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Regime Legitimation, not Nation-Building: Media Commemoration of the 1917 Revolution in Russia's Neo-Authoritarian State

Abstract:

Scholars predicted that official Russian commemorations of the centenary of the 1917 revolutions would prioritise 'reconciliation and accord' between pro- and anti-communists. Such a frame might help construct a new post-Soviet Russian identity. Yet, in 2017, state-affiliated political and media actors gave accounts that contrasted with their previous narratives and with each other. Domestic state-aligned media were unprecedentedly negative about the revolutions' events and enduring legacies; whilst Russia's international broadcaster, RT, emphasised the revolution's positive international legacies. We explain this paradox by arguing that regimes of commemoration are directly related to political systems: in neo-authoritarian regimes such as contemporary Russia, history is not used primarily for nation-building, but to build legitimacy for the ruling regime. Referencing similar practices in other neo-authoritarian regimes, we show how state-affiliated actors selectively co-opt interpretations of historical events that circulate in the global media ecology, to 'arrest' the 'memory of the multitude'. Simultaneously, they reinforce core messages that legitimise the existing government.

The 1917 February and October revolutions in Russia retain their reputation worldwide as defining historical events: the destruction of the Tsarist Empire brought the Bolsheviks to power in the world's first communist state and helped set the geopolitical dividing lines of the twentieth century. Yet, a hundred years later, and twenty six years since the resulting communist state collapsed, Russia had no coherent, new historical narrative about the events of 1917 – a significant omission for a state whose post-Soviet identity crisis has been well-documented (Malinova, 2015; Torbakov, 2011). Experienced scholars of Russia anticipated that official narratives would foreground reconciliation and accord between the pro- and anti-communists, sidelining Soviet terror and prioritising the Soviet Union's military and scientific achievements (Malinova, 2018; Torbakov, 2018; Edele, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Rendle and Lively, 2017). However, actors articulating

the official position ultimately produced an unprecedented and wholesale rejection of the Bolshevik project and, crucially, of its enduring legacies.

Scholars' predictions were based on early statements that President Vladimir Putin and Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky made about the revolutions. However, it is not solely politicians that produce Russian official discourse – which we define as the widely circulating communications that performatively construct, rather than merely reflect, social realities (van Dijk, 1996). Russian state-aligned broadcasters – funded by the government, and editorially-aligned with its priorities - play a crucial role in the process. Indeed, Russia's political elites appear acutely aware that contemporary media penetrate and fuse with all elements of daily life, rather than merely 'mediating' events external to them. This process, known as 'mediatization', combines with rapid transnational information flows, making it impossible to systematically control information from above. Instead, neo-authoritarian political and media elites together operate to limit the accessibility, rather than availability, of information (Hoskins and Shchelin 2018). They aim to ensure that the 'old' and 'new' media accessible to their citizens are dominated by narratives (interconnected stories) and frames (characterizations of those stories' core elements and how they fit together) that reinforce government-preferred messages. However, contemporary information flows are inherently multidirectional, and so, too, are the processes of narrative articulation and framing (Bernstein, 2016: 430-3). Thus, whilst state-aligned broadcasters remain the primary news source in many neo-authoritarian states (Becker 2013), Russian state-aligned media, executives and journalists are allotted significant leeway to co-produce, not just disseminate, official discourse (Tolz and Teper 2018). This is why a December 2016 Russian Presidential decree assigned representatives of three state-funded broadcasters, Channel 1, Rossiya-1 and RT, to the Organisation Committee for the Preparation of the Commemoration of the Revolution (President of Russia, 2016).

It might have made political sense for Putin and Medinsky to mark this centenary with narratives of reconciliation and accord. This could simultaneously appeal to the revolution-sympathetic lobby (the Communist Party and military) and revolution-critical groups (Orthodox Church and overseas diaspora) – both of which Russia's political leadership relies upon to maintain its legitimacy. President Boris Yeltsin had used this reconciliation frame during the 80th anniversary of the revolution after divisive elections (Malinova 2018). Its non-committal nature could navigate an awkward centenary which could not have been ignored, but whose revolutionary connotations are viewed extremely negatively by the Kremlin.

Yet, by October-November 2017, 'reconciliation and accord' became marginal within official discourse. Putin made scathing comments about the Bolsheviks and their legacies, whilst on domestic television, Channel 1 and Rossiya-1 portrayed both 1917

revolutions as treasonous criminal coups. By contrast, Russia's international broadcaster, RT, invited foreign audiences to co-produce narratives via social media, which turned out to be more complex. How can we explain these key actors re-writing the October revolution and its Soviet legacy in stark contrast to previous narratives, and tailored for different audiences? What does it tell us about commemoration and uses of the past within Russia's neo-authoritarian system?

Sources, methods and conceptual framework

To address these questions, we drew on empirical sources taken from the outputs of the three broadcasters represented on the centenary's official Organisation Committee: Russia's two main domestic state-aligned channels, Channel 1, and Rossiya-1, which remain the main source of information for the majority of Russian citizens[1]; and its international broadcaster, RT. These channels commemorated the revolution using online and social media, in addition to 'traditional' broadcasting. This demonstrates an appreciation of the nature of the contemporary media ecology – the 'specific balanced environment' within which media technologies function like 'organic life forms,' as 'old' and 'new' media interact and compete in complex ways (Hoskins and Shchelin 2018: 3). Rather than systematically censoring undesirable online and social media flows in the Russian media ecology, the Russian political leadership adopts various strategies to ensure preferred narratives and frames dominate (Hoskins and Shchelin 2018). Television retains a crucial role in ensuring their predominance, despite rising audience mistrust (Szostek 2018), and our analysis shows how the dynamics of this specific media ecology shaped coverage of the revolution's centenary.

We collected our empirical sources by identifying five key episodes in the 1917 revolutionary developments likely to spark significant media coverage. We created a database of relevant programmes broadcast in these periods, and found that only two attracted coverage of any substance.[2] Additionally, the research team of the 'Reframing Russia' project[3] scraped the outputs of the central account in RT's #1917LIVE Twitter project (@RT_1917) and its associated hashtags (#1917LIVE; #1917CROWD) throughout 2017. Our analysis of how state-aligned broadcasters navigated the commemoration of the revolutions was focused around the narratives that were disseminated and the techniques used for reaching audiences across their broadcast, online and social media outputs. This helped us to gain insight into the broader goals that such representations of the past were intended to achieve. Whilst our analysis addresses the contributions of audiences as co-producers of narrative, a comprehensive analysis of the audience reception of 1917LIVE, can be found in Crilley, Gillespie and Willis (this issue).

The subjects of scholarly studies of the politics of commemoration are wide-ranging, from the 'hardware' of fixed stone commemorative artefacts to the deterritorialized 'software' of historical, cultural and other products, and events unfolding within particular communities over time (Blacker and Etkind, 2013: 5-6). The emphasis is not on how individuals perceive and communicate events they have directly experienced, but on how narratives are produced, circulated and made intransient (Fedor et al, 2017: 3). National memory, then, is the frame within which citizens can 'place events in the national history, whether or not [they] took part in them' (Snyder 2002: 39). In this regard, historical commemorations function as 'a form of memory materalization' to convert 'past social occurrences (particularly those not directly experienced) into objects relevant to contemporary social realities' (Zadora, 2017: 179). As we will see, the predominance of contemporary issues was particularly striking in our case, and we suggest that broadcasters were not primarily concerned with forging particular understandings of Russian history among their audiences. Our analysis is not, therefore, focused on the social phenomenon of community-centred collective memory initiatives that provide frames for members of a community to make sense of the past. Rather, we refer to what Miller and Lipman (2012) call the politics of history - state-aligned actors' uses of history for political purposes.

Our analysis aims to transcend common methodological and conceptual limitations in studies of politics of history and commemoration in Russia and post-communist Europe. The first is the tendency of such studies to treat media as a source of factual information, rather than as a focus of analysis (Ryan, 2018; Malinova 2015; Miller and Lipman, 2012). In turn, works on the mediation of the past in this context tend to study one selected medium, e.g. cinema, television or social media (Kalinina, 2017; Laruelle, 2014; Rutten, Fedor and Zvereva, 2013). Yet, the conversion of individual understandings of history into something of relevance across space and time demands the continuous mediation of particular symbolic artefacts, which is a dynamic process that takes place within a wider media ecology (Erll and Rigney 2009:1). In combining insights from our respective home disciplines of international relations, and history, we are able to shed light on just how fundamentally the rapidity and transnationality of the present media ecology influences this conversion process. Most importantly, whilst the circulation of narratives through multiple media platforms can present challenges for state-affiliated actors, it also offers new opportunities to legitimise the ruling regime. Thus, if post-Soviet commemorations of historical events have developed 'beyond the usual ways of instrumentalising the past' (Fedor et al., 2017: 8), this article interrogates some specific developments that the commemoration of the revolutions' centenary in Russia highlights.

The second problem is methodological, in that studies of the politics of commemoration within Russia and Eastern Europe are overwhelmingly nation-specific (Mihelj, 2017), or

confined to the post-socialist space (Etkind et al, 2012; Rutten and Zvereva, 2013; Miller and Lipman, 2012; EJCS, 2017).[4] It has been suggested to further transnationalise the discussion by acknowledging the circulation of ideas and images between Eastern and Western Europe (Mihelj, 2017). However, we contend that Russia's status as a neo-authoritarian regime – i.e. a political system in which autocratic and (pseudo-)democratic rules and practices are combined (Petrov et al. 2014) - is crucial for understanding the strategies that state-affiliated political and media actors adopt in articulating and disseminating narratives about historical events. Therefore, we refer to comparisons with neo-authoritarian states globally, such as in East Asia and Latin America. Political regimes derive their legitimacy from the extent to which they appear to operate according to rules justified by widely-accepted beliefs: subordinate groups ultimately consent to these power relations (Beetham, 1991: 16). As mass media play a crucial role in shaping such beliefs and values, neo-authoritarian regimes attempt to control influential media, and manipulate the wider media ecology in order to 'reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty' (Schedler, 2002: 36; see also Walker and Orttung, 2014). Consequently, Russia's commemorative practices likely bear more similarities to those in comparable neo-authoritarian regimes, where incumbent political elites' primacy over information is challenged by the circulation patterns of an inherently global media ecology.

In addressing these two problems, we become freed from a third, crucial, limitation of existing work on post-Soviet memory: the *default* assumption that state-endorsed public commemoration projects are nation-building initiatives (e.g. Malinova, 2018; Kalinina, 2017: 286; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Malinova, 2015). In fact, whilst state-sponsored commemorative initiatives often reflect elites' nation-building objectives, they do not have to do so. The manipulation of national memory tends to be part of a regime's broad legitimation strategy (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), which may or may not involve nation-building. In fact, a 'deep national identity may not be necessary or desirable in a patrimonial, authoritarian system,' because it can 'empower rival political actors who could challenge the authority of the leader.' In many such states, then, 'we are not seeing nation-building, so much as identity management and regime maintenance' (Rutland and Taras, forthcoming).

The idiosyncratic mediation of the revolution's centenary belies claims that Russia's political leadership is using history to achieve the 'consolidation of nation-building' (Malinova, 2018: 272 and 275). Instead, specific narratives are articulated by ruling political elites and state-aligned media in order to influence citizens' values and beliefs in ways that legitimise the existing government under Putin. Decoupling nation-building and the regime's broader legitimation strategy helps to explain sharp fluctuations in official historical narratives under the same political leadership, and marked divergences

between the narratives disseminated by state-funded media to different audiences. Such inconsistencies would be problematic for any long-term nation-building project, but are advantageous for the regime's responsive strategy of legitimatory ideological messaging.

The first substantive section of this article discusses how, since the controversial elections of 2011 and 2012, the Putin leadership has flexibly fused together ideas, norms and identity discourse to suit the leadership's legitimatory imperatives at any given time. The second section interrogates the narrative competition surrounding the legacies of the 1917 revolutions amongst domestically influential groups, and in the international arena. It examines how these were represented and performed in media coverage of the revolution. The final section demonstrates that though domestic coverage undermined the nation-building potential of the shared Soviet experience, it served the regime's immediate pre-election needs. By contrast, international coverage mobilised Russia's international cultural capital. We draw broad conclusions about how neo-authoritarian regimes navigate mediated memory of the past for legitimation purposes.

Introducing Russia's idiosyncratic regime of commemoration

Contemporary neo-authoritarian political elites frequently articulate political programmes which promise increased economic prosperity and security, whilst simultaneously disseminating ideational-identitarian narratives concerning the nature of the state, its people, and place in the world, that justify the erosion of democratic institutions and rights (Kneuer 2017). When their capacity to deliver on such promises is under threat, ideational legitimacy-building increases (Zhao, 2016). In her comparative study of current neo-authoritarian regimes from China to Venezuela, Kneuer (2017) argues that their legitimatory constructs constantly adapt to changing internal and external conditions. The political leadership in such systems does not tend to pursue long-term objectives, so the narratives that they employ have to be flexible and modular. As a result, despite some minimal stability of core structural narrative components, accompanying elements fluctuate depending upon context and upon the leadership's changing goals.

In the Russian case, the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine saw the emergence of a crucial ideational-identitarian narrative of revolution as a foreign policy tool of 'the West', assisted by treasonous pro-Western elites (Putin, 2014). According to this account, only a strong state with a strong leader can protect citizens from the inevitably destructive consequences of such interventions. However, the 2008-9 economic recession and 2011 anti-government protests showed the limitations of legitimation based on Putin's strong state. During Putin's third term, the reliance on identitarian narratives has correspondingly increased, framed in terms of the government securing the country from a range of domestic and external 'enemies' that is frequently narratively updated (Teper,

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2018). The result is an oscillating vision of Russia, replete with contradictions over whether Europe, Ukraine and Islam form part of the Russian 'self' or 'others'. The 'West', however, represented in particular by NATO and the United States, is a constant other (Teper, 2018). These contradictory representations are periodically slotted into state narrative as required by the changing domestic and international goals of the regime (Tolz and Teper 2018). This changeable picture suggests not an attempt to delineate a contemporary Russian national identity or to foster collective solidarity, but to selectively address popular concerns as expressed in opinion polls, and thereby neutralise oppositional challenges to official discourse.

Within this strategy of legitimation, narratives about the past are used purely to buttress the oft fluctuating ideational-identitarian narrative, which is entirely about the *immediate* present. This means that selectively evoked historical events do not have to come together into the coherent vision of national history necessary for nation-building. Just as the regime-sponsored ideational-identitarian narrative itself is situational, so are the interpretations of historical events to which it refers. So, whilst the anniversary of the Second World War in 2005 saw Stalin's Soviet Union represented as a victorious state under strong leadership (Torbakov, 2011), by the revolutions' centenary, the strong state was late tsarist Russia. Tsar Nicholas II 'never forgot his personal responsibility before the country' (Channel 1, *The True History of the Russian Revolution*), whilst Stalin was merely 'a bandit' and 'murderer' (Channel 1, *Trotsky*).

Clearly, then, national memory as a particular interpretative frame is not static and does not exist in isolation but is discursively produced within 'historically specific and contestable systems of knowledge and power' – or, 'regimes of memory' (Radstone and Hodgkin, 2003: 11). The specifics of any regime of memory reveal 'a politics of memory discourses' (Radstone and Hodgkin, 2003: 2), as demonstrated by the narrative and commemorative fluctuations that often accompany changes in political leadership. Political scientists have further examined political actors' contrasting memory strategies, typologising the 'official memory regime' of various states in East-Central Europe (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014: 10). They identify three main models of public commemoration: the 'pillarized memory regime' of democratic and broadly pluralist historical interpretation; the 'unified' model of broad consensus about the past among key mnemonic actors; and the 'fractured' regime where opposing political actors mobilise conflicting interpretations of historical events for electoral gains (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014: 15-16). None of these typologies, however, fit a neo-authoritarian context, where dramatic and unexpected narrative fluctuations can occur without a transfer of power – in China, for instance, key figures and historical events have been recently drastically re-imagined to suit the immediate needs of the incumbent political elite (Bernstein 2015; Jing 2017). Similarly, in Russia, conflicting interpretations of the revolution are promoted

by the same political leadership and its closely-affiliated political actors in a process which is, at least partially, state-managed.

In order to conceptualise such intra-regime contestation within this Russian model of state-sponsored commemoration, we draw on two notions from memory and media studies, both of which foreground the interaction between 'new' and 'old' media. One is Hoskins' concept of the 'memory of the multitude,' which accounts for how online and social media allow people to engage in commemoration via 'new flexible community types with emergent and mutable temporal and spatial coordinates' (Hoskins 2017: 85). Unlike the collective notion of national memory, the 'memory of the multitude' foregrounds the fragmentation and speed of change that the contemporary media ecology implies for historical memory landscapes. This 'multitude' could prove challenging for a neo-authoritarian government, and in the case of World War II, Russian political elites responded by co-opting popular grassroots narratives into official discourse (Bernstein, 2016: 433). Situating this co-optation process within the context of a challenging global media ecology, we characterize intra-regime historical contestation as one means by which political elites and state-affiliated actors attempt to impose order on chaotic social media dynamics by engaging new communication technologies to promote hegemonic narratives and frames. These tactics for navigating memory are similar to the attempts of mainstream media to 'arrest' chaotic information flows during war and conflict (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015). State-affiliated actors attempt to harness the complexity of the current media ecology to the regime's advantage, by 'arresting' genuine contestation of history-related narratives. This produces a specific model of state-endorsed commemorations, reflecting new ways of instrumentalising the past. Whilst the strategy of 'arresting' is by no means always successful, its potential is highest when events are far from living memory and produce weak public sentiment. This proved to be precisely the case with the revolutions.

Different Actors and Competing Narratives of the Revolution

Russia's leadership shares a trait with other neo-authoritarian regimes like China in being highly sensitive to public opinion (Creemers, 2017; Tsai, 2016), so several respected scholars predicted that social dissensus about the legacies of the 1917 revolutions would constitute 'real problem' for Putin's government (Edele, 2017); Fitzpatrick, 2017: 824). However, recent polls suggest that the revolutions, unlike the Second World War, do not provoke strong popular sentiments. 80% of respondents considered that the February Revolution had little long-term significance, or were unable to form a judgement (Levada, 2017a), whilst 54% saw no reason to dwell on the legacy of the October Revolution (Levada, 2017b).

The real issue, then, is that the public players that the state relies upon to maintain its legitimacy have opposing positions on the revolutions' legacies. The relatively positive interpretations of the military and the Communist Party conflict with the overwhelmingly negative perception of the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the domestic and international arenas present different challenges and opportunities for the regime: domestically, the repudiation of revolutionary activism is the core element of the state's ideational-identitarian narrative, but internationally, popular mythologies surrounding the revolutions constitute an unrivalled source of cultural capital.

Since official discourse must take these opposing perspectives into account at the time of the centenary, responsibility for pursuing these conflicting visions with the relevant audiences appears, in effect, to have been divided between different information gate-keepers. These include leading politicians and state-controlled media. Nonetheless, the state's role in managing commemorative processes means that these conflicts cannot produce the kind of genuinely fractured memory field as observed in Poland or Hungary (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014b; Seleny, 2014). The Russian Orthodox Church closely co-operates with the state, and only representatives of the 'within system opposition' (*sistemnaia oppositsia*), which performs competition for the regime, can access the most influential media. The Kremlin does not orchestrate the entire process, but establishes the parameters within which individual players exercise agency in performing their roles. Within this managed framework, state-affiliated actors can adopt diverse positions. These, however, tend to support a common core message, thus disseminating it more effectively to different audiences (Tolz and Harding, 2015). Unfettered by strong public opinion, this is precisely the pattern observed in domestic commemoration of the revolution's centenary, which emphasised the dangers of all challengers to an incumbent regime. For overseas audiences, the centenary was used to emphasize Russia's relevance for the development of social justice within contemporary international society.

Top politicians offered some diversity of interpretation from the start, and this paralleled the multivocal narrative articulation of the 80th anniversary in 1997 (Malinova 2015, 59-60). Putin and Medinsky used a broad 'reconciliation and accord' frame, condemned foreign assistance to the revolutionaries, and painted both revolutions as illegal coups. However, Medinsky attempted to simultaneously accommodate the Orthodox Church, communist opposition and military by balancing his critique with praise for the Bolsheviks' state-building efforts (MGIMO, 2015). Putin, however, derided Lenin's attempts to re-build the state, arguing that his policies precipitated the USSR's collapse in 1991 (Putin, 2016).

Domestic coverage

Such diversity was reflected in domestic broadcasters' coverage of the first 1917 revolution in February-March 2017. Different commentators interpreted the revolution either as a global phenomenon, which 'determined world developments in the twentieth century,' (Channel 1, 2017b) or a tragedy, 'which resulted in numerous victims and threw our country back by many decades' (Channel 1, 2017a); either as 'spontaneous popular unrest' (Channel 1, 2017c) or a West-sponsored elite conspiracy (Channel 1, 2017d). A similar incompatibility was evident on Rossiya-1, as when a March 2017 teaser for a forthcoming programme, *The Great Russian Revolution,* included a series of condemnatory statements about the revolutions and revolutionaries by leading dissident writer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Patriarch Kirill. The conclusion of the network's presenter, top media executive Dmitrii Kiselev, that Lenin was concerned with 'building, rather than destroying' and 'made people believe in the reality of a just world…' clashed entirely with what the Patriarch and Solzhenitsyn had said (Rossiya, 2017).

However, at precisely the same time as these ambiguous outputs were being aired, media executives closely aligned with the Kremlin began working on some rapidly-produced programming intended for October-November (Shmeleva, 2017). It was at that crucial point that both domestic channels aired most of their revolution programming and ambiguity gave way to a clear anti-communist stance, repudiating not just the revolution, but also its legacy. This amounted to the boldest attempt in post-Soviet Russia to produce an unambiguous narrative of terror around the October revolution and its legacy for mass consumption.

Both Channel 1 and Rossiya-1 aired serials which offered a simplistic and coherent critical line. Channel 1's *Trotsky* gave a damning account of Bolshevik treason, cruelty and moral depravity. It was produced in record time during 2017, according to a detailed brief that the network's CEO, Konstantin Ernst, had drawn up together with the scriptwriter and producer (Shmeleva, 2017). A participant in weekly strategy meetings with the presidential administration, Ernst has previously been entrusted with creative agency for significant state-sponsored projects. The screenplay of *Trotsky* portrayed all major Bolsheviks very negatively (Gordeeva and Petrashko, 2017: 3). Lenin was depicted as no better than murderous Stalin, masterminding with Trotsky the first wave of post-revolutionary terror and citing Stalin as an example of how one should treat one's opponents by subjecting them to maximum suffering (ep.7). Similarly negative portrayals were apparent in *Demon of the Revolution,* a serial that aired on Rossiya-1 from 6 November. Advertised as a historically-accurate revelation of information that had been deliberately 'concealed for the previous hundred years' (*Demon*, ep.1), the serial painted Lenin and his entourage as traitors whose German funding constituted a deciding factor in the events of 1917. Though German funding and Western meddling had been

referenced in February-March 2017, its reiteration over almost four hours through a visually powerful medium gave this narrative a major boost.

In contrast to previously dominant historical narratives, these serials neither represented contemporary Russia as heir to the Soviet state nor offered any positive assessments of the Soviet legacy. All the commemorative programmes broadcast by the two main domestic channels during October-November, in fact, repudiated this legacy. *Demon of the Revolution* ended with documentary footage from 1917 of Lenin giving anti-war speeches. These iconic Soviet-era images acquired a new meaning, however, given the preceding account of German stage-management of Lenin's return to Petrograd in order to take Russia out of the war. The film thus extended Putin's earlier interpretation of the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty as an act of 'national betrayal' (cited in Tolz, 2014: 257), depicting Lenin as a mere German agent. The repudiation of the legacy of the revolution in *Trotsky* was even more dramatic, voiced by the philosopher Ivan Ilyin, whom Putin often quotes in his speeches. Ilyin proclaims that the future the Bolsheviks are building 'has already arrived. It is here, in these stone prison cells… Your revolution is a rebellion of bandits and criminals' (ep.8).

The assessment of the Ilyin character in *Trotsky* that people are an easily-led mob rather than a creative revolutionary force was fully developed in Rossiya-1's *The Great Russian Revolution*, billed as a research-based documentary. In contrast to its contradictory advert in March, this programme had a clear anti-communist message, with revolutionary masses depicted as drunken deserters and cocaine users. Most significantly, it used an idealised vision of the late imperial period as the source of Russia's usable past, rather than Soviet achievements – unheard of in such an emphatic form for state-sponsored narratives. In this account, Russia had the highest industrial growth in the world on the eve of WWI; and tsar Nicholas II was a much more effective leader than historians have suggested. Channel 1's counterpart, *The True History of the Russian Revolution,* praised late imperial Russia even further, whilst condemning liberal oppositionists and the Bolsheviks as traitors, and ridiculing ordinary people as pawns of the elite. Both programmes fostered fear of revolutionary developments via explicit links drawn between the legacy of 1917, the traumatic state collapse of 1991, and Putin's alleged saving of Russia from another collapse in 1999.

Despite their claims to factual accuracy, however, domestic programming was ultimately 'docufiction', which combined 'documentary media with witness interviews and fictional re-enactments' (Erll and Rigney, 2009: 4) such that only experts could distinguish between a historical source and a fictional invention. Most notably, *Demon* regularly quoted from the memoir of a tsarist intelligence agent as if this were a reliable historical source. However, the character and his writings were entirely fictitious. What is more, the programming was designed not to be a reflective exploration of national history. Rather,

it was premised on entertainment, being advertised as 'spy games and intrigues, deceptions and adventures, betrayals, bribery, [and] political murders' (Pakshin, 2017).

The 'sense of obviousness' (plausibility) of the narratives – a necessity for generating their public appeal (Topolski, 1999) - was strengthened by co-opting longstanding critiques of the Bolsheviks, including direct references to Solzhenitsyn's work in *The Great Russian Revolution*, *The True History* and *Demon*. Conspiracy theories of 1920s White-movement émigrés were reflected in attention paid to the Jewish origins of prominent revolutionaries, the presence of masons within the Provisional Government and the foreign funding for revolutionary activities. Finally, the Russian Orthodox Church's idealisation of tsar Nicholas II and the late imperial period (contrasted with the atheistic liberals who initiated Russia's destruction) prevailed in *The Great Russian Revolution* and *The True History*.

International coverage

Coverage of the centenary for foreign audiences was entirely different. RT's English-language output was geared to foster communities of cosmopolitan memory (Beck, Levy and Sznaider, 2009) by exploiting Russia's cultural capital around the romantic aura of the revolutions. The low-key broadcast coverage included just one package within RT's *Sputnik* interview show to mark the February revolution, and in October, a documentary, *Revolution: 100 Years Young* and a themed edition of the *CrossTalk* panel discussion. These programmes echoed messages that had dominated domestic marking of the revolution's anniversary in 1997 (Malinova 2015: 59-60), emphasising the positive social legacies of the revolution globally, despite the hardships endured at home. The narratives were made more relevant to overseas audiences due to their emotive construction within personalised, contemporised and impressionistic coverage – not just in conversation-based programmes like *CrossTalk* and *Sputnik*, but also in the editing together of documentary interviewees' contemporary personal activism within a broadly anti-capitalist narrative. The programmes' sense of obviousness came from their echoing of Soviet-era and contemporary left-wing anti-capitalist narratives of the inevitability of the revolution as a popular uprising; the central importance of Lenin early on in 1917; the anti-war, anti-imperialist credentials of the Bolsheviks; and the catastrophic consequences of Western intervention in the Russian civil war (RT, 2017c: 08:02).

RT's main commemorative output, however, was the multimedia #1917LIVE online reenactment of the revolution. Launched in February 2017 and continuing for the rest of the year, the project promised to 'cover 1917 in Russia in real time' (RT, 2017a). It did so within a range of detailed and frequently-updated English-language resources.[5] Like RT's television programmes, these stressed the inevitability of the revolution, in stark contrast to the contingency and chance emphasised in the anti-communist domestic coverage. The

initiative's centrepiece was a 'live tweeting' project conducted via individual accounts of historical figures, including leading Bolsheviks, the tsar and Provisional Government members, and 'ordinary' people, based on memoirs, diaries and other historical records. RT's hardback tweet book produced to mark the end of the project lists 39 official accounts in the dramatis personae (RT, n.d. pp. 8-13). Members of the public were invited to create further accounts as part of the #1917CROWD, and apparently 'dozens' did so (RT, n.d.: 354). Some tweeted more than the official accounts, and almost 90 characters contributed to the project at its peak. Furthermore, the project engaged as account curators prominent authors of books about relevant personalities - Brazilian author, Paulo Coelho (as Mata Hari; 3115 followers) and British historian, Helen Rappaport (as the Romanov sisters; 2089 followers). The most popular accounts, however, were RT-managed Russian Telegraph/Revolutionary Times (@RT_1917; 57.3k followers) and Vladimir Lenin (@VLenin_1917; 19.5K followers).[6]

In contrast to domestic coverage, RT's revolutionary Russia was the source of transnational progressive trends. Broadcast output and #1917LIVE (via a 'chronicle', tweets and an interactive web map) echoed Soviet teleological narratives, portraying Lenin and his party as central and significant figures from the start. Lenin's perspective on important events was foregrounded, whilst his complex personal life was avoided. The re-enactment was marketed as an educational resource, based on '[t]horough historical research' (RT, 2017b) and won international accolades on this basis (Shorty 2017 and 2018). In fact, #1917LIVE represented an on-line version of 'docufiction', which incorporated fictional and semi-fictional characters (e.g. @StudentVlad1917; see Morrisey, 1998: 223-224). Quotes from historical sources were often rephrased to better relate them to the present, as in Lenin's declaration that 'Twitter is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer! #LoveTwitter #1917LIVE' (Vlenin, 2017b).[7]

By their nature, Twitter reenactments involve some relinquishing of control over message, and reflexivity to social media users' online interactions. This sets #1917LIVE apart from other forms of mediated commemoration, including the privately-run Russian-language Project 1917 to which it bears certain similarities (see Wijermars, 2017: 60). Thus, #1917LIVE produced sometimes ambiguous content, open to multiple interpretations, such as in the exhortations of RT's Lenin to dismiss as 'fake news' accusations of collusion with the Germans (VLenin_1917, 2017a) – precisely the accusations that had dominated the limited domestic references to Lenin's April 1917 return to Petrograd. Yet, this relinquishing of control was ultimately partial, with the overall Twitter output being dominated by what was produced/re-tweeted by RT's own accounts. This fits with the specific ways Russia and other neo-authoritarian states tend to deal with the challenges of information flows and 'the multitude of memory' within the

global and domestic media ecologies, by entrusting state-affiliated actors to 'arrest' the potential chaos of on-line and digital communications.[8] Despite its interactive ambiguity and some polarisation of interpretations, #1917LIVE engaged with messages that were also central in the domestic coverage. The main one of these was the explicit criticism of the 'West', whether this as a funder and fomenter of revolution or as a hypocritical hegemonic power (V_lenin1917, 2017a).

Similarly to the domestic coverage, RT's output foregrounded entertainment, including sex scandals, conspiracies and gossip. The personalisation of RT's broadcast coverage, plus the 'live' logic of #1917LIVE, made them relevant to global audiences, and interactive with non-project accounts and trends. Reflecting RT's wider brand identity, tweets and broadcast output was often deliberately ironic – as when a millionaire communist is described as an 'extraordinary man' in *Revolution: 100 Years Young,* alongside footage of him snoozing (19:58). The #1917LIVE project actively incorporated multimedia social plug-ins, including Periscope live streaming (RT, 2017e), and virtual reality panoramic videos.[9] Thus, varied media-consumption preferences and viral marketing opportunities were catered for.

Conclusions: Understanding new uses of the past in a neo-authoritarian state

Commemoration of the 1917 revolution by Russian state-aligned media varied dramatically in its core narratives, themes, editorial approaches and chosen media platforms. These differences were evident in comparison to how similar topics have been covered before, despite there being no change in political leadership. They were also evident in stark contrasts between the outputs intended for domestic and international audiences. Thus, the default assumption that state-sponsored narratives of national history are geared towards national identity construction does not work in this case. Rather, a state's official memory regime is directly related to its political system. Within Russia's neo-authoritarian system, media commemoration of the revolution's centenary highlighted new ways of instrumentalising the past. Here, 'contestation' is expressed by politically allied actors in an attempt to manage the challenging information flows of the Russian, and global, media ecology. Multiple conflicting and constantly shifting interpretations of historical events are co-opted by state-affiliated actors in order to 'arrest' the 'memory of the multitude'. Yet, at the same time, specific core messages are reinforced to legitimise the existing government.

The centenary of the 1917 revolutions proved an instructive case to observe this new instrumentalisation of the past in action with wider implications. First, we concur with Kneuer (2017) that neo-authoritarian regimes are most likely to use ill-remembered events from the distant past for legitimation purposes. In this case, limited popular knowledge and weak popular sentiment offered an ideal opportunity to reinterpret history

in ways that were politically expedient for the ruling elite. Here, the negative representation of the 'revolutionary masses' on state-funded channels Channel 1 and Rossiya-1 is particularly salient, given the coincidence of the centenary with the start of the 2018 presidential election campaign. It reinforced a core component of the regime's preferred ideational-identitarian narrative: the 'non-intrusion pact' between the political leadership and society (Petrov et al 2014), by which citizens judge that 'social organisation independent of the state… is useless, [and] risky…' and they acquiesce, instead, to the status quo.

Second, the precise contents of the reinterpretations of the revolution and its legacies corresponded with the priorities of an election cycle in which the main numerical and ideological challenges to Putin were anticipated to come respectively from the representatives of the Communist party and the liberal opposition. Thus, the media's unprecedented critique of the main actors and legacies of the October revolution; political liberals; and bottom-up social movements (portrayed as being directed by foreign agents) clearly fit the immediate political legitimation priorities of the current regime. There is no reason to believe that the consistently anti-communist narrative disseminated to the domestic audience will remain stable beyond the context of the elections, nor that its purpose is the construction of a new, post-Soviet Russian national identity. On the contrary, RT's contrasting narrative shows willingness to instrumentalise history as cultural capital for international audiences.

Finally, it was politically-allied actors whose interpretations of history diverged. This appears to have resulted from selective stage-management and delegation of responsibilities and creative agency, within parameters acceptable to the Kremlin. The consequence of the delegation is reflected in the particularities of the different media products. *Demon of the Revolution* displays the same affinity for conspiracy theory and tsarist counter-intelligence services as producer Vladimir Khotinenko's 2005 serial *The Fall of the Empire (Gibel' imperii)*. The serial's villains, however, have been updated from the Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians relevant during the 'history wars' of the mid-2000s, to *Demon*'s Bolsheviks, relevant to 2018's electoral challenge. By contrast, though Channel 1's Konstantin Ernst devised the *Trotsky* brief, its producer, Aleksandr Kott, offers more sophisticated visual devices, characterisations, and engagement with wider social issues than in *Demon* – although both serials were criticized for implicit anti-Semitism (Krasheninnikov 2017). Similarly, RT's social media chief at the time, sought not just to educate and engage audiences through #1917LIVE, but to set 'new best-in-class Twitter standards' (RT, 2017f).

The novel media treatment of the centenary of the Russian Revolution shows the wide range of contemporary media tools being used to help justify and perpetuate Russia's present ruling elite, much like in other neo-authoritarian regimes (see also Creemers,

2017; Tsai, 2016; Tolz and Teper 2018). This case demonstrates how commemoration provides a fertile opportunity for such legitimation by co-opting, and thus 'arresting' the 'memory of the multitude'. Given this focus on legitimation rather than building national identity, neither narrative inconsistency nor the tailoring necessary to reach varied audiences poses a problem, and state-funded broadcasters are in a strong position to attempt experimental approaches. In this context, historical narratives are flexible, modular, and subject to change in accordance with immediate political needs – as are the range of formats chosen for their delivery. These mediated narratives constitute tools by which neo-authoritarian states seek to confront the challenges that their distinctive media systems face within a wider global media environment that is governed by personalised, emotive responses to information.

[1] A 2018 survey from the respected Levada polling organisation found that 73% of respondents used television as their main source of news (Levada, 2018).

[2] These five periods include: the February revolution, the tsar's abdication and the establishment of the Provisional Government (19 February – 3 March); Lenin's return to Petrograd (3 April); The July Days (4-19 July); The 'Kornilov Affair' (25-30 August); the October Revolution (with the monitoring period from 10 October to the end of November). Only periods one and five were covered in the broadcast output.

[3] See www.reframingrussia.com

[4] For a notable exception, see Vlad Strukov and Victor Apryshchenko, eds., *Memory and Securitization in Contemporary Europe* (London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2018).

[5] Russian- and Spanish-language portals were created but quickly abandoned.

[6] All follower numbers accurate at 04 April, 2018

[7] Lenin's original statement (cited in Kenez, 1985) was that 'The press should be not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, but also a collective organizer of the masses'

[8] For comparison with the situation in China see Zhang 2012.

[9] Full series available to view at https://1917.rt.com/#!/en/video360/all

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