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Information influencing in the Catalan illegal referendum and beyond

Rubén Arcos

Introduction¹

Intrinsic to the challenge presented by hybrid threats and hybrid warfare is the conscious amplification of political or other divisions already present in targeted societies. The Catalanian issue illustrates how existing vulnerabilities in social cohesion can be exploited through disinformation/misinformation activities; it constitutes a divisive internal political issue that can be utilized by hybrid actors for different aims. These kinds of political issues, highly polarized and that divide societies, can be exploited by external actors in information influencing campaigns, targeting either foreign or domestic audiences. Those issues might be utilized for legitimizing political decisions and actions in the domestic arena, or for conveying distorted representations of foreign political systems and societies for different reasons, including weakening the internal cohesion of those targeted societies or transnational political networks. At the same time, domestic actors can also engage in influence activities, in both legitimate and illegitimate ways, through strategic communication campaigns aiming to manage the perceptions of foreign audiences and produce cognitive, affective and behavioural impacts in domestic stakeholders.

However, conducting post-event analyses of political disinformation campaigns is a difficult endeavour for academics for many reasons: monitoring and gathering data from social media platforms as events unfold usually requires professional social intelligence tools; accounts violating policies of social media platforms may be deleted, data protection regulations prevent the access to data that may identify the perpetrators.²

The Spanish Constitutional Court (TC) suspended on 7 September 2017,³ the Catalan Parliament Law 19/2017, of 6 September, of ‘the referendum of self-determination’ that called Catalan citizens to a binding referendum to be held on 1 October 2017 with the question ‘Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a republic?’⁴ The Constitutional Court warned of ‘the duty to prevent or paralyze any initiative that involves ignoring or avoiding the agreed suspension’, and particularly to refrain from initiating actions allowing the preparations and effective holding of such

a referendum. The TC warned as well of the possible criminal consequences in case of non-compliance.⁵ On 17 October the Constitutional Court sentenced that the Law 19/2017 was illegal and declared its nullity.⁶

Given that the holding of the referendum of 1 October 2017 was against the rule of law, it seems more appropriate here to speak about allegations of external/foreign political meddling than of allegations of foreign electoral interference. Those allegations pointing out to Russia constitute in itself today a controversial issue in Spain. Some of the domestic pro-independence actors were proactively seeking to influence attitudes and behaviours of foreign governments and institutions through strategic communication activities and actions. Generating public expressions of sympathy from abroad to the cause was obviously one of the objectives and consequently domestic actors used communication tactics to that aim. Even if hybrid actors played a role with uncertain effects, much of the information and influence flows can be characterized as well as inside-inside and as inside-out. The Spanish non-profit fact-checking organization Maldita.es has collected cases of disinformation from those days unfavourable to independentism as well.⁷ According to Arcos, ‘the evolution of events responded to pre-existing internal logics in which the dissemination of inaccurate, biased, purposely deceitful, or partial information, either by external or internal actors, has had the effect of reinforcing pre-existing biased beliefs and attitudes, igniting existing tensions, causing confusion in international audiences, and obstructing the development of a prudent democratic debate.’⁸

This chapter examines information influencing activities and allegations of foreign political meddling in Catalonia associated to the Catalan illegal referendum of 1 October 2017, as well as developments after 14 October 2019 decision of the Supreme Court of Spain, that sentenced twelve Catalan independentist leaders. First, the allegations of a malign influence operation orchestrated by the Kremlin are examined. The chapter considers agenda-setting, framing and amplification in social media channels as means by which news outlets and communication content can influence the perceptions of individuals about public issues, paying particular attention to the activity of RT and Sputnik, as well as the content produced by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in support of the independence process. Internet usage data and the new digital media landscape in Spain are also examined in order to acquire a perspective on the potential impact associated to the exposure of publics to contents disseminated by pro-Kremlin digital outlets. Second, the communication and influence activities of domestic pro-independentism players are examined, as well those campaigns conducted by hacktivist group Anonymous. Finally, the chapter addresses the events and developments after 14 October 2019 decision of the Supreme Court of Spain, in particular the conduction of violent actions, disinformation activities and the dissemination of conspiracy theories by different actors.

Allegations of external meddling

On 23 September 2017, the Spanish daily newspaper *El País* published a piece called ‘*La propaganda rusa sacude el “procés”*’, later translated into English as ‘Russian meddling machine sets sights on Catalonia’ claiming that

The network of fake-news producers that Russia has employed to weaken the United States and the European Union is now operating at full speed on Catalonia, according to detailed analyses of pro-Kremlin websites and social media profiles by this newspaper.⁹

The article, signed by David Alandete, deputy editor by the time, went on stating that

the Kremlin is using the Catalan crisis as a way to deepen divisions within Europe and consolidate its international influence. It appears in the form of websites that publish hoax stories, the activity of activists such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and a legion of bots – millions of automated social media accounts that can turn lies into trending topics.^{10, 11}

Articles published by *El País* have also been referenced in the Democrats' report titled 'Putin's asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: implications for U.S national security' prepared for the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations.¹² This January 2018 Minority Staff report quoted a Department of State's report, according to which

Russian state news outlets, such as Sputnik, published a number of articles in the run up to the poll that highlighted alleged corruption within the Spanish government and driving an overarching anti-EU narrative in support of the secessionist movement. These Russian news agencies, as well as Russian users on Twitter, also repeatedly promoted the views of Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, who has taken to social media to call for Spanish authorities to respect the upcoming vote in Catalonia.

Spanish newspapers have also reported that Russian bots attempted to flood social media with controversial posts in support of Catalanian independence prior to the referendum.¹³

On the likely motives for an alleged malign influence operation there have been different hypotheses, including among others the following: weakening the EU, a sort of vengeance against Europe for the Kosovo issue (although Spain did not recognize the independence of Kosovo), the geopolitical/geostrategic interest of this Mediterranean region and the legitimization of the secessionist Crimean referendum. However, and not surprisingly since denial is a repeated pattern that can be observed in statements from the Kremlin in the face of similar allegations of interference, the official position of the Russian Federation on the *procés* is that 'there is a national legislation and there are some international commitments, and we assume that the internal processes of Spain must be based on these principles'.¹⁴ As reported by EFE, in a June 2019 meeting with the main world news agencies representatives held in San Petersburg, Vladimir Putin declared: 'We have an attitude of utmost respect for Spain, the Spanish people, Spanish history. We have good relations, with historical roots. We are not at all interested in having European countries dismember one after another [. . .] Above all, we pronounce for stability, for the preservation of territorial integrity'.¹⁵ These official

public statements challenge the allegations of Russian interference with the obvious effect of producing confusion around the issue. A paper by the Integrative Initiative suggested a route to escape from this sort of 'dead-end street':

Real leverage over Madrid is precisely what the Kremlin seems to be looking for [...] By supporting both sides, Russia is putting itself in a position to try to prevent the Catalan independence crisis moving in an undesirable direction or getting completely out of Moscow's control [...] Russia is establishing leverage over both sides; proving it can create/exacerbate problems for both sides too [...] It is difficult for either side to deal with this even if they are aware of the manipulation/reflexive control going on. What non-specialists might see as a dichotomy/contradiction (does the Kremlin want to see Catalan independence or not?) is no contradiction at all. All Putin's statements fit if you understand the Russian approach.¹⁶

An unclassified May 2018 report by the Spanish National Cryptologic Centre (CCN) asserted that 'the presence of activists sponsored by Russian institutions seems to be proven in the media coverage of the conflict in Catalonia during 2017'.¹⁷ However, no additional supporting evidence was provided for this statement in the report. This lack of stronger supporting evidence added to the repeated Kremlin denials of interference in the Catalan crisis, might create a perennial sense of confusion or risks to become a polarizing issue in itself. On 19 December 2017, several witnesses from Spain participated in the fake news inquiry of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the UK Parliament: David Alandete, Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Mira Milosevich-Juaristi.¹⁸ When questioned by the committee member Ian C. Lucas (Labour) about 'evidence that the Russian Government is seeking to interfere with the referendum in Catalonia', David Alandete declared that 'the only evidence that I have as a journalist is that Russian state-affiliated TV organizations have been openly spreading propaganda that benefits those who want independence in Catalonia'.¹⁹

More recently, *El País* unveiled that Spain's Audiencia Nacional did open an investigation into the alleged activities of GRU's Unit 29155 in Catalonia 'during the 2017 Catalan breakaway bid'.²⁰

This is not the first time that Russia and its spies have been suspected of influencing the Catalan independence movement. In February, the investigative website Bellingcat published several official documents from the Russian secret service that placed a GRU official named Denis Sergeev in Barcelona on two occasions. Both times, he had traveled under the false name Sergey Fedotov.

On the first trip, Fedotov arrived in the Catalan capital on November 5, 2016, and after spending six days in Spain, returned to Moscow via Zurich. The second trip took place almost a year later on September 29, 2017, just two days before the illegal independence referendum on October 1. On that occasion, the Russian official stayed in Spain until October 9, when he returned to Moscow via Geneva.²¹

One of the effects of targeted disinformation against societies, as part of hybrid threats, as already pointed out in the introduction, is the amplification of political or other

existing divisions (evident or latent). The Catalanian issue is obviously an existing cleavage. The surge of far-right political parties in Spain and other more extreme right-wing elements has been driven, at least partially, by tensions and developments in Catalonia.²²

Issue salience and framing

Agenda-setting and framing explain ways in which news media and communication content can influence the perceptions of individuals about public issues.

According to McCombs, 'through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media.'²³ The daily repetition of the topic issue 'is the most powerful message of all about its importance.'²⁴ That is to say, news media can potentially influence public opinion by increasing the salience of the issue on the public agenda.²⁵ This influence is conditioned by the existence or absence of experience that citizens have on the topic issue, being greatest in the case of 'unobtrusive issues' where the public has not direct experience (i.e. foreign policy issues).²⁶ In the words of Bernard D. Cohen,

the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.²⁷

On the other hand, frames 'shape what others think of an issue' and the understanding and discussion of the world around us.²⁸ As defined by Entman,

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe.²⁹

In their comparative study on dissemination of news related to the *procés*, in the period 1 September 2017 to 31 December 2017, through the Facebook post of RT in Spanish, Deutsche Welle, and BBC World, López-Olano and Fenoll found that RT published 236 posts with a coverage closer to Catalan independentism.³⁰

An example of this activity is a Facebook post on 28 October 2017, stating 'Civil war in Spain ahoy?' (*Guerra civil en España a la vista?*) linking to a news article in the RT in Spanish portal with the misleading headline: '*Tanques en las calles de Barcelona*': *España*

y Cataluña al borde de un desenlace violento ('Tanks in the Street of Barcelona': Spain and Catalonia on the verge of a violent outcome).³¹ The article brings to the headline, of what apparently seems to be for the reader a news story, an opinionated quote from a commentator that is included at the end of the full piece stating: 'The analyst says that Spain and Catalonia are clearly heading towards a conflict. To avoid 'tanks in the streets of Barcelona,' both sides must step back, he emphasizes.' By sampling the full sentence and bringing its most impactful part (tanks in the street of Barcelona) to the headline, the opinionated original meaning has completely changed. Moreover, by presenting this strong statement in the headline of a news story, even with quotation marks, the reader receives the impression that it is a description of an ongoing situation, especially if the reader came to the story after reading in post 'Civil war in Spain ahoy?'. It could be said that this is a clear example of combustible material for the fire.

The journalist Enric Juliana, in an article published on 1 November 2017 in the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, commented on another example from RT in Spanish, whose misleading headline was 'The new map of Europe. Who supports the independence of Catalonia?' presenting a map of different European countries (Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, UK, Ireland, Belgium and Slovenia) from which some degree of support (i.e. unofficial statements by some politicians, Parliaments receiving the Catalan government). The RT article was suggesting to the readership that those countries were supporting the Catalan unilateral declaration of independence when the reality was that not a single country in Europe did recognize the 'Catalan Republic' (Juliana 2017).³² RT later (15 November 2017) published a modified version of the original article with a different headline 'What support has received the Catalan government in Europe?' and added a disclaimer: 'The owner of this news in his first writing was inaccurate so it has been modified. We apologize to our readers for this error. Every day we keep trying because failures like this don't happen again, thanks for your understanding.'³³ The Twitter account of RT still shows the original headline.³⁴

Del Fresno and Manfredi (2018) analysed the content produced by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in support of the independence process in the period 25 September to 15 November, finding that Assange adhered 'to the narrative and pro-independence worldview, equating it with all of Catalonia and ignoring the existence of the other half of society, which is also Catalan and not pro-independent' and that constructed 'the perception of Spain as a dictatorship or non-democratic state'.³⁵

Amplification through bots and fake accounts

On 27 March 2018, an article on 'How Twitter Bots Help Fuel Political Feuds' published in the *Scientific American* referenced the joint research conducted by researchers at Fondazione Bruno Kessler in Italy and at the University of Southern California, on the use of social bots related to the Catalanian referendum. The authors identified two polarized factions of Twitter users as Independentist and Constitutionalist and quantified 'the structural and emotional roles played by social bots'.³⁶ According to their findings:

Our results demonstrate that bots sustain each faction from the periphery of the online social network structure by mainly targeting human influencers. Bots tend to target human Independentists with messages evoking negative sentiments and associating hashtags with negative connotations. Importantly, we show that bots provide semantic associations, in messages directed to the Independentists, that inspire fight, violence, and shame against the government and the police. In addition to promoting target-specific content generated by human hubs, social bots achieved social contagion also by fabricating automated content within specific communities of humans.³⁷

The researchers conducted the following collection strategy:

we manually selected a set of hashtags and keywords to collect messages (tweets) posted to a microblogging platform (Twitter). The list contains various general Catalan issue-related terms: #Catalunya, #Catalonia, #Catalogna, #1Oct, #votarem, #referendum, #1O. We monitored the Twitter stream and collected data by using the Twitter Search API, from September 22, 2017 to past the election day, on October 3, 2017: this allowed us to almost uninterruptedly collect all tweets containing any of the search terms. The data collection infrastructure ran inside FBK servers to ensure resilience and scalability. We chose to use the Twitter Search API (<https://dev.twitter.com/rest/public/search>) to make sure that we obtained all tweets that contain the search terms of interest posted during the data collection period, rather than a sample of unfiltered tweets: this precaution avoids incurring in known sampling issues related to collecting data using the Twitter Stream API (<https://dev.twitter.com/streaming/overview>) rather than the Twitter Search API.

This procedure yielded a large dataset containing approximately 3.6 million unique tweets, posted by 523 thousand unique users.³⁸

However, neither the research paper nor the supporting material mentions links of bots to Russia or to any state-sponsored operation.

On 14 December 2017, Janis Sarts, Director of the NATO STRATCOM Centre of Excellence, spoke before the Spanish Mixed Commission on National Security.³⁹ Sarts pointed out that for the majority of governments the key area was defending elections from external interferences (using massive disinformation campaigns and amplification through the use of botnets in the cyberspace). Regarding Catalonia, according to the news agency Europa Press, Sarts explained that the Centre did not monitor the situation in Spain, but that from a certain moment, botnets that spread pro-Russian narratives on the internet began to tweet about Catalonia.⁴⁰

On June 2019, Twitter make a disclosure of 'Information operations on Twitter' in its blog informing on the suspension of fake accounts in Spain linked to pro-secessionist political parties:

Earlier this year, we suspended 130 fake accounts originating in Spain. These accounts were directly associated with the Catalan independence movement, specifically Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. They were primarily engaged

in spreading content about the Catalan Referendum. The network includes fake accounts which appear to have been created with the intent to inorganically influence the conversation in politically advantageous ways. Setting up fake accounts is a violation of the Twitter Rules, full stop.⁴¹

Disinformation messages and malicious narratives can be further amplified through botnets and fake personas, creating a false impression of veracity in audiences exposed to those contents. However, as explained elsewhere,⁴² neither the dissemination of correct information and sound judgements, nor the propagation of fake news and biased opinions for influence purposes, guaranteed that targeted publics are exposed to them. The more people watching a TV programme or following a specific Twitter account, the more people are likely to be exposed to persuasive messages. Similarly, the exposure of target audiences to persuasive communications does not guarantee an effective influence on attitudes and behaviour. From a processual perspective, to be influenced the recipients of persuasive communications 'must make the preliminary responses of paying attention to the message, comprehending its contents, accepting the conclusions advocated, and rehearsing this acceptance sufficiently to permit later expression of the induced change'.⁴³

Social networks and digital media ecosystem

According to IAB Spain's Annual Social Networks Study (IAB Spain 2019), in Spain an 85 per cent of internet users (between sixteen and sixty-five years) use social media networks, representing a total amount of 25.5 million users, being WhatsApp (88 per cent) and Facebook (87 per cent) the networks with greater penetration among users, followed by YouTube (68 per cent), Instagram (54 per cent), and Twitter (50 per cent) as the top 5 social media. Spain is a top 10 Twitter market (ninth) with 8.3 million active users on Twitter, as of April 2018 (Statista 2018).⁴⁴

The number of digital news media in Spain has experienced an important growth, from 1,274 digital media identified in 2005 to 3,431 in March 2018.⁴⁵ According to Salaverría et al., 3,202 were active by 31 May 2018 (1,229 of which are news media born digital), with Madrid and Catalonia being the regions with a higher number of digital news media.⁴⁶ The existence of co-official languages in specific regions like Catalonia, Valencia, Galicia and the Basque Country seems to be a factor driving the growth of digital news media.⁴⁷ A total of 1,334 of the above-mentioned 3,202 active digital news media only used the internet for the dissemination of content, while a majority of 58.3 per cent combine this with other platforms for the dissemination of content, more specifically, digital media with radio broadcasting ($n = 872$), with printed media ($n = 795$), television ($n = 238$) and with apps ($n = 444$).⁴⁸

According to the information from the internet portal of RT in Spanish, the state-funded Russian TV channel in Spanish started broadcasting from Moscow in December 2009 and has an audience of eighteen million people that see RT every week in ten countries in Latin America. The signal is available in Spain and the United

States as well. Regarding the internet portal, 'RT in Spanish is at the top among the international informative web pages' and 'according to data from SimilarWeb, for several consecutive months the Spanish version of RT exceeded in visits to the Spanish portals of BBC, CNN, Euronews, France 24 and the Latin American channel TeleSur'.⁴⁹

The Facebook page of RT in Spanish has 7.5 million followers while RT Play in Spanish has 3.3 million followers. The YouTube channel has 2.84 million subscribers and RT live has 103,000 followers. The Twitter account @ActualidadRT has 3.13 million followers.

On the other hand, Sputnik Mundo, the Spanish version of the other main state-funded platform, is followed on Twitter by 101,048 accounts (October 2019), and it has 379,000 followers on Facebook. A search in the Sputnik Mundo portal with the keyword 'Cataluña' provides a considerable number of results ($n = 1.426$) for the period 1 September to 21 December 2017, given an idea of the salience of the issue in this digital news outlet.

Key non-state independentist players and Catalonian public diplomacy organizations

In his work on the Catalan independentist process, the historian Jordi Canal highlights the key role played in the *procés* by 'parainstitutional' organizations like the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium Cultural (Canal 2018: 169–77).

ANC declares itself to be 'a strictly non-partisan civil organization' that 'does not receive any governmental funding'.⁵⁰ According to its by-laws, ANC

- a) Promotes the creation of the political and social conditions necessary for the achievement and constitution of the independent Catalan state of right, social and democratic.
- b) Brings together all the people that work with objectives similar to those of the Catalan National Assembly, either from all kinds of groups, entities, movements, political parties, or individually.⁵¹

In their website, they provide an essentials section in which visitors can download logos, digital postcards, posters and other communication products to be used in grassroots campaigns.⁵²

Carme Forcadell was a former president of ANC and she later became president of the Catalanian Parliament in 2015.

On the other hand, Òmnium Cultural, with over 125,000 members, declared itself to have 'worked for over fifty years as a civil society agency to promote the Catalan language and culture and also to disseminate Catalonia's will for freedom. In recent years one of Òmnium's aims has been to assist Catalonia in its quest to become a new independent state'.⁵³ According to the information published by the digital newspaper El Confidencial, these organizations have been receiving public funding by the Catalanian government,

Between 2008 and 2010 it received one and a half million euros in aids. In 2006, it received 661,000 euros for the acquisition of its headquarters in Barcelona [. . .] That same year it received 1.1 million euros. Between 2011 and 2013, with Artur Mas as head of the presidency, he would also have obtained public aid of almost one and a half million euros. During those years and until the appointment of Cuixart, the deputy and activist Muriel Casals was in charge of the association (2010–2015). One of its most important partners is the Barcelona coach, Pep Guardiola, who has already released his three sons.⁵⁴

The Public Diplomacy Council of Catalonia, DIPLOCAT, was a public-private consortium aimed at promoting ‘initiatives which allow for a direct knowledge of Catalonia in the international field’

The PCM – DIPLOCAT has to contribute to this objective furthering the image, reputation, and international promotion of Catalonia via the exporting of the best knowledge of the reality of the country and its unique assets and values, so as to aid the internationalization of Catalonia. Fulfilling this objective offers direct repercussions such as an increased attraction of investments, knowledge, institutions, and people, and contributes to generating positive public opinion abroad and establishing relations of trust with the rest of the world.⁵⁵

The Spanish government closed the DIPLOCAT, as part of the measures adopted after the application of article 155 of the Spanish Constitution. According to a report released by Spain’s Court of Auditors on the economic resources for foreign relations activities by the Catalan Autonomous Community fiscal years (2011–2017), from the analysis of the activities carried out by DIPLOCAT between 2013 and 2017, it is observed that 558 activities out of 751 were aimed at publicizing, promoting and fostering the *procés*.⁵⁶ DIPLOCAT received over EUR 12 million from public funds.

According to the Professor of Political Sciences Joan Antón,

the secessionist communicative strategy has been a success because it has counted on the autonomic means of communication, fundamentally TV3 and Catalunya Radio, and because its communicative offer had an enthusiastic and growing social demand. At the same time, the political errors of the central government (not recognizing the problem, belittling, disproportionate repression) have multiplied the problem and given credibility to the independence story.⁵⁷

Hacktivism and #OpCatalunya

The Spanish Department of Homeland Security (DSN) warned on 20 October 2017 that ‘the hacktivist group Anonymous, through associated twitter accounts, is announcing a massive cyberattack campaign for tomorrow day 21 under the name of “#OpCatalunya” and “#FreeCatalunya”’. The last weeks, state pages have received

different cyberattacks under these same slogans'.⁵⁸ On 21 October the website of the Constitutional Court and other services experienced a denial of service attack.⁵⁹ The different DDoS attacks were headed by the release of an Anonymous video on 24 September.⁶⁰

National security strategy and legislative action

On 1 December 2017, the Spanish government approved the new National Security Strategy 2017. The document states:

To a large extent, technology has given pride of place to connectivity, to the detriment of security. Acts such as the theft, use, and dissemination of information and sensitive data, and hostile actions that include disinformation activities and interference in electoral processes represent a huge challenge today, for both governments and citizens.⁶¹

The Strategy includes as well references to hybrid influencing and disinformation:

Traditional armed conflicts are being compounded by additional forms of aggression and influence, threats associated with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and other forms of hostile acts. Sophisticated high-precision systems are combined with the functional fatality of cyberattacks, influence campaigns and acts of disinformation. Ambiguity and the difficulty of attribution are constant factors of what are known as hybrid conflicts: those that incorporate operations combining information, subversion, economic and financial pressure and military actions. These actions, perpetrated both by State actors and by non-State actors, aim to mobilize public opinion and create political destabilization.⁶²

Similarly, the 2019 National Cybersecurity Strategy affirms that 'cyberspace should be considered as a strategic communication vector that can be used to influence public opinion and how people think by manipulating information, disinformation campaigns or hybrid actions'.⁶³

Operation Judas

On 23 September 2019, Guardia Civil arrested nine people in the province of Barcelona within the framework of a police investigation led by the National Court 'aimed at clarifying alleged criminal activities planned by members of the CDR' resulting in the seize of precursors susceptible to be used in the manufacture of explosive artefacts.⁶⁴

According to news reports, the Prosecutor's Office of the National Court considered that they formed 'a terrorist group of a Catalan secessionist nature' and attributed them

‘crimes of terrorism and/or rebellion.’⁶⁵ A lieutenant prosecutor’s note, that was leaked to the media, asserted that

given the certainty that the actions were to be carried out taking advantage of the period between the anniversary of the illegal 1st of October referendum and the publication of the [Supreme Court] decision on the *procés* judgement, it was decided to proceed to the arrest of those involved to abort the project that could have caused irreparable damage due to the progress of their preparations.⁶⁶

According to later news reports by *El País*, two of the members alleged to belong to a violent branch of the CDR (Committees for the Defense of the Republic⁶⁷) ‘have confessed to making explosives and testing them’, and quoting ‘sources from the investigation’, explained that ‘the officers have video recordings that show some of the detainees testing the explosives, as well as testimony from witnesses who recognized several group members who purchased chemical substances that can be used to make explosives’.⁶⁸

This obviously represents an important radicalization step forward within a part of the whole secessionist movement.

14 October 2019

On 13 October 2019 the Twitter account @YourAnonXelj published a video on Twitter together with the following message: ‘Anonymous message for the Spanish state and the world. Tomorrow the #OpCatalonia2019 will officially begin. We are anonymous. We are one.’⁶⁹ The English Tweet was preceded by a similar previous Tweet in Spanish published at 2.46 pm ‘Mensaje de #Anonymous para el estado español y el mundo. Mañana se iniciará oficialmente la #OpCatalonia2019. We are anonymous. We are one’.⁷⁰ This tweet was followed by another one on 14 October 2019 by the account @Spanglish__Tea:

#OpCatalonia2019 #OpCatalonia #Catalonia #GlobalRevolution #Anonymous
#AnonFamily #AnonymousUnited #WeAreLegion #WeAreNation #WeDecided
No me van a callar, esto no es suficiente!!!
They can’t shut us down, that’s not enough!!!
Visca Catalunya!!! Viva Catalonia!!!

Powering up political influencing and civil disobedience with the means of the digital era

The events following the 14 October 2019 decision of the Supreme Court of Spain, regarding the Catalanian illegal referendum of 1 October 2017 and the subsequent unilateral declaration of independence, that sentenced twelve Catalan independentist leaders for offenses of sedition, misuse of public funds, or disobedience, illustrate how

cyber and digital communication tools can be used to challenge the domestic status quo, support the disruption of the public order and create urban chaos, and influence events for political purposes.

The website of Tsunami Democràtic was used to provide access to an app claiming to be 'a platform for the coordination of peaceful actions of civil disobedience', as well as access to communication materials to be used in those actions, and provided legal advice to individuals intending to participate in the protest through a 'Guia bàsica de consells legals'.^{71, 72}

The URL was blocked 'by provision of the Judicial Authority' during the afternoon of 18 October 2019.⁷³ However, during a period it was still possible to access a similar content under the URL <https://tsunamidemocratic.github.io>.

The application of Tsunami Democràtic 'can only be used if someone in your trusted circle gives you a QR code. Once you have read the QR code with the app you will already be part of the Tsunami!'⁷⁴ The text of a humorous defying banner on the need for the QR code required to use the Tsunami D app stated 'Intelligence services here is the QR code.'⁷⁵ Moreover, the app did not require to disclose any personal data and claimed to grant anonymity.

Tsunami Democràtic made public call on 14 October to collapse the two major airports in Spain, the airport of El Prat and Madrid-Barajas. This resulted in over a hundred cancelled flight due to the impossibility of airline crews to access the airport.⁷⁶

The Twitter account of the Chinese outlet China Daily published a propaganda, which is a thirty-six-second video on 15 October 2019 misleadingly comparing events in Hong Kong and Catalonia using several images of the El Prat Airport and the following text:

On October 14, 9 Catalonia pro-independence leaders were sentenced between 9 and 13 years. In Barcelona, thousands of people protested on the streets, and some of them wore masks. Riot police responded and the two sides clashed. Protesters threw fire extinguishers and random objects at police. Police used batons to disperse demonstrators and fired rubber bullets. Separatism will not be tolerated in any countries. Separatism will face punishments. This is an alarm call to all Hong Kong rioters!⁷⁷

Of course, the opportunity presented by this piece of propaganda was seized and the tweet was later amplified by pro-independence influencers to discredit Spain as an authoritarian country.⁷⁸

Disinformation narratives, conspiracy theories and violence

On 18 October 2019, during a press conference, the Minister of Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, highlighted that

The diffusion of narratives aimed at manipulating and polarizing the audience continues through the transmission and attribution of actions of violence

provocation to the State Forces and Security Corps (Mossos, Police, Guardia Civil) by the means of infiltrated individuals, different from the CDR, with supposed video and testimonial evidences [. . .] and massive re-diffusion of images from altercations with the pretention of smearing the reputation of police officers.⁷⁹

An example of this disinformation activity attributing violent actions of provocation to infiltrated police officers within the so-called Committees for the Defense of the (un-existing Catalan) Republic has been analysed by the Spanish fact-checker Maldita.es.^{80, 81}

Violent actions by insurgents during the first week of protest resulted in the injury of over 300 police officers; according to the Minister of Interior the riots on 18 October resulted in the injury of 101 police officers and damage of 264 vehicles.⁸² According to Ignacio Cembrero, an estimated number of 4,500 activists participated in violent action against the police, of which 500 were from abroad.⁸³ The news agency Efe claimed that experts and police sources who were consulted 'have no doubt that leaders of ultra-left and European anarchist groups are actively participating in the riots of these days, with "extensive experience" in violent altercations in recent years in Greece, France, Germany or Italy'.⁸⁴

The catalogue of violent actions included the launching of stones and other harmful objects like steel balls, Molotov cocktails, acid, firing barricades using trash containers and even the launch of a pyrotechnic rocket against a police helicopter.⁸⁵

Paradoxically, one of the most visible political leaders of the independentist movement, ERC's Gabriel Rufián, was received in the demonstration of 19 October with shouts of 'botifler' (traitor) after he tweeted: 'Call to all groups, entities and people of peace to defend the legitimate right to protest and to reduce the tension of these days. Against the violence of baton and barricade, human barrier of civil society'.⁸⁶

Commenting on the violent protest, the president of ANC, Elisenda Paluzie, stated that

the altercations and riots between protesters and police 'make the Catalan conflict visible', so that 'it is these incidents that make us present in the international press continuously' and 'make the conflict visible'.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Information influencing and strategic communication in the context of the Catalan illegal referendum is a very complex issue involving many different actors. There are clear examples of 'pro-Kremlin disinformation' related to Catalonia identified by the East Stratcom Task Force, in addition to the examples covered in this chapter of misleading news stories and posts from state-funded Russian outlets. However, there are also important information gaps, including those related to the attribution of some activities reported by the media, that should prevent from extracting definitive conclusions.

The AMEC Integrated Evaluation Framework for measurement and evaluation, for example, clearly differentiates between outputs (i.e. reach, visitors, number of posts, tweets or retweets, readers), out-takes (response from target publics), outcomes (cognitive, attitude and behavioural effects) and overall impact of communication.⁸⁸ Exposure to tweets, post and misleading stories is not the same as outcomes or results.

Domestic pro-secessionist actors also developed a strong communication activity targeting foreign audiences and portraying secessionism as a fully peaceful movement. However, recent developments including violent protest and sabotage against railroads by some groups evidence that the movement is not uniform.

Actions aimed at blocking transport infrastructures and regular working routines are also part of a deliberate communication strategy aiming at keeping the *procés* salient in the agenda.

The highly polarizing nature of the issue constitutes a societal vulnerability that can be exploited in hybrid influencing operations by hostile foreign actors.

Notes

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