

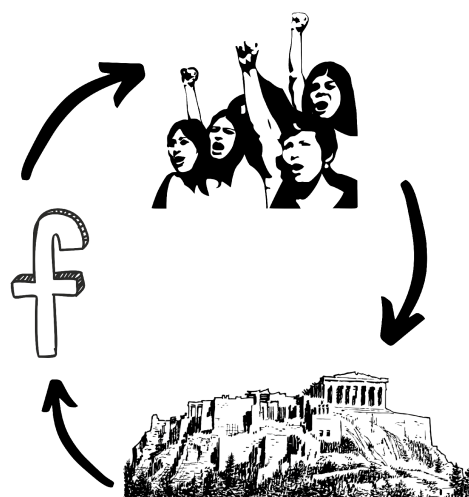
EASTERN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

THE ERA OF CHAOS: HOW THE SYMBIOSIS OF MEDIA AND THE RIGHT-WING WAVE ARE RUPTURING THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY

by Mikhail Zakharov

For many years, democracy has been well served by journalists. Their accuracy and impartiality has supported the basic norms of truth in society. The public and politicians have been able to rely on healthy mixture of domestic and foreign news. It stimulated the sustenance of the reasonable world politics, where there were few places to tell half-truth and outright lies.

However, recently the traditional model of journalism around the world has been gutted and replaced by a new approach to the coverage of events. The decreasing popularity of traditional media has coincided with the retreat from democracy, generated by the rise of right-wing ideas. The far-right is rising in Europe (but not only here), riding a wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. In Europe, it appears as a phenomenon of marginal media that constitutes a toxic combination of devotion to a political cause and passionate right-wing ideology. It led Britain down the Brexit road, it was deeply involved into the story with President Trump's success, it has helped populists to take control over Europe during elections (and probably will help them to get more seats in European Parliament next time). Its hostile and xenophobic messages provoke real hype storms and demolish society, turning politics into mind-numbing chain of scandals, like Trump's Twitter feed does.



The new wave of media is full of violence, hate-fueled rhetoric and fake news. This new phenomenon, closely connected to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, is a bizarre symbiosis of internet media, which promotes a sense of severe crisis in the world, with right-wing leaders and their twisted vision of liberal society. These leaders promise to return people to normality but to a normality under the conditions they deem appropriate. The far-right reject political correctness, which neoliberalism developed as a way of shielding hate speech. They brand themselves as “the true rebels” and, in fact, provide a host for ideologies that embrace actual violence to come in. (It's Going Down, 2017b)

Trump wants to Make America Great Again; Bolsonaro wants to Make Brazil Great Again, Alternative for Germany (AfD) wants to Make Germany Great Again. They offer to close borders and to get rid of migrants to make their countries safe. In France, far-right leaders, such as Marine Le Pen, the President of the National Rally (formerly known as the National Front until June 2018) warn that “without any action, this migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the IV century, and the consequences will be the same.” These leaders further advocate that it is the burden and responsibility of the right wing to take charge and “immediately stop this madness to safeguard our social pact, freedom and identity.” (International Business Times, 2015) Populists ride the wave of protests against immigration, turning them into cascades. Today they embrace new technologies as the best way to get their message across. As more people have gained access to the Internet, far-right websites, like the page of the National

Front in France, have started speaking about subjects regarded as taboo in the press that spun a relatively narrow range of customary views. (BBC, 2017)

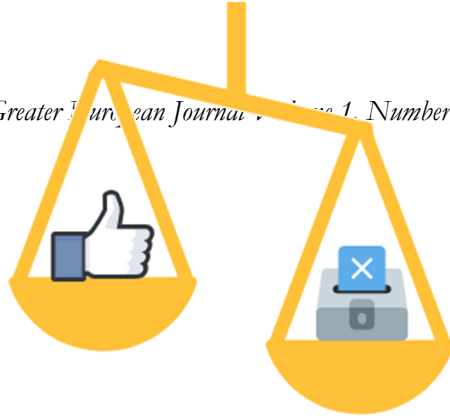
Right-wing media outlets like Fox News frequently use public communication against particular individuals or groups. They spread rumors, like the idea that the migrant caravan, making its way from Central America to the United States, is linked to George Soros and they are connected with the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric. (Slate, 2018) They invert every criticism of itself back onto its enemies, like militias and right-wing biker groups proclaim in the USA: “Anarchists are the shock troops of the Communist, Democratic Party, and are funded by George Soros!” (It's Going Down, 2017a)

They also utilize media outlets to unify their supporters: the right-wing firebrand Steve Bannon does this through *Breitbart*. But if today's right-wing populists of Europe are concentrating their efforts on the issue of immigration locally, Bannon's idea is to create a pan-European think tank “The Movement”, which seeks to develop their economic and social ideas. (Deutsche Welle, 2018a.) If he succeeds, the old continent will also have an access to *Breitbart* – and now in local languages, with local news. Moreover, the views of people divided by the Atlantic ocean are very similar: a struggle against immigration, support of “traditional values” in the areas of family, gender relations, and nationalism. This interaction between two continents will be of great help for the right-wing politicians and eurosceptics in their fight against other cultures and Brussels as a symbol of globalization – meanwhile, their countries may undergo a more precipitous decline in democratic freedoms.

Before the rise of today's social media network, right-wing followers were often gathering in local communities. But today their messages circulate with incredible speed across mainstream social media platforms. A good example of it is The Reconquista Germanica (RG), an right-wing channel running on the Discord application, which was set up to disrupt the 2017 elections in Germany. (Deutsche Welle, 2018b) They were instructed to create as many Twitter accounts as possible and to re-tweet their nationalistic materials as much as possible. Thus, the impression of RG representing a predominant point of view was created. (The Guardian, 2017) Today they are not a lonely marginal group of marginal: the far-right AfD, represented in the German Parliament today, as well as its supporters, were far more active and adjusted quicker than mainstream parties when it came to promoting their agenda on social media in the past few years. This effort helped the party to win seats in the national parliament for the first time in 2017 – with 12.6 percent of the vote. Half of all retweeted messages during the campaign were about Alternative for Germany, and its Facebook posts were shared five times more than those ones of any other party. (Reuters, 2018) According to Juan Carlos Medina Serrano of the Technical University of Munich's political data science team, “[AfD] used very aggressive and polarizing messages – that caused people to react more.” (Reuters, 2018)

Furthermore, they continue to gain further popularity by posting on issues such as crime committed by migrants and triggering negative emotions towards them, which is widely supported by far-right activists.

These various right-wing theories have become known to the vast majority of internet users. Being supported by social media, they have also resulted in a growing number of people committing violence. “Right-wing media is a gradient pushing rightwards, toward violence and oppression,” data scientist Emily Gorcenski wrote. (The Verge, 2018) It can be clearly seen on the example of far-right activity in Britain, ranging from Brexit to a rise in anti-Semitism. As the British anti-extremism commissioner Sara Khan has noted: “We are seeing a new wave of the far right: modernized, professionalized and growing; supported by a frightening amount of legal online extremist material”. (The Guardian, 2018) British lawyer Anthony Julius agrees with Khan about the anti-Semitism that the Jewish community in Britain faces today: “I am concerned by the threat from a disaffected, street smart, social media-adept right in this country that is learning from the populist right in Hungary, Poland and also the United States”. (The



Times of Israel, 2019) Maybe, nowadays it can happen seemingly at random, but in future we will face it more often.

Perhaps the global rise of populists and the influence of big platforms are not clearly correlated. But today large right-wing news channels make their stories go viral on Facebook and other social network sites, where the right-wing

influencers can create more content to share, like memes, and promote hate speech across the globe. They utilize digital technologies to create new channels of alternative media and to change existing platforms. When Facebook or Twitter attempt to clean up offensive content and misinformation, they grow their own social networks, like Gab – the free speech social network, as it's called. "You know, this social media starts as a place to be free and open and share a bunch of thoughts and ideas all willy-nilly is the way it should be," says one of its followers and writers. "I don't want you to feed me – I want a buffet, where I can pick what I want. I don't want an algorithm to control my news feed, I want to decide for myself." (NPR, 2017)

Mainstream media may also contribute to the overall radicalization of public discourse by covering the preferred topics of right-wing populist forces and providing a platform for their position to reach the public. Right-wing populist forces capitalize on these communication channels to actively provide interpretive frames of events in an attempt to impact the general media discourse. "Their discourse still has a strong power of attraction on the population ... [and] a big part of their game is to influence politics by influencing culture and public opinion in some ways, without ever doing politics directly. They've maintained that power", says Maxime Fiset, a former neo-Nazi who now works at the center for the prevention of radicalization leading to violence in Canada. (Al Jazeera, 2018) This radicalization can grow the new sort of people that will be much more careful with their language and be certainly less aggressive on the streets, distancing itself from the violence but simultaneously advocating it. Nonetheless the radicalization of public discourse will feed the movement, pushing the public towards the far-right.

By supporting the media hype, contaminated with this kind of discourse, we legitimize the populism of Le Pen and Trump, Bolsonaro and Nigel Farage. This legitimization is their desire: populists want to create the perception that they speak "for the people", even though they may only represent an angry and vociferous minority. (HuffPost, 2017) We can say this is true for all politicians, but the willingness to claim that they speak for the majority can lead to hazardous outcome. We should not underestimate the threat posed by this ideology, and the intense media attention can only fuel their achievements. But after the years of extreme media hype, today we see that the far-right figures are reaping the fruits of their victories in elections of all levels.

Therefore, the symbiosis of internet media with right-wing leaders can lead to the overall change of the current world-order. It didn't create a whole new media platform but it shifted the discourse in a different direction – towards rupturing society as we know it. Right-wing figures reform discourse, identities and the concepts of power and culture, using media. That makes a picture of a dangerous world where people need protection and where only right-wing politicians can protect them. It influences not only voting – it pushes people to take matters into their own hands and to resort to violence.

Today we ought to try to filter out media hype and not let hype storms obscure the important issues in today's changing political agenda. Social media platforms together with agencies should find ways to decrease extremism, or these texts, memes and hate speech will continue to manipulate people and rupture the foundations of democracy. If we challenge their propaganda and debunk the conspiracies that can provoke hatred and distrust we can beat this appalling symbiosis.

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