2017).

3.3. Discussion

The tense atmosphere in Catalonia between the independence supporters and unity supporters that was aggravated by Madrid's firm crackdown of the Catalan referendum on 1 October provided a fertile ground for the Russian media to use it for their advantage and narrate a story in line with the overall Russian strategic aspirations in the world. The aim of this thesis was to identify and assess these strategic narratives Russia disseminated in relation to the Catalan crisis. In order to do that, media coverage of the referendum by Russian government sponsored news outlets Sputnik and RT was examined. Based on the analysis three main strategic narratives of policy, identity and system were identified:

- 1) the policy narrative arguing that the EU should act to defend the legitimate rights of the Catalans against Spain's repressive measures,
- 2) the identity narrative depicting the EU as hypocritical in its stance towards the crisis and also partly responsible for it,
- 3) the system narrative contending that the EU is in decline and might even disintegrate due to various separatist movements that gain in popularity.

The basis for all these narratives was laid by the overamplification of the conflict and different depiction of the pro-independence and pro-unity supporters. The carefully chosen opinion leaders ensured that the overall coverage of Sputnik and RT was biased towards the independence supporters. Pro-unity – or rather, “pro-repression” – camp was mostly embodied by the bureaucrats – the elite – in Madrid, e.g. prime minister Mariano Rajoy, or the police forces, their opinions were concise and politically correct. Measures taken by Madrid were shown as inappropriate for a democratic country. Furthermore, Madrid's violent crackdown even brought about comparisons with the regime of Francisco Franco. Apart from the content, bias was also reflected in the form of the coverage that had the effect of amplifying emotions. Pro-independence supporters on the other hand were shown as average people from the streets, of different socioeconomic backgrounds, united in a common noble cause of self-determination and disheartened by the fact that they're not even allowed the basic freedom of expression, so fundamental to a democratic country.

Bavarian Party got 0.8% of the votes in 2017 German federal elections (The Federal Returning Officer 2017).

Sputnik and RT's coverage thus created this imaginary link of nodal points that aimed to simplify the social (discursive) space by dividing it into two opposing camps – “us” vs “them”, elite vs popular will, repressors and the repressed – creating a type of popular antagonism foreseen by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 131). This logic of “us” vs “them” was also carried over to the coverage of the EU when the union was accused of being responsible for all the decisions that Madrid had made. This left the impression that instead of Madrid, Eurocrats in Brussels should be looked at as those who subdue the free will of the people.

As Madrid was using repressive measures to oppress the peaceful Catalans standing for their right of freedom of expression (according to the Russian narrative), the only logical policy narrative of Russia was to encourage the pro-independence supporters to turn to the EU, the warden of human rights, to seek for redress and mediation. This would have served two purposes. If EU would have agreed to mediate it would have given the crisis an international dimension, turning it from a strictly internal affair of Spain into an international conflict with Catalonia sitting as an equal to Spain behind the negotiations table. This would have been an ideal pretext for Russia to show that the EU is actually encouraging separatist movements across Europe.

Since the EU declined to act and viewed the matter as a Spain's internal affair another window of opportunity opened for Russia to project an identity narrative of the EU as hypocritical and following double standards in its treatment of different separatist movements. “Why isn't NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days,” William Mallinson asked in RT (RT 4.10.2017) implying that if the EU recognised Kosovo's independence, it should apply the same standards for Catalonia. Russia was thus trying to prove the misalignment of EU's identity narratives (the image it projects of itself) with its policy narratives (the actions it actually undertakes) in order to weaken its standing. As Miskimmon et al. noted (2017, 8), the system, identity and policy narratives need to be in harmony in order to be effective.

Whilst Russia was accusing the EU of hypocrisy it was at the same time doing its best to conceal the fact that the Russian official position regarding the Catalan crisis was in fact aligned with that of the EU's, viewing it as an internal matter of Spain that should be solved in “strict compliance with Spanish law” (MFA of Russia 2017). Russian official

position was in harmony with its great power narrative that saw the use of force the primary way to counter perceived security threats, exemplified by the use of force in Chechnya by Vladimir Putin (Roselle 2017, 79). The official position was touched only a few times in the end of October though for a more frequent mentioning of the Russian position would have weakened the identity narrative it was disseminating of the EU (EU hypocritical for supporting Spain).

On the macro scale, coverage of the Catalan crisis could be seen in the overall prism of Russian contestation of West's hegemony. The system narrative of Russia told a story of Europe in disintegration with numerous separatist movements in its member states gaining ground. The overall effect of separatist movements in Europe was amplified by Sputnik and RT with the implicit juxtaposition of serious independence movements (e.g. Flanders and Scotland) with marginal ones (e.g. Åland, Bavaria, Yorkshire). EU was shown in decay in order to weaken its image both in the eyes of its own citizenry but also its geopolitical contenders. Russia was thus aiming to shape the perception of the world to its own advantage aiming in the long run for a new system alignment of the currently Western dominated world, as foreseen by Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2017, 115–116).

When examining the Russian media coverage role of the changing media ecology with novel ways of engaging public should be duly noted. Although a social media analysis fell out of the sphere of interest of this thesis, Sputnik and RT were found to integrate user-generated content (primarily Twitter but also Youtube) quite frequently in its articles. Some of the articles in Sputnik such as “Eight Seconds of Freedom': #CataloniaIndependence Delay Disappoints Internet” (Sputnik 11.10.2017a) were entirely based on tweets by random users. Although Miskimmon et al. (2017, 10) argue that a change in the information infrastructure is also accompanied with a change in the distribution of power, e.g. allowing for a new 'bottom up' public diplomacy, this is questionable for Russia certainly controls the communication processes taking place in its media system, publishing tweets and opinions that are carefully sifted beforehand.

Conclusion

Russian activity outside of its borders has been constantly rising throughout the last decade. Although accusations of Russia taking advantage of the Catalan independence referendum and interfering in the internal processes of Spain have been rife there has been little academic research on Russian information activity in Spain. The author aimed to partly fill that gap by examining the news coverage of Russian government sponsored English-language media outlets Sputnik and RT.

The aim of this thesis was to identify the strategic narratives that Russia disseminated to the English-language audience in relation to the Catalan independence referendum and connect them with Russian foreign policy interests, i.e. the broader Russian understanding of how the international system ought to function. The author set a hypothesis that Russia was taking advantage of the events in Catalonia to enfeeble the European Union.

To test the hypothesis, a poststructuralist discourse analysis was conducted on the content of Sputnik and RT news coverage. As these media outlets form the foundation of Russian international information activities it was assumed that they also embody the overall understanding of how Russia perceives the world and its place in it. By imagining that the nodal points of the pro-Russian discourse are interrelated in imaginary chains of equivalence, the author identified six different sets of nodal points that can be reduced to three main Russian strategic narratives, all directed towards the European Union.

The author discovered that the coverage of Sputnik and RT was clearly biased towards the Catalan independence movement with pro-unity arguments either discarded or diminished. The use of force shown by the Spanish government was shown as a Francoist practice, unworthy of a democratic state, whereas pro-independence supporters were shown as average people from the street with legitimate concerns. These stereotypes were furthermore amplified with the use of various communicative tools, i.e. showing the police violence in slow motion with intense music on the background.

Policy level. The tense and at times violent conflict in Catalonia gave Russia a pretext to furthermore amplify the tensions and ultimately direct the coverage towards the European Union. Following the proposition of Miskimmon et al. to divide strategic narratives into three categories it was ascertained that on a policy level, Russia argued for the

intervention of the European Union. This would have given the conflict a wholly new, international dimension.

Identity level. As it became clear that the European Union is not willing to step in and mediate the conflict, Russia began to accuse the EU of hypocrisy and double standards. Russia argued that the EU that ought to be the model for other states and regions as the epitomiser of European and democratic values does not in fact match its rhetoric. One of the main examples was to juxtapose Catalan independence aspirations with that of Kosovo's and draw attention to the fact that while the EU had supported the independence of the latter the first now finds itself abandoned by the EU.

System level. Weakening the perception of the European Union by directing negative attention towards it was part of the overall strategy to improve Russian relative standing in the world. The coverage valued articles and opinion pieces that showed the EU in decay and in the process of disintegration due to numerous separatist movements gaining ground in its member states. The coverage could be broadly viewed as an intent to weaken the West's hegemony and by doing this strive for a multilateral world order where the role of Russia would be increased. Therefore, the hypothesis that Russia was taking advantage of the events in Catalonia to enfeeble the European Union was found to be true.

At a time when Russia is actively using its foreign policy channels and influence to negate any claims of foreign intervention and there are different narratives in the media of how one should perceive and comprehend the world it is a duty of the European academic society to conduct researches like this. The work contributes to the wider efforts of elucidating the range and technique of Russian information activities and demonstrates that Russia has vested interest not only in its close neighbourhood but also further away where it is not an active player itself. As the goals of Russian information activity might then be more difficult to fathom, these efforts might at first sight go unnoticed.

This thesis only concerned the projection of Russian strategic narratives. To get a full understanding of Russian information activities, it should also be analysed how the audience of Sputnik and RT received these narratives and what effect did they have on the European Union. These analyses should be conducted bearing in mind the 21st century media ecosystem where people and international actors increasingly rely on social media channels to communicate.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Coverage of Catalonia in Sputnik and RT September – October 2017.

Publishing date (2017)	Number of Sputnik articles published	Number of RT articles published	Number of RT Youtube videos	Articles and videos in total
1.09				0
2.09				0
3.09				0
4.09	1			1
5.09				0
6.09	2			2
7.09	4	1		5
8.09	2			2
9.09				0
10.09	1			1
11.09	2		1	3
12.09	2	1		3
13.09	1	1		2
14.09	3		1	4
15.09	1	1		2
16.09	1	1	1	3
17.09	2	1		3
18.09	1			1
19.09	1			1
20.09	1	3	1	5
21.09	3	1	1	5
22.09		1		1
23.09	1	1		2
24.09	2			2
25.09				0
26.09	2			2
27.09	3			3
28.09	5	3	1	9
29.09	7	1	1	9
30.09	8	6	1	15
1.10	29	14	10	53
2.10	19	13	1	33
3.10	13	6	1	20
4.10	9	8	2	19
5.10	3	4		7
6.10	14	7	2	23
7.10	2		1	3
8.10	3	3	2	8
9.10	3	3		6
10.10	9	5	3	17
11.10	9	9	1	19
12.10	6	4	2	12
13.10	3	2		5

14.10	2	1		3
15.10				0
16.10	6	4	1	11
17.10	4	4	1	9
18.10	1	4		5
19.10	3	2		5
20.10	4	2		6
21.10	8	4		12
22.10	6	5	2	13
23.10	4	4	1	9
24.10	2	3	1	6
25.10	2	4	1	7
26.10	2	1	1	4
27.10	16	7	5	28
28.10	6	5	1	12
29.10	5	4		9
30.10	4	5	3	12
31.10	4	6	1	11
In total	257	165	51	473

Appendix 2. Chronology of the events in Catalonia.

Date	Event	Some articles published by RT and Sputnik
June 2017	The Catalan government calls an independence referendum for October 2017	
7 September 2017	The Spanish constitutional court declares the upcoming referendum illegal by suspending the referendum law introduced by the Catalan regional government.	“Catalan Government Accuses Madrid of 'Convert (<i>sic!</i>) Stage of Siege”, “Catalan Referendum Violation of Spanish Constitution, EU Law - EU Parl't Head“
15 September 2017	Spanish police seize ballot boxes hidden by the regional government	“EU Commission Urges Catalonia to Respect Spain’s Constitution”, “‘We will vote!’ Catalonia officially launches independence referendum campaign”
20 September 2017	Spanish police storm and occupy Catalan government ministries, a dozen Catalan officials are arrested by Spanish police for organizing the independence referendum. Protesters take to the streets in response	“Catalan President Accuses Spain of Suspending Region's Self-Governance”, “‘State of siege’: Catalan officials, incl. junior economy minister, arrested over referendum docs”
1 October 2017	Independence referendum. Turnout 43%, 92% supporting independence. Official numbers by the Catalan government show that 1066 civilians were injured during the clashes with police.	“Spain's Actions in Catalonia Push Country Into Authoritarianism – Assange”, “French Bretons rally for own self-determination & in solidarity with Catalonia”, “Assange Urges Juncker to Suspend Spain From EU Over Violence in Catalonia”, “Madrid’s Violent Tactics See Catalan Independence Voters Switch Sides”, “Catalan Ombudsman Urges Council of Europe to Respond to Violence at Referendum”, “Catalan police in tears as they shield referendum voters from Civil Guard”, “Suffer for democracy? Police crackdown at Barcelona school during independence referendum”
3 October 2017	Huge protests and a general strike shake Catalonia as King Felipe VI condemns the Catalan government in a strongly-worded television address	“EU Should Mediate Madrid-Catalonia Row Over Independence Vote - Belgian Party”, “Belgian Interior Minister Says Catalonia's Independence Inevitable”, “After Catalan crackdown, EU will look hypocritical preaching about democracy – Irish MEP”, “Viva la Independence: Iraqi Kurdistan

		Backs Catalonia’s Independence Aspirations”, “Russia ‘worried about Spain,’ hopes Catalan crisis will be resolved – Putin”
11 October 2017	Spanish prime minister Mario Rajoy sets the Catalan government a deadline of 16 October to clarify whether they have declared independence or not, with a further three-day extension to 19 October.	“Catalonia Declares Independence, Then Dodges a Bullet”, “The Role of Neoliberalism in Spain's Constitutional Crisis”, “‘Champagne stayed in the fridge’: European independence movements react to Catalan ‘anticlimax’”, “From 'Long Live Catalonia' Companys to 'Follow the People's Will' Puigdemont”, “Spanish PM seeks clarity on Catalan independence declaration, threatens to suspend region’s autonomy”
17 October 2017	Spain’s national court orders the imprisonment of Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart, two leading Catalan separatist politicians.	“Are Catalan nationalists copying Maidan's ‘propaganda’ handbook?”, “Madrid-Catalonia Dispute Should Be Settled in Spanish Parliament - Ex-PACE Head”
21 October 2017	Spanish government suspends Catalonia’s autonomy and forces a new election.	“Domino Effect? Italy's Veneto, Lombardy Seek Autonomy After Catalan Referendum”, “Invoking Article 155 Is 'Worst Attack' on Catalonia in Centuries”, “‘It’s a coup’: Thousands protest power transfer from Barcelona to Madrid”, “Catalan leader: Madrid’s steps toward direct rule are ‘worst attacks’ since Franco’s dictatorship”
27 October 2017	Catalan parliament meets and unilaterally declares independence by 70 votes to 10, in a vote boycotted by the opposition. Later that day, Spain’s senate approves new powers for the Madrid government to impose direct rule on Catalonia by 214 votes to 47.	“‘Madrid can only act by force’: Spain & Catalonia on a collision course”, “EU President Tusk: Catalan Independence Vote Changes Nothing for Union”, “Anticonstitutional, Wrong: World Leaders React to Catalan Independence”, “Catalonia Could Be Foundation for What Will Happen Across the EU’ – Economist”, “‘Rajoy's Intransigence' Pushed Catalans 'Fed Up With Being Treated Like Kids’”, “EU's Economic Failures Are To Blame! – Economist On Catalonia's Independence”, “Catalan Situation 'Not a Vanity-Type of Secession, Self-Determination”

Appendix 3. Opinion leaders.

Name	Qualification	Article	Title of the article or video	Available at (accessed 9 May 2018):
Academics and political commentators				
Michele Ainis	Italian expert	Sputnik, 10.10.2017	“Catalonia's Shadow: Why Two Italian Regions Seek Autonomy Referendums”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710101058096069-italy-veneto-lombardy-referendums-autonomy/)
Chris Bambery	Scottish political analyst, previous leading member of the International Socialist Group, a revolutionary socialist organisation	RT (TV), 6.10.2017	“Franco legacy: Crackdown on Catalan voters recalls Spanish Civil War”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAQcPf0SnAg
		RT (TV), 28.10.2017	“Undivided Attention: Tensions run high as Spanish PM dissolves Catalan govt”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3aml0quDl4
Oriol Bartomeus, PhD	PhD, professor of political science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona	Sputnik, 30.09.2017	“Catalonian Referendum: 'Losing Barcelona Could Be a Big Problem for Spain”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709301057838275-catalonia-referendum-problem-for-spain/
Marco Bassani	Professor of politics at the University of Milan	RT, 23.10.2017	““Catalonia likely domino effect – up to 45 new counties in Europe””	https://www.rt.com/news/407547-italy-referendum-catalonia-independence/
Ferran Brunet, PhD	Research fellow with the Autonomous University of Barcelona	Sputnik, 29.09.2017	“Independent Catalonia: Success or Failure?”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709291057822867-independent-catalonia-success-or-failure/
Jordi Pacheso i Canals	Catalan political scientist	Sputnik, 27.09.2017	“Catalonia 'Is Not Against Spain as Such, But Against Its Ruling Party”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709271057754075-catalan-referendum-independence-reasons/
Lorenzo Codogno (presented as Lorenzo Cologna)	Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, European Institute, founder	Sputnik, 20.10.2017	“Italy Sweet-Talks Potential Investors With Promises of Higher Autonomy”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710201058410122-lombardy-veneto-secession-referendum/

	and chief economist at LC Macro Advisors			
Gracia Dorel-Ferre (presented as Garcia Dorel-Ferre)	Historian and Catalan affairs expert	Sputnik, 4.10.2017	“Catalan Independence Vote Risks Creating 'Domino Effect' in France”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710041057941476-france-catalan-referendum-consequences/
Paolo Cossarini	University teacher in politics and international relations, Loughborough University	RT (TV), 16.10.2017	“Catalonia's response on independence is not valid – Madrid”	https://www.rt.com/news/406810-catalonia-fails-clarify-independence/
Roberto Duran	Professor at the Institute of Political Science at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile	Sputnik, 14.10.2017	“High Stakes Secession: Catalonia's Exorbitant Price to Go It Alone”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710141058229045-catalonia-secession-price/
Russell Foster, Dr.	King's College London, European & International Studies Department	Sputnik, 6.10.2017	“Catalonia's Referendum is the 'Biggest Disaster for Europe Since WWII”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710061058017284-catalonia-referendum-biggest-disaster-europe/
Marko Gašić	London-based international affairs commentator	RT, 4.10.2017	“Why isn't NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days? – former British diplomat”	https://www.rt.com/news/405659-catalonia-referendum-spain-serbia/diplomat/
		RT, 16.10.2017	“Catalan quandary: No big national power supports its independence – analyst”	https://www.rt.com/news/406872-catalonia-referendum-spain-puigdemont/
		RT (TV), 16.10.2017	“Catalonia Countdown: Madrid gives Puigdemont until Thursday to clarify region's position”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogPgMz7BqEM
Jordi Graupera	Political philosophy professor, post-doc researcher at Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University	RT (TV), 28.09.2017	“Catalan President: EU can't keep ignoring independence referendum”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY5ZQKsY3fE
Caroline Gray	Lecturer in politics and Spanish at Aston University in UK	Sputnik, 8.10.2017	“Catalonia to Face Domestic, International Obstacles if Independence Declared”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710081058053054-catalonia-independence-referendum/

Modest Guinjoan, Dr.	Economic expert	Sputnik, 29.09.2017	“Independent Catalonia: Success or Failure?”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709291057822867-independent-catalonia-success-or-failure/
Thomas Harrington	Professor of Iberian studies at Hartford’s Trinity College	RT, 22.10.2017	“Catalan crisis escalated by repressive actions of Spanish government – analysts”	https://www.rt.com/news/407470-catalonia-repression-spanish-government/
Beatriz Hernández	Research fellow at the University of Diego Portales in Chile	Sputnik, 31.10.2017	“What Happens Next? Four Key Questions for Understanding Catalonia's Future”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710311058688888-four-key-questions-catalonia/
Daniel Hoegger	Senior policy fellow at the Swiss-based think tank Forum on Foreign Policy	Sputnik, 8.10.2017	“Catalonia to Face Domestic, International Obstacles if Independence Declared”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710081058053054-catalonia-independence-referendum/
Luis Huacuja	Mexican expert	Sputnik, 12.10.2017	“‘Let Them Wait More’: How Catalonia's Crisis Can Be Resolved”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710121058169457-catalonia-independence-government-negotiations/
Carlos Flores Juberias	Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Valencia	Sputnik, 19.10.2017	“Spanish 'Constitution Superior to Catalonia's Autonomous Systems' – Academic”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710191058377693-spain-constitution-catalonia-autonomy/
Steve Keen	Australian economist and author. Professor and Head of the School of Economics, History and Politics at Kingston University, London	Sputnik, 24.10.2017	“Secession Is So Hot Right Now: Economist Steve Keen on Where the Euro Went Wrong”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710241058495323-europe-economics-independence-movements/
		Sputnik, 27.10.2017	“EU's Economic Failures Are To Blame! - Economist On Catalonia's Independence”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710271058604018-spain-catalonia-independence-economy/
		RT, 31.10.2017	“Why does Catalonia want to quit Spain? It’s the economy, stupid”	https://www.rt.com/op-ed/408330-eu-catalonia-economic-separatism/
Daniel Lacalle	Chief economist at Tressis Management, Professor of Global Economy at IE Business School	RT (TV), 8.10.2017	“Federal police stay, no talks & no independent Catalonia – Spanish PM”	https://www.rt.com/news/406022-catalonia-rajoy-no-talks-police/

Robin McAlpine	Director of Common Weal, a pro-Scottish independence think tank	RT, 10.10.2017	“Are Scotland and Catalonia’s independence struggles symptoms of EU oppression?”	https://www.rt.com/uk/406231-catalonia-scotland-independence-eu/
Pablo Calderon Martinez, Dr.	A lecturer in Spanish politics at Aston University, UK	Sputnik, 2.10.2017	“The EU’s ‘Tough Spot’: Why Brussels Is Largely Silent on the Catalan Referendum”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710021057875372-eu-catalonia-referendum-silence/
Jose Luis Carretero Miramar	Spanish political commentator	Sputnik, 8.09.2017	“Thirst for Independence: Spain May ‘Use Repressive Measures’ Against Catalonia”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709081057208748-spain-catalonia-referendum-independence/
Alejandro Quiroga, Dr	Reader in Spanish history at Newcastle University	Sputnik, 2.10.2017	“Catalonia Standoff: Spanish Constitution, ‘Sons of Francoists’ vs Independence”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710021057871769-catalonia-spain-independence-crisis/
		RT (TV), 29.09.2017	“Hackers in Catalonia? Spanish media accuses Russians of keeping referendum site active”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r vBOBSbTRUY
Andrew Spannaus	Journalist and political analyst based in Milan	Sputnik, 20.10.2017	“Catalonia Referendum: Will ‘Europe of Regions’ Become Viable?”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710201058389841-catalonia-referendum-europe-of-regions/
Armando Fernández Steinko	Professor of sociology at the Complutense University of Madrid	Sputnik, 28.09.2017	“This Spanish Region Mulls Independence Vote, Following in Catalonia’s Footsteps”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709281057773183-spain-balearic-islands-independence/
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Ruben Tamboleo	Political scientist, Complutense University of Madrid	RT (TV), 28.10.2017	“Is Catalonia’s independence declaration valid? (VIDEO DEBATE)”	https://www.rt.com/news/408048-catalonia-independence-declaration-debate/
Alfonso Valero	Principal lecturer at the Nottingham Trent University	Sputnik, 23.10.2017	“Invoking Article 155 May Unlock Situation in Catalonia, Political Analyst Says”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710231058475366-bringing-country-to-normality-madrid/

Mary Vincent	Professor of Modern European History at Sheffield University	Sputnik, 4.10.2017	“King of All Spaniards? Only 'Unitary State' for Spain's 'Constitutional Monarch”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710041057946937-king-spain-catalonia-crisis/
Duncan Wheeler	Professor at the University of Leeds, Chair of Spanish Studies	Sputnik, 27.10.2017	“Rajoy's Intransigence' Pushed Catalans 'Fed Up With Being Treated Like Kids”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710271058603720-catalonia-independence-mariano-rajoy/
John Wight	Scottish writer and political commentator. A supporter of the Crimean reunification with Russia (“Crimea is Russian, the matter is finished” 13.03.2018)	Sputnik, 28.09.2017	“From Scotland to Catalonia to Iraqi Kurdistan, Separatism Is in Vogue”	https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201709281057783191-age-of-nationalism-catalonia-scotland-kurdistan/
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		Sputnik, 11.10.2017	“The Role of Neoliberalism in Spain's Constitutional Crisis”	https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201710111058128898-neoliberalism-spain-constitution-crisis/
		RT, 27.10.2017	“Madrid can only act by force’: Spain & Catalonia on a collision course”	https://www.rt.com/news/408039-madrid-catalonia-crash-course/
		RT (TV), 28.10.2017	“Undivided Attention: Tensions run high as Spanish PM dissolves Catalan govt”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3aml0quDl4
		Sputnik, 30.10.2017	“Catalan Independence Is Not Worth Dying For”	https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201710301058656065-catalonia-independence-cultural-nationalism/
Alfred De Zayas	Professor of international law at the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations, UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order	Sputnik, 27.10.2017	“Catalan Situation 'Not a Vanity-Type of Secession, Self-Determination”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710271058600850-catalonia-independence-declaration-legal-perspective/

Adrian Zelaia	Spanish political analyst	Sputnik, 4.10.2017	“Historic Tension’: Should Spain Brace for the Worst After Catalan Vote?”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710041057927694-catalonia-independence-referendum-violence/
Politicians				
Pedro Agramunt	Spanish senator, People’s Party, former president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. On 28 April 2017, after travelling to Syria to meet Bashar al-Assad, the Bureau of PACE said he is no longer authorized to undertake any official visits, attend meetings, or make public statements on behalf of the assembly in his capacity as president after a vote of no confidence on him.	Sputnik, 17.10.2017	“Madrid-Catalonia Dispute Should Be Settled in Spanish Parliament - Ex-PACE Head”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710171058322485-spain-catalonia-settlement-parliament/
Oriol Amorós	A Catalan MP of the Republican Left of Catalonia party (pro-independence)	Sputnik, 26.10.2017	“Why One Catalan City Has Declared Spanish King Felipe VI Persona Non Grata”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710261058551323-spain-catalonia-girona-king/
Jose Maria Chiquillo Barber	Senator for Valencia, People’s Party, member of the Spanish delegation to OSCE PA (anti-independence)	Sputnik, 5.10.2017	“EU ‘Natural’ Mediator for Catalonia-Spain Conflict - Spanish Lawmaker”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710051057971594-eu-catalonia-spain-conflict/
Olivier Berthelot	President of the Parti Breton in Brittany (party got 13 000 votes in the last election)	Sputnik, 12.10.2017	“‘Shared Prison’: EU’s Rejection of Catalonia Vote Shatters Independence Dreams”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710121058169344-catalonia-spain-independence-referendum-eu/
Bart Claes	Member of the Belgian right-wing Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party	Sputnik, 12.10.2017	„Catalan Referendum Police Violence Immoral - Belgian Politician“	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710121058178251-eu-catalonia-violence-referendum/

Alfred Bosch	Member of Barcelona city council, leader of Republican Left on Barcelona City Council (pro-independence)	RT, 21.09.2017	“Independence-hungry Scottish nationalist leader sends support to Catalonia”	https://www.rt.com/uk/404104-independence-catalonia-spain-sturgeon/
		RT (TV), 21.09.2017	“Catalan referendum no more than impossible dream - Spanish PM”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4d3f0QlpAc
		RT, 2.10.2017	“Has Spain reverted to Franco-style military dictatorship?”	https://www.rt.com/news/405374-spain-catalonia-referendum-eu/
		RT, 11.10.2017	“Catalonia gave Spain last chance”	https://www.rt.com/news/406395-catalonia-spain-independence-autonomy/
		RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Catalonia at Crossroads: Senate to vote on direct rule over region”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8vmV8iQn70
Matt Carthy	Irish MEP, Sinn Féin, European United Left-Nordic Green Left party group	RT, 3.10.2017	“After Catalan crackdown, EU will look hypocritical preaching about democracy – Irish MEP”	https://www.rt.com/news/405525-catalonia-referendum-spain-eu/
Dario Castañé	Pirate Party of Catalonia (not in parliament)	RT (TV), 29.09.2017	“Hackers in Catalonia? Spanish media accuses Russians of keeping referendum site active”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-vBOBSbTRUY
David Coburn	British MEP, leader of the Scottish UKIP	RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Landmark Vote: Catalan parliament votes for independence from Spain”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-5Ip3f1ekY
		RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Independent Catalonia: Spanish PM appeals to Senate to seize Catalonia & dismiss leaders”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v5a5JZHepc
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		RT (TV), 28.10.2017	“Catalan President sacked by Madrid calls for peaceful resistance to Spain’s power takeover”	https://www.rt.com/news/408091-catalan-leader-speaks-independence/

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Bernard Daelemans	Observer, board member of the International Commission of European Citizens, Flemish people’s movement	RT (TV), 1.10.2017	“Catalonia's independence: 90% vote 'Yes' to break away from Spain”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j49z9Q9mHoo
		RT (TV), 10.10.2017	“Catalan leader suspends declaration of independence, offers dialogue with Madrid”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26lEzTUMz1A
		RT, 22.10.2017	“Catalan crisis escalated by repressive actions of Spanish government – analysts”	https://www.rt.com/news/407470-catalonia-repression-spanish-government/
Gianmatteo Ferrari	A member of Lega Nord, Vice President of the Lombardy-Russian Cultural Association	Sputnik, 2.10.2017	“Lawmaker Criticizes EU Over Failure to Condemn Spain's Use of Force in Catalonia”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710021057877213-spain-catalonia-force/
Ray Finch	British MEP, UKIP	RT, 3.10.2017	“After Catalan crackdown, EU will look hypocritical preaching about democracy – Irish MEP”	https://www.rt.com/news/405525-catalonia-referendum-spain-eu/
Enric Folch	International secretary of Catalan Solidarity for Independence (pro-independence, party did not participate in the last elections)	RT, 16.09.2017	“Catalan Secessionists Claim EU's Receptiveness Dictated by Economics”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709161057449877-catalonia-independence-vote/
		RT (TV), 20.09.2017	“Clashes with police in Catalonia ahead of independence vote”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZS7Dm2SmEk
		Sputnik, 13.10.2017	“Juncker Believes Catalonia’s Independence May Trigger Other Regions' Secession”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710131058208650-eu-catalonia-secession-independence/
		RT, 27.10.2017	“‘Madrid can only act by force’: Spain & Catalonia on a collision course”	https://www.rt.com/news/408039-madrid-catalonia-crash-course/
		RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Landmark Vote: Catalan parliament votes for independence from Spain”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-5Ip3f1ekY

		RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Independent Catalonia: Spanish PM appeals to Senate to seize Catalonia & dismiss leaders”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v5a5JZHepc
Josep Gonzalez Gi	Mayor of Rasquera (population 850) in Catalonia (pro-independence)	Sputnik, 19.09.2017	“Catalan Town Mayor Threatened With Arrest, Vows to Hold Independence Vote”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709191057528205-ctalan-mayor-arrest-independence-referendum/
		Sputnik, 20.09.2017	“Catalan President Accuses Spain of Suspending Region's Self-Governance”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709201057550420-spain-catalonia-independence-referendum-blocking/
Diane James	Independent British MEP, former leader of UKIP	RT (TV), 29.09.2017	“Hackers in Catalonia? Spanish media accuses Russians of keeping referendum site active”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-vBOBSbTRUY
Stelios Kouloglou	Greek MEP, Syriza, impartial observer in Barcelona	RT, 30.09.2017	“Madrid struggles to close Catalonia polling stations on eve of referendum”	https://www.rt.com/news/405111-catalonia-independence-referendum-preparation/
		RT (TV), 30.09.2017	“Referendum Matters: Catalans stage sit-ins at schools to prevent polling stations closures”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-llHuvGCq8
		RT, 1.10.2017	“‘Respect for democracy?’: Assange calls on EU to suspend Spain over Catalan referendum crackdown”	https://www.rt.com/news/405262-assange-spain-eu-suspension/
Jörg Meuthen	Chairman of Alternative für Deutschland	Sputnik, 5.10.2017	“Catalonia's Possible Secession May Lead to 'Domino Effect' - German Politician”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710051057972119-catalonia-independence-spain-madrid-eu/
		Sputnik, 6.10.2017	“German 'Catalonia'? Prospects of Independence Referendum Scenario in Bavaria”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710061058006062-german-catalonia-independence-bavaria/
Michaël Modrikamen	President of the Belgian People’s Party (party got 1,5% votes in the 2014 elections)	Sputnik, 3.10.2017	“EU Should Mediate Madrid-Catalonia Row Over Independence Vote - Belgian Party”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710031057898780-eu-spain-catalonia-independence-vote/

Caroline Ollivro	President of the autonomist Breton movement Breizh Europa	Sputnik, 4.10.2017	“Catalan Independence Vote Risks Creating 'Domino Effect' in France”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710041057941476-france-catalan-referendum-consequences/
Federico Pinedo	Provisional President of Argentina's Senate	Sputnik, 14.10.2017	“EU Stance Not to Recognize Independent Catalonia Important - Argentine Official”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710141058234565-eu-catalonia-unity-separatism/
Carles Prats	Catalan MP, Junts pel Sí (leading pro-independence party)	RT (TV), 4.10.2017	“Catalonia's independence: EU refuses to condemn police brutality”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvfCU4ePGJg
		RT, 28.10.2017	“Is Catalonia’s independence declaration valid? (VIDEO DEBATE)”	https://www.rt.com/news/408048-catalonia-independence-declaration-debate/
Iestyn ap Rhobert	Chairperson of YesCymru	Sputnik, 27.09.2017	“Watch and Wonder: Independence Campaigners in Wales May Copy Catalan Vote”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709271057747391-wales-independence-catalan-referendum/
Gianluca Savoini	An adviser on international politics to Lega Nord party leader	Sputnik, 22.10.2017	“Italy's Veneto, Lombardy to Seek Autonomy, Not Independence Like Catalonia”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710221058444208-italy-veneto-lombardy-referendums/
Jonathan Shafi	Chairman of Radical Independence Campaign	RT, 13.09.2017	“Spain's state prosecutor orders probe into 700+ Catalan mayors for cooperating with referendum”	https://www.rt.com/news/403179-catalonia-spain-mayors-referendum/
Tommy Sheridan	Former Scottish Socialist Party leader, cofounder of Solidarity (both minor parties), former Scottish MP, organiser of the „Hope over Fear” campaign for the Scottish independence	Sputnik, 28.09.2017	“Sense of Injustice Drives Independence Movements' Across the World”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201709281057788536-independence-movements-scotland-catalonia-referendums/
Jordi Solé	Spanish MEP, Republican Left of Catalonia (pro-independence)	RT, 13.09.2017	“Spain's state prosecutor orders probe into 700+ Catalan mayors for cooperating with referendum”	https://www.rt.com/news/403179-catalonia-spain-mayors-referendum/

		RT, 3.10.2017	“After Catalan crackdown, EU will look hypocritical preaching about democracy – Irish MEP”	https://www.rt.com/news/405525-catalonia-referendum-spain-eu/
Josep-Maria Terricabras	Spanish MEP, Republican Left Party of Catalonia (pro-independence)	RT (TV), 30.10.2017	“Spain Divided: Country deeply split over Catalan independence”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41gMQpy7Cok
Ramon Tremosa	Spanish MEP, Catalan European Democratic Party (pro-independence)	RT, 6.10.2017	“‘The brutal military repression has united us all’ – Catalonia MEP”	https://www.rt.com/news/405918-catalonia-referendum-spain-violence/
Stegano Valdegamberi	A member of the Regional Council of Veneto in Italy, Lega Nord	Sputnik, 2.10.2017	“Spanish Crackdown in Catalonia 'Blow to Democracy' - Italian Lawmaker”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710021057876954-catalonia-referendum-spain-italy-democracy/
		Sputnik, 21.10.2017	“Domino Effect? Italy's Veneto, Lombardy Seek Autonomy After Catalan Referendum”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710211058430370-veneto-lombardy-autonomy-economic-discrimination/
Karel Vereycken	French politician and journalist, Vice President of Solidarité and Progrès political movement (party not in parliament)	Sputnik, 6.10.2017	“Why Catalan Independence Vote Part of Broader Plan to Split Europe Up”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710061058019216-catalonia-europe-fragmentation-independence/
Florian Weber	Chairman of the Bavarian Party (party got 0.8% votes in the last election)	Sputnik, 6.10.2017	“German 'Catalonia'? Prospects of Independence Referendum Scenario in Bavaria”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710061058006062-german-catalonia-independence-bavaria/
Marco Zanni	Italian MEP, Five Star Movement (M5S)	Sputnik, 3.10.2017	“Catalan Vote to End Rajoy's Political Career, Destabilize Bloc - EU Lawmaker”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710031057913515-catalonia-vote-spain-consequences/
Tatjana Zdanoka	Latvian pro-Russian MEP, member of the Greens-European Free Alliance party group	Sputnik, 2.10.2017	“EU Parliament Stops Short of Discussing Referendum in Catalonia – Lawmaker”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710021057880459-catalonia-referendum-european-parliament/

Others				
Jameel Ahmad	Chief Market Analyst & Vice President Corporate Development	RT, 8.10.2017	“Federal police stay, no talks & no independent Catalonia – Spanish PM”	https://www.rt.com/news/406022-catalonia-rajoy-no-talks-police/
Valentin Anadon	Mossos d’Esquadra (Catalan police force) spokesperson	RT (TV), 30.09.2017	“Referendum Matters: Catalans stage sit-ins at schools to prevent polling stations closures”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-lIHuvGCq8
Anna Arqué	Pro-independence activist, European Partnership for Independence	RT (TV), 16.09.2017	“‘Don’t underestimate Catalan strength’: Mayors march in defiance of Madrid (PHOTOS, VIDEO)”	https://www.rt.com/news/403580-barcelona-mayors-referendum-protest/
Polly Boiko	RT	RT, 18.10.2017	“UK should support Catalonia independence, says former diplomat”	https://www.rt.com/uk/407115-catalonia-independence-spain-brexit/
Simona Bordonali	Head of security, civil protection and immigration of the Lombardy Region	Sputnik, 22.10.2017	“Italy's Veneto, Lombardy to Seek Autonomy, Not Independence Like Catalonia”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710221058444208-italy-veneto-lombardy-referendums/
Carles	A man injured at a polling station	RT (TV), 1.10.2017	“‘We never thought the police would be so violent’ – Man injured in Catalan referendum clash”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t88Jl3hyuKI
		RT (TV), 1.10.2017	“Catalonia's independence: 90% vote 'Yes' to break away from Spain”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j49z9Q9mHoo
		RT (TV), 4.10.2017	“Catalonia's independence: EU refuses to condemn police brutality”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvfCU4ePGJg
Lorenzo Consoli	Journalist covering the EU, former president of the Brussels International Press Association	RT (TV), 28.09.2017	“Catalan President: EU can’t keep ignoring independence referendum”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY5ZQKsY3fE
		RT, 20.10.2017	“Italy Sweet-Talks Potential Investors With Promises of Higher Autonomy”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710201058410122-lombardy-veneto-secession-referendum/

Jordi Cuixart	President of the pro-independence Òmnium Cultural association	Sputnik, 30.09.2017	“Catalan Public Organizations Call Upcoming Independence Vote Peaceful Revolution”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709301057839138-catalonia-independence-democracy-referendum/
Jonathan Davis	British (Scottish) economist, Jonathan Davis Wealth Management.	Sputnik, 27.10.2017	“Catalonia Could Be Foundation for What Will Happen Across the EU” – Economist”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710271058605157-catalan-independence-economy-spain/
Charles Drace-Francis	Former UK diplomat Jim Jatras, former U.S. diplomat	RT, 18.10.2017	“UK should support Catalonia independence, says former diplomat”	https://www.rt.com/uk/407115-catalonia-independence-spain-brexit/
Alvaro Hilario	Journalist	Sputnik, 4.10.2017	“Historic Tension’: Should Spain Brace for the Worst After Catalan Vote?”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710041057927694-catalonia-independence-referendum-violence/
Jolanda	An activist from Catalonia	Sputnik, 27.10.2017	“A Long Fight’: Local Activist on Catalan Independence Declaration”	https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710271058602695-catalonia-independence-spain-activist/
Neus Lloveras i Massana	Mayor of Vilanova i la Geltrú (population 66 000), Catalan European Democratic Party (pro-independence), president of Association of Municipalities for Independence	RT, 16.09.2017	“Don’t underestimate Catalan strength’: Mayors march in defiance of Madrid (PHOTOS, VIDEO)”	https://www.rt.com/news/403580-barcelona-mayors-referendum-protest/
Nebojsa Malic	RT	RT, 30.10.2017	“Kosovo led to Catalonia. But West won’t admit it”	https://www.rt.com/op-ed/408237-kosovo-catalonia-independence-west/
William Mallinson	Presented as former British diplomat. He is an academic at the Italian online Guglielmo Marconi university, has previously served as a public servant, third secretary and	RT, 4.10.2017	“Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days? – former British diplomat”	https://www.rt.com/news/405659-catalonia-referendum-spain-serbia/
		RT, 19.10.2017	“Catalonia leader threatens to declare independence if Spanish govt suspends autonomy”	https://www.rt.com/news/407158-puigdemont-rajoy-independence-suspended/

	acting second secretary in UK embassies in locations including Nairobi (Alandete, 2018).			
Ilya Petrenko	RT	RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Landmark Vote: Catalan parliament votes for independence from Spain”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-5Ip3f1ekY
		RT (TV), 27.10.2017	“Independent Catalonia: Spanish PM appeals to Senate to seize Catalonia & dismiss leaders”	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v5a5JZHepc
Paulo Vizeu Pinheiro	Portuguese ambassador to Russia	Sputnik, 31.10.2017	“Portugal Doubts Spain to Face 'Serious Splits' Over Catalonia - Envoy to Russia”	https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710311058687756-catalonia-spain-splits-crisis/

2017. AASTA KATALOONIA ISESEISVUSREFERENDUM: RT JA SPUTNIKU LEVITATUD VENEMAA STRATEEGILISED NARRATIIVID

Johannes Voltri

Resümee

Abhaasia ja Lõuna-Osseetia annekteerimisest saati 2008. aastal on Venemaa muutunud oma välispoliitiliselt hoiakult varasemast palju jõulisemaks ja isepäisemaks. Iseäranis päevakajaliseks on muutunud Venemaa mõjutuskatsed läänemaailmas, näiteks seoses USA ja Prantsusmaa presidendivalimistega. Süüdistused, et Venemaa üritab aktiivselt lääne poliitilisi protsesse enda kasuks kallutada kerkisid üles ka eelmise aasta oktoobris, kui toimus Kataloonia iseseisvusreferendum. Hispaania välisminister Alfonso Dastis on sõnanud, et neil on teavet, mis viitab, et Venemaalt viidi läbi teabeoperatsioon eesmärgiga Hispaaniat destabiliseerida. Seda kinnitas hiljem maikuu ka Saksamaa julgeolekuteenistuse BfV juht Hans-Georg Maassen. Venemaa välisminister Sergei Lavrov on süüdistusi aga meelekindlalt eitanud ning väitnud, et need on osa lääneriikides levivast Venemaavastasest hüsteeriast.

Kuigi Venemaad on Hispaaniavastases mõjutustegevuses palju süüdistatud, pole siiski terviklikumaid akadeemilisi eritlusi väga palju läbi viidud, uurimused on keskendunud peaaesjalikult hispaaniakeelsetele RT ja Sputniku väljaannetele ja sotsiaalmeediale. Käesolev töö kätkebki endas ülesannet küsimuses selgust tuua, uurides põhjalikumalt seda, kuidas kajastasid Kataloonia referendumit Venemaa valitsuse hallatavad ingliskeelsed meediaväljaanded RT ja Sputnik.

Töö eesmärk on kindlaks teha, millised olid peamised strateegilised narratiivid, mida Venemaa RT ja Sputniku kajastusega läänemaailmale levitas ning siduda need Venemaa välispoliitikaga ehk üldisemalt Venemaa nägemusega sellest, kuidas rahvusvaheline süsteem peaks toimima. Muuhulgas otsib autor vastust sellele, miks Venemaa üleüldse Kataloonia vastu huvi tundis ning kuidas Venemaa kasutas erinevaid kommunikatiivseid vahendeid oma eesmärkide saavutamiseks. Autor seab hüpoteesi, et Venemaa kasutas sündmusi Kataloonias ära eesmärgiga nõrgestada Euroopa Liitu.

Lähtuvalt Alister Miskimmoni, Ben O'Loughlini ja Laura Roselli'i kirjutistest vaatleb autor rahvusvahelisi suhteid ja kommunikatsiooni läbi strateegiliste narratiivide prisma,

sidudes selle Ernesto Laclau ja Chantal Mouffe'i diskursuseteooriaga. Need teooriad sobituvad omavahel hästi kokku, sest strateegiliste narratiivide teooria tugineb suuresti justnimelt poststrukturealistlikule diskursuseteooriale.

Hüpoteesi tõestamiseks viis autor läbi diskursuseanalüüsi RT ja Sputniku veebiväljaannete (rt.com, sputniknews.com) kajastusest ning RT televisioonikajastusest, mis oli leitav RT Youtube'i lehelt. Uurimisvahemikuks valis autor 1.09.2017–31.10.2017 ehk umbes kuu enne ja pärast referendumit. Kokku avaldas Sputnik selles ajavahemikus 257 ja RT 165 Kataloonia sündmusi puudutavat artiklit, millele lisandus veel 51 videot RT Youtube'i kanalilt.

Diskursuseanalüüsi tulemusena selgus, et meediaväljaannete kajastus oli selgelt iseseisvusmeelsete poole kaldu, osalt juba seetõttu, et suurem osa meedias ülesastunud arvamusiidritest olid iseseisvusmeelsed. Nii näiteks kujutati meetmeid, mida Hispaania valitsus referendumit ärajätmiseks ette võttis kui frankoistlike, mis ei käi kokku demokraatliku riigi aluspõhimõtetega. Iseseisvusmeelseid näidati aga kui tavalisi inimesi, kes põhjendatult oma õigusi ja vabadusi taotleavad. Mõlema poole kohta käivaid stereotüüpe võimendati ka kommunikatiivselt, näidates näiteks Hispaania politsei vägivalda aegluubis pingelise muusika taustal.

Pingestatud ning kohati vägivaldsele kiskuv olukord Kataloonias andis Venemaale ideaalse võimaluse pingeid veelgi võimendada ning seeläbi kogu probleemiteravik Euroopa Liidu poole suunata. Lähtudes Miskimmoni jt strateegiliste narratiivide kolmesest jaotusest (poliitika-, identiteedi- ja süsteeminarratiivid) tegi autor kindlaks, et poliitikatasandil argumenteeris Venemaa Euroopa Liidu sekkumise poolt Kataloonias. See oleks andnud konfliktile kohe ka rahvusvahelise mõõtme. Kui selgus, et Euroopa Liit jääb kõrvaltvaataja rolli, hakkas Venemaa levitama Euroopa Liidu vastu suunatud identiteedinarratiivi, süüdistades viimast silmakirjalikkuses ja topeltstandardites. Venemaa üritas näidata, et Euroopa Liit, mis peaks olema euroopalike ja demokraatlike väärtuste kehastuseks ning seeläbi etaloniks teistele riikidele, ei ühti retoorikas tegelikult oma tegudega. Ühe peamise näitena kõrvutati nii näiteks Kataloonia iseseisvuspüüdlusi Kosovo iseseisvumisega, juhtides tähelepanu tõigale et kui Kosovo puhul oli Euroopa Liit iseseisvuse poolt olnud, siis nüüd on ta Kataloonia justkui hüljanud.

Euroopa Liidu olemuse nõrgestamine oli tihedalt seotud Venemaa üldisema süsteemitasandi strateegilise narratiiviga, mis kujutas liitu kui nõrka ning lagunevat. Nii näiteks ilmus uurimisperioodi vältel RT-lt ja Sputnikult arvukalt artikleid, mis käsitlesid Euroopa Liidus pead tõstvaid separatistlikke liikumisi (isegi nii marginaalseid kui nt Ahvenamaa iseseisvusliikumine), arvumusartiklites aga toodi välja, et separatistlikud liikumised ongi suurelt jaolt tekkinud Euroopa Liidu süül.

Venemaa meediaväljaannete kajastust ning huvi Kataloonia sündmuste vastu võib seega laiemalt vaadelda kui püüet nõrgestada lääne ülevõimu ning seeläbi püüelda mitmepooluselise maailmakorra poole, kus Venemaa rahvusvaheline roll oleks senisest suurem. Seega leidis kinnitust ka autori seatud hüpotees, et Venemaa kajastas Kataloonia sündmusi ära nõrgestamaks Euroopa Liitu.

Olukorras, kus suhted läänemaailma ja Venemaa vahel on pingestatud ja meedias levib palju narratiive selle kohta, kuidas peaks maailma sündmusi mõistma ja tõlgendama, on oluline, et tõde ridade vahel kaduma ei läheks. Töö annab olulise panuse selgitamiseks Venemaa teabeoperatsioonide mõjuulatust ja tehnikaid ning näitab, et Venemaa tegevus ei piirdu vaid lähinaabrusega, vaid ulatub kaugemalegi, kus Venemaa ei pruugi olla konfliktis aktiivne osapool. Kuna Venemaa eesmärgid on sel juhul ka keerulisemalt hoomatavad, on oht, et mõjutustegevus võib jääda esmapilgul sootuks märkamatuks.

Tuleb silmas pidada, et töös käsitleti pelgalt seda, kuidas ja milliseid strateegilisi narratiive Venemaa levitab. Saamaks täielikumat pilti Venemaa teabeoperatsioonidest ning mõjutustegevusest tuleks põhjalikumalt eritleda ka seda, kuidas Venemaa strateegilised narratiivid on üldse tekkinud ning kuidas meedia tarbijaskond need omaks võtab, näiteks millist mõju on RT ja Sputniku Euroopa Liidu vaenulik kajastus avaldanud Euroopa Liidule. Kõike seda tuleks aga teha, võttes arvesse 21. sajandi meediaökoloogiat, kus rahvusvahelised tegutsejad toetuvad omavahelisel suhtlusel aina enam sotsiaalmeediale.

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