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The Impact of the Media on the Catalonia Referendum

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Abstract: The impact of fake news on contemporary international relations processes becomes increasingly intertwined with the systemic processes of human existence and an integral part of it. The rolling out of mass consciousness and ideological pumping of the population has become possible not only by traditional methods, but also by modern technical means of information transmission. Thus, the use of social networks has allowed creating virtual characters and bots, leading certain processes and influencing public opinion. Catalonia is no exception, here are various factors influencing the country's illegal referendum. It was various channels of communication and information transmission covering a variety of events that took place in Spain in October 2017 during the illegal referendum in Catalonia. Misinformative messages were covered; concepts and reality were changed, especially by Russian propaganda. The article analyzes the impact of various media on the preparation of the referendum in Catalonia and the main implications for the country in general. It is proved that most fake news belonged to Russian news platforms, which were clearly coordinated and threatened not only Spain but also the information security of the European Union. Despite the intrinsic nature of the Catalan problem, it is the widespread dissemination of false information that has further deepened the contradictions between supporters of independence and its adversaries within the country.

Keywords: communication, information, fake, news, post-truth, Catalonia, referendum, media.

Introduction

Being a special region of Spain, Catalonia has differed in its language, identity and regional autonomy. The Catalan problem remains open and unresolved on the global agenda, independence referendums in Scotland, Brexit and protests, which have become a mass phenomenon in many parts of the world. The trigger for Catalonia was the Scottish independence referendum held in 2014, unlike the UK, the Spanish government did not allow it in October 2017, so it is considered illegal.

In the post-truth era Catalonia was no exception, as the manipulation of public opinion is a widespread practice. The most striking examples are the presi-

dential elections in the US and France, Britain's withdrawal from the EU and the referendum in Catalonia. In all cases, fake news were massively thrown into the information space, and they were skillfully and effectively designed. Interethnic regional conflicts have arisen in different regions of Spain, and a comparison between Catalonia and Crimea in Russian sources has been found, which is incorrect. Such a comparison essentially conceals Russian aggression in Ukraine and will lead to the recognition by international community of the legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea in the future. These conflicts have a completely different nature and etymology, so the Catalan-Spanish conflict is an internal affair of Spain, while the Russian-Ukrainian one has emerged from a local status. What intrinsic to conflict is that there is no so-called "people of Crimea" in an ethnic sense and "the Crimean nation" in a political sense unlike the Catalans who are recognized as a nation. The right of the people of Crimea to exercise their "right to self-determination" can be considered propaganda. Crimean "separatism" was fueled by Moscow, as well as by the presence of military forces on the peninsula, an illegal referendum and the recognition of its results. The main factor confirming the internal nature of the issue in Catalonia is that the Catalan movement did not have any support by neighboring France and Andorra, especially from the EU, while Russia's external support for Crimea was extensive.

The research aim is to identify the impact of the media on the illegal referendum in Catalonia and its consequences.

An empirical research method such as generalization was used to cover the issue. It helps to select and group data by individual attributes and characteristics. Thus, an attempt was made to divide the media into internal and external, as well as official and neutral ones. The method of generalization was applied to distinguish logical processes, to associate and group subbjects according to their various features. An effective method within the study was the use of content analysis, which allowed allocating quantitative indicators of information. The content analysis method is leading in media research, identification and segregation of true and false information content. Content analysis allowed us to analyze the most common messages and various documents, blogs, online networks, accounts, etc.

Countering the dissemination of false information

Under the legislation Spain is a parliamentary monarchy, the head of state – the king at the official level fixed the existence of a state of autonomy. 17 regional communities have been created, with autonomies such as Catalonia, Andalusia, Galicia and the Basque Country having the status of national autonomy, each

with cultural, linguistic and economic freedom. Power in the country is divided into central, regional and local levels. At the Constitution level, rights to national and territorial autonomy are recognized and guaranteed. Article 145 of the Spanish Constitution prohibits creation of the federation of Autonomous Communities, so holding a referendum in the country is considered to be illegal.

In 2009-2011 informal independence referendums were held in many provincial cities. In 2012 a million rallies for independence took place in Barcelona. In January 2013, the Parliament of Catalonia adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty and appointed an independence referendum on 9 November 2014. On March 26, 2014 the Spanish Constitutional Court declared it illegitimate and the Spanish Parliament voted against it. Nationalist sentiment in Spain was strengthened in 2015 by the coming into power in Catalonia of parties that supported the secession from Spain. A block called Junts pel Sí, which included the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, led by Arthur Mass and the Left Republicans of Catalonia with Oriol Junkeras. All these events in 2015 led to the Catalan parliament coming to power, which formally declared its fight for independence of the region and created the Catalonia Independence Plan in 2017. [1]

On October 1, 2017 90.18% voted in favor of Catalonia's referendum, 7.83% voted against independence; turnout was 42.3%. One week after the referendum, thousands gathered at the Barcelona downtown to protest against the Catalan government's plans to secede from Spain. According to the city's municipal police, about 350,000 people gathered at the city center of Barcelona. The demonstration was organized by the Societat Civil Catalana Group, a leading anti-independence organization in Catalonia. [2]

After the referendum on October 1 events developed rapidly. Different scenarios were forecast, both for the region and for the country as a whole. A situation has emerged that could have explosive consequences or be in a latent conflict stage for decades and provoke separatist sentiment in other regions of the country.

On October 27, 2017 following the independence referendum the government of Catalonia proclaimed the Republic of Catalonia. According to the Spanish law, the results of the referendum have been declared illegal and invalid. On October 30, 2017 the Parliament of Catalonia acknowledged the Spanish Government's decision to dissolve it before the new round of elections. The Spanish Constitutional Court annulled Catalonia's declaration of independence.

Turning to norms of international law, it must be stated that every nation has the right to self-determination. On the other hand, every state has to adhere to the principle of indivisibility of borders; these two rights have been in conflict for

more than a decade. Of course, the Catalan government has the right to appeal to the principle formally enshrined in the UN charter, namely the right of nations to self-determination. This principle requires the consent of Spain. [3]

Nowadays politics in a world where the media are able to cover real-time news to the billions of people armed with smartphones connected to social networks are no longer telling the truth. The number of people who participated in the Catalan referendum, the number of votes or the legitimacy of the process have no consequences. An important issue in politics today is to tell a carefully planned story that happened once again in Catalonia. [4]

On the eve of the referendum, the Spanish police occupied the Catalonia Communication Centre and took control over the Catalan Government's Telecommunications and Information Centre. The High Court of Catalonia ordered the police to suspend the use of computerized services for electronic voting on the day of the referendum and instructed Google to remove the statement used to disseminate voting information. In fact, the television and radio services, which had existed here since 1983 and had broadcasted exclusively in Catalan, were taken under control.

The use of information technologies in the run-up to the referendum literally became a battleground between the Spanish law enforcement agencies and hackers. The Spanish government applied aggressive tactics to suppress data and especially digital information from the independence movement supporters. In turn, the Spanish intelligence services attacked and used the buildings of the telecommunications operators as well as censored many websites. The Spanish Civil Guard, by order of the Supreme Court of Catalonia, blocked more than 140 sites that contained information about the referendum on Catalonia's independence. Almost all Internet resources were blocked a number of times by the Spanish Government, but new ones were created despite high fines. The authorities of Catalonia posted slogans and appeals on social media not to ignore the referendum and not to resist the Madrid police. Law enforcement officers seized 45,000 personal messages which were to be sent to members of local election committees in the municipalities of Catalonia.

It can be argued that the Catalan independence referendum began as the so-called "World Internet War since the population of the region used Internet networks to prepare and organize the entire referendum process, and created special sites to disseminate information to the Catalans.

The main messages of the Catalan media to society contain a distorted reality of Catalonia's secession and its possible consequences both for the region and for the whole country. This type of messages has been forming a subjective

opinion in society on the oppression of Catalans by the Spanish government, who has been living in a state of unstable colonial oppression in the artificially created Spain for three centuries. The idea of creating a state among the Catalans has become more utopian than real, fake news and myths in society about the economic, political power and uniqueness of the Catalonia region as an independent state has built up the Catalan post-truth policy.

An important fact in the dissemination of favourable information among the Catalans was the creation in 2006 of their own personal web domain "cat" for Catalan sites aimed at the promotion of Catalan language and culture. Almost all countries in the world have this type of web domain, but it is rather an exception for a region. Thus, a letter of appeal was published on the official site of the football club "Barcelona" in support of organizations defending Catalonia's independence. An interesting fact was a manifesto of Catalan bishops and church representatives calling all citizens and Catholics of Catalonia to vote. During the voting process, electronic lists were planned to be used, but the database server was shut down. Therefore, any ballot papers, even printed on a home printer, could be dropped into the ballot box.

Thus, the rapid dissemination of information to all segments of the population led to accession the vote process of even those who had not previously been interested in the issue. As a result, the population was transformed into a mass that tried to make decisions on its own that the interested political forces skilfully used, leading to a serious disturbance of the political-territorial environment and administration of the region as a whole.

Official, local and neutral media were involved in the shaping of public opinion both domestically and internationally. For example, official media in Spain, represented by the most famous Spanish newspaper in the world "El Pais", which overwhelmingly supported the view that the referendum contradicted the Constitution, was less focused on the use of force against citizens by police, questioned the data on nearly 900 victims as well as drew attention to the activities of the Russian Twitter bots on the Catalan issue, fake and selective news coverage of it in the US media. Some leading newspapers brought to the front pages not the number of injured and the use of sticks, tear gas and rubber bullets by national guards, which are banned in the region, but issue of the illegitimacy of referendum. [5]

All these phenomena were also observed in Spain, especially during the coverage of the events of the Catalan referendum in 2017. During the preparation and dissemination of information on the referendum in Catalonia, Spanish experts noted the establishment of the "Maldito bulo" media project, which in

Spanish means "damned lies": media polarization, manipulation of coverage terminology of the October 1, 2017. Maldito bulo is a Twitter and Facebook page denouncing false information on the Catalonia crisis. Also, they posted true photos and rebutted false facts and rumours on the social networks of the Spanish-speaking information space.

"Maldito mulo" has not only played a key role in detection of counterfeiting photos which were posted or broadcasted during the coverage of Catalan illegal independence referendum. They have specialized in the detection of fake news, especially on controversial issues. [6]

"El Confidencial" has been another electronic resource that helped to refute false information. In the run-up to the December 2015 general election the electronic resource "El Confidencial" created a screening section called "La chistera", which initially analysed candidates who ran for government, later it reclassified itself for data verification and its classification as true, vague, erroneous or unjustified. In 2016 an "El cazabulos" twitter account was launched to verify true and false news from readers.

Consequently, the official media of Spain tended to attach the notion of violence, tension, fear, conflict, covering the events in Catalonia; a parallel reality was created to justify the violent actions of the Spanish police on 1 October 2017.

Neutral media tried to cover the information objectively, but their number was much smaller and lack of capabilities as well diminished their influence on the formation of public and world opinion. News in Catalonia differed significantly from the rest of Spain; Barcelona wrote about the brutal police crackdown and Madrid about the removal of ballot boxes and protesters' violence against police.

The analysis of the global media coverage of events in Catalonia of October 1, 2017 can be divided into quantitative – statistics and figures, and qualitative – stories from different event participants. When it comes to violence and conflict, there are also more accurate ways to describe the very nature of conflict instead of the use of such words as "chaos" and "crisis". For example, reports on how people were affected and how these events could affect Catalonia's political, social and economic conditions. [7]

The European media, namely the British ones, such as the Times, noted that Spain was torn apart, providing information about hundreds of victims, with a picture of Spanish police with sticks and batons. This kind of slogans and illustrations in the press of a violent scenario with the Madrid police officers flew around the world. Of course, the Spanish government was condemned for such actions

by the international community and was accused of human rights violations and using force against peaceful protesters. All web servers of the Catalan referendum were located outside the EU in different countries, including Russia.

Professor Javier Lesaka analysed more than five million social media messages and Russian news coverage platforms, including Russia Today and Sputnik between September 29 and October 5. The results of his research led to "the discovery of an entire army of zombie accounts that are perfectly coordinated. Of the accounts studied, 30% were anonymous and dedicated to spreading content from those news organisations. Only 3% were real profiles". It has been proved that both Russia Today and Sputnik participated in a "deliberate disruption strategy" over Catalonia. Headlines used emotive language to draw readers in, focusing on Spanish police violence against those who sought to vote in Catalonia's "illegal" referendum". [8]

Russian media influence.

Russia Today has been broadcasting in Spain, Latin America and the US for about 10 years now as a Spanish-language channel. It is the leading channel in the inserting the right information to convince any audience.

Russia's interference in Spain's internal affairs is multilateral, particularly leading Spanish media have claimed significant support for Catalan separatists and distortion of events in Catalonia. Calls for Catalonia's secession from Spain were spread on social media by "Solidarity", a Russian-owned bot with links to the international Twitter Audit company, which defines real people's and bots messages. [9]

Since August 2017 the Russian edition of "Russia Today" has published around 42 articles in Spanish under headlines such as "the EU's recognition of Catalan independence". The "Sputnik" news website has published more than 200 articles on Catalonia since September 2017 and has covered the referendum in a positive way. [10]

The Russian newspaper "Izvestia" published a statement by the press secretary of the Catalan Solidarity for Independence coalition Jose Enrique Folk, saying that in case of its independence Catalonia would recognize Crimea as part of Russia. Russia Today's publication released disinformation that Folk's political power was in power, despite the fact that it was outright lies.

Support for Catalan separatists by means of the "fourth power" was used to create in the Western information space the stereotype that Catalonia was a victim of Spain's oppressive policy, and the only way to overcome that was to separate from Spain. Russia counted to create an image of the Catalans as revolu-

tionaries and advocates for justice in the European media space, appealing to the emotions of human rights defenders, and prepared the European society for the recognition of Catalan independence.

It was the image of Catalans suffering from the Spanish government's policy that was actively picked up and promoted by Russia; the biggest influence by the number of fake news was by the Russian media. The referendum in Catalonia was "promoted" by the state media and bot networks of the Russian Federation, as well as by such iconic figures as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. For example, Australian journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, known for his frequent appearance on Russian television channels, called for support for Catalonia's independence, accusing Spain of oppression. He noted that the prospects of emergence of a new country or civil war would depend on the EU's actions. Former CIA analyst Edward Snowden accused the Spanish government of violation of human rights in Catalonia. They described Spain as a "banana republic", claiming that Spain was on the brink of civil war and used police to block the democratic right to vote. Also, the use of force by the police was spreading as a Frankish practice which is not worthy to a democratic state.

Experts believe that Russia's interest in the Catalan conflict was primarily related to destabilization of the EU and democratic development of Spain. Political science professor at the University of Madrid Julio Rodriguez Reyes pointed out the tendency of the coverage of the events in Catalonia by the Russian propaganda, for example, those arrested for the attempt of insurgency were called political prisoners, and Spain was depicted as authoritarian and anti-democratic. Such a position outraged the Spanish authorities and undermined its authority in the international arena.

The Spanish government's official position on Russia's information interference in the Catalan crisis process was to confirm the receipt of "destructive messages" sent from the Russian Federation and Venezuela. The Russian bots were promoting separatism on social networks, calling for Catalan independence, sending thousands of re-tweets and many likes.

The Strategic Communications Task Force EUvsDisinfo set up by the EU to "confront the Russian disinformation campaigns", noted that the Catalan run up to referendum and referendum itself were the main topics in Russian propaganda. It was noted that both the Russian-language media, the Spanish-language RT channel and Sputnik news agency were covering the Catalan topic under such headlines as "Catalonia will recognise Crimea as part of Russia", "Spanish is taught as a foreign language in Catalonia", "EU officials supported the police violence in Catalonia". [11]

In the European Commission report "A Multi-dimensional Approach to Disinformation" the term fake is not used because it does not sufficiently reflect the problem of disinformation. It is not clear when false or true information can be used simultaneously. The term "fake" takes information to the other side when politicians use it to combat information that they disagree with. Population's fakes are often associated with party debate, not disinformation. [12]

For the detailed analysis of digital communications 5 million emails with words "Cataluóa", "Catalonia" and "Catalunya" were collected mainly on Twitter and partly on Facebook. Another source was YouTube videos, as well as information from such social platforms as Instagram, Blogger, WordPress, Reddit and Flickr. The Spanish media of course were placed first, but the RT News and Sputnik were ranked fourth. They distributed 47 964 posts about Catalonia - ten times more than the Spanish public broadcaster RTVE or the Spanish news agency EFE.

Qualitative analysis of the ten most popular RT posts and links has revealed that the greatest interest was for people injured in the clashes with police. Almost 50% of the photos and videos condemned the actions of the Spanish police, 20% discussed how Catalan independence would affect the Spanish economy, 20% were neutral, and 10% criticized Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy. The analysis showed that only one in a hundred of the most active accounts demonstrated human behaviour, others corresponded to the official RT and Sputnik profiles, and 84 could not be identified with any particular person or institution, they relied completely on RT and Sputnik as their primary source. They can be identified as bots, as some of them distributed 1425 messages per day. It is interesting to note that the accounts were not apparently enough, and 30% of them were from Venezuela. The Spanish government has confirmed that the hackers were working from the Russian territory. [13]

A report of US scholars from the George Washington University analyses messages from various accounts owned by Russia, Russia Today, and Sputnik spreading negative image of Spain in Venezuela. A large number of zombie accounts which were coordinated and designed for the content exchange have been found in messages between Syria, the US and Catalonia. Therefore, the pattern of digital interference that was used at the US elections and the Brexit elections in the UK has been revealed in the case of Catalonia as well.

Investigations were carried out at the state level of Spain, so Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis claimed that Madrid had found fake profiles in social networks, half of which had been managed from Russia, and 30% of them from Venezuela. [14] These accounts were created to disseminate information regarding

the benefits of Catalan secession from Spain. It was also stressed that the investigated groups had been trying to create instability in Europe and that the task of the Spaniards was to make this information public. Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg noted that according to various reports Russia had attempted to interfere in internal political processes in several countries. The Alliance accused Moscow of utilizing an information warfare and information strategy to split the West and undermine its unity over the economic sanctions on Russia.

The main fake news can be grouped into the following:

- The EU would recognize the independence of Catalonia after the accession process.

- The EU has ordered Spain to undertake "repressive measures" in order to end the referendum, trying to avoid another Brexit.

- The referendum is another "colour revolution", but in this case within the EU which is the first stage of the EU's disintegration.

- Comparison of Spain and Ukraine, and Catalonia is on the verge of a civil war like the Donbass.

- The referendum in Catalonia is similar to the Crimean referendum.

The West is responsible for the Catalan desire to become independent of Spain: it created the prior conditions for the separatists when it supported and recognised the independence of Kosovo. [15]

Conclusions

For the past 40 years Catalonia has had such a wide autonomy rights that it is difficult to find analogues in the world, but despite its privileges, the quest to become independent has become a pressing issue in Catalonia. Relations between Barcelona and Madrid have become strained over the past two years to such an extent that the central government has made a fateful decision for the country and the region: after the referendum, it was stripped of its autonomy status and introduced direct administration in October 2017.

Public opinion has been manipulated at all times, but in the 21st century with the emergence of social networks, international and global media resources, the world's leading countries have acquired more opportunities to influence different political processes. Internal state issues often come to the fore and shape foreign policy processes both domestically and in the region, involving other countries and international organizations in solving their problems.

Therefore, the coverage of any major events taking place in the globalised world has become rapid and operative, and modern means of communication make it possible to do it online. It has become common to do that not only on of-

ficial or private TV channels, but also on social networks. The dissemination of fake news has become a norm during the last decade in line with rumours and lies on the world wide web which results in the false sense of reality of public. Real politics has become mediative, pressing issues are replaced by far-fetched ones, populism and the change of concepts are spread. The events in Catalonia were an example of the successful pursuit of "post-truth" policy – the shaping of public opinion not from objective facts but from emotions and personal beliefs.

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