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Sputnik's Coverage of Trump's Declaration Over the Purchase of Greenland

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Beyond the material and physical reality of the region, the Arctic is represented differently in state, media, and civil society discourses. Framing the region in terms of cooperation or competition impacts individual perceptions of the Arctic. We also know that disinformation (spreading false information willingly to mislead) and misinformation (spreading false information without the intent to mislead) are global phenomena, impacting the circumpolar North just like any other region. There is a thin line, however, between disinformation and misinformation and displaying different frames of an event or development: media outlets can put the spotlight on different aspects of a story without necessarily dis/misinforming. Differing techniques can also be deployed to either promote specific frames or lead dis/misinformation: interviewing specific experts, referring to social media, organizing the information in specific ways, etc. This policy brief will analyze how the (state-operated) Russian press agency *Sputnik* covered the controversy around Donald Trump's declaration that the United States

was interested in purchasing Greenland. The analysis explores how this event was described by the Russian press agency and the techniques used by Russian journalists to frame the event. The ultimate question is whether or not *Sputnik* engages in dis/misinformation and, if so, how.

Covering Trump's statement on the purchase of Greenland

On August 16, 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the United States President, Donald Trump, was asking aides and advisers to "look into" the possibility that the United States would purchase Greenland from Denmark.² This revelation was followed by a tweet from Donald Trump on August 19, further hinting at this possible development. This story unfolded a month ahead of a planned visit by President Trump to Denmark. After the Danish government closed the door on a possible Greenland purchase, the trip was cancelled.

Links and Sources

Upon beginning the analysis, the use of links and sources was immediately of interest. As with many online news outlets, most of *Sputnik's* articles contain links to other, related online content. These can be used to link both to previous coverage of a topic and to sources. Of the forty-two stories being analyzed, twenty-seven contained links. As will be discussed more below, these links were to a variety of sources, including official political websites, such as the Danish Ministry of Defence and Naleraq (a pro-independence party from Greenland), news sources, such as the *Wall Street Journal* or *Jyllands Posten* (a Danish newspaper), organizations such as The Polar Connection and the InterAction Council, and Twitter. Of the twenty-seven articles that contained links, 100 per cent contained links to *Sputnik*, and the number of *Sputnik* links per story ranged from one to seven for a total of sixty-eight *Sputnik* links over twenty-seven articles. In contrast, Twitter had the second highest number of links, with twenty-two links over twenty-seven articles.¹ The *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* came in third, each with two links. These numbers indicate that, in the vast majority of cases, a user clicking on any link within a story will be led to additional *Sputnik* content, as opposed to external content. In addition to promoting further *Sputnik* content, this use of links is interesting because of how it diverges from the use of in-text references: there was a large difference between what sources were mentioned by name in the text and those that were linked to. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* (which reported the initial story) is referenced in-text thirty-one times, but is only linked to directly twice, because most links to earlier coverage of the story

¹ Note that this does not include links found in the tweets present in the articles. That is, if one tweet was copied into a story, and that tweet contained two links (for a total of three links: one to the tweet itself, plus the two links in the tweet),

lead to *Sputnik* content, not the original *Wall Street Journal* article. However, it does create credibility via the use of trusted Western news outlets, without directing users to those outlets. This will be discussed further below.

As noted, the frequency of Twitter links is notable, especially when compared with other sources. To some extent, this can be attributed to statements regarding the Greenland purchase being made on the website, but not every tweet came from a politician or other involved party—some were simply reactions from (seemingly random) Twitter users, as well as journalists. These do not represent any particular end of the political spectrum, which echoes Ramsay and Robertshaw's findings: they are comprised of both right- and left-leaning individuals.³ Ramsay and Robertshaw also point to an English-language 'parallel commentariat' – "a network of sources that rarely overlaps with those featured on 'mainstream' national media"⁴ – on Russian state-controlled news outlets RT and *Sputnik*. At the same time, they note that RT and *Sputnik* regularly do cite their sources, though they note "[i]t is unclear whether this is to use the trustworthiness of the original source as a signal of authority within a skewed news agenda."⁵ This pattern is visible in the articles under examination as well: interviewees and Twitter accounts are drawn from a variety of non-traditional sources outside the mainstream, while trusted Western sources are regularly mentioned throughout the articles (though, as mentioned, are rarely linked to). For example, the site overall uses direct links to a number of familiar, well-regarded, English-language news outlets (the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the

this was counted as one link. If we count all links including those in every tweet, the number rises to forty-three, all but one of which is to another Twitter link.

Washington Post, the *New York Times*, *Reuters*, and *AP News*, among others). Most of these outlets, however, are linked to only once (or twice, for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*). It is note-worthy that in the vast majority of cases, links to well-known and often trustworthy, English-language, Western (frequently American or British) news sources are used. Presumably, *Sputnik* could link to other Russian state-owned media, but it does not.

Alongside well-known Western sources are a handful of troublesome sources. Some of these are interviewed or linked to directly by *Sputnik*, while others are found in the tweets *Sputnik* copies into stories. These sources are striking not for the number of times which they appear, but rather for their inclusion alongside trustworthy sources. For example, Twitter accounts linked to *OpIndia* and *teleSUR English* appear in one of the articles. Bhat and Chadha (2020) identify *OpIndia* as anti-media, pointing to strategies it uses such as “highlighting errors in mainstream media coverage, attacking individual journalists, publicizing media criticism by prominent individuals, and representing mainstream media as pro-elite as well as anti-Hindu.”⁶ Meanwhile, Carter and Carter (2021) include *teleSUR* among their list of outward-facing propaganda apparatuses (which also includes Russia’s RT and North Korea’s *Pyongyang Times*).⁷ Similarly, one story references an interview done by Radio *Sputnik*’s “Loud and Clear” with Bruce Gagnon, coordinator of the Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space who, on his personal blog, discusses conspiracy theories including the faking of 9/11 and chemtrails.

Ultimately, what is of interest regarding *Sputnik*’s use of sources is the variety: many are trustworthy, but the presence of some questionable content

amidst trustworthy sources can obscure those questionable sources. This is in line with what Potter (2019) describes, quoting Bergmann and Kenney (though in this case regarding RT): “RT provides a ‘vener of credibility’ by publishing or broadcasting the ‘legitimate’ news of the day, making it difficult for viewers ‘to weed out stories that are either completely fabricated or pure propaganda.’”⁸ This strategy appears to apply to *Sputnik* as well: it features broadly accurate information with a sprinkling of conspiracy theory. Hence, the disinformation is relayed by *Sputnik*, but often does not originate from *Sputnik*: false equivalences are inferred by putting reputable media sources with dubious ones. Here, mixing legitimate and questionable sources together tends to blur the lines between solid and suspect information.

The key takeaways regarding *Sputnik*’s use of links and sources are that the news outlet makes use of Western sources frequently in name only, which may grant them credibility among English-language readers. They also use questionable sources which, hidden among the names of trusted English sources, may be difficult to detect, and therefore have a better chance of convincing a reader of their reliability. Finally, the majority of links on *Sputnik*’s site direct to other *Sputnik* content, largely confining readers to the *Sputnik* echo chamber.

Recurring Themes, Content, and Frames

Throughout the coverage, several readings of the Greenland purchase recurred. These were: the seriousness of the purchase, Greenland’s strategic value, past purchase attempts, and the conflict between the United States, on one side, and Denmark and Greenland, on the other.

One topic repeatedly raised was the seriousness of the purchase. That is, to what extent were Trump’s

comments to be taken at face value? While in the first few days there was discussion of the possibility that Trump might have been joking, Larry Kudlow—Trump’s White House economic advisor—confirmed Trump’s interest in the purchase on August 18th. In addition to repeating the confirmation and/or brief mention of the *Wall Street Journal’s* report, the topic of seriousness emerged in multiple formats over the course of the coverage. For example, references to Greenland’s strategic value—a repeating theme on its own—were made very regularly. In some cases, the arguments being made were quite explicit. For example, an interviewee in one story states: “[t]he purchase would allow the United States to pursue multiple geopolitical interests in the area, including access to natural resources ... as well as a potential establishment of a maritime route.” An interviewee in a separate article says “[Greenland is] a huge piece, strategically, for shipping, for militarism and for ‘drill baby, drill.’”⁹ In other cases, however, the arguments were somewhat less explicit, as when they took the form of describing Greenland’s strategic significance without specifying that this would be a reason to purchase it. These arguments often co-occurred with what were otherwise fairly neutral descriptions of Greenland (for example, regarding its size or population). This theme—of Greenland’s strategic value—supports the idea that the purchase is actively being sought by providing reasons that the purchase is logical. Similarly, there are multiple references to past purchase attempts, both of Greenland and of other pieces of land by the United States. References to Truman’s purchase attempt are made as early as the first article, and references to Louisiana, Alaska, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are common. Again, this reference to historical precedents maintains the purported purchase as a possibility both because of the United States’ history of land-buying and because of a

previous attempt to purchase Greenland specifically. When these themes are combined, the issue becomes framed first as a strong likelihood: Trump is interested in the purchase, he has good reasons to want to make the purchase, and his country has a history of making this kind of purchase. In this case, the reporting is matter-of-fact, but the use of strategic and historical information serves to push a particular reading of the situation. This framing also serves to maintain a degree of pressure regarding the situation, even after news of planned increased cooperation between the United States and Denmark, or after President Trump confirmed a positive phone call with Prime Minister Frederiksen. This is possible because, despite the increased cooperation, Greenland’s strategic value is continually pushed as a reason the purchase could still occur in the future.

Another recurring theme is the conflict between the United States and Denmark and Greenland. Many stories rehash exchanges between President Trump and Prime Minister Frederiksen, in addition to airing reactions from Twitter accounts belonging to a variety of Danish and Greenlandic political sources. One striking element of the articles discussed here is that, in comparison to those examined in other studies, they do not present Denmark negatively. Deverell et al. (2021), in their study of *Sputnik’s* coverage of the Nordic countries, find that the news outlet uses narratives that “can serve to divide and weaken the Nordics and the EU, and undermine international reputations of each state.”¹⁰ While the narratives they locate regarding Denmark focus on moral decay within the country, EU skepticism, and Denmark’s international insignificance and unfair treatment of Russia, these issues are put aside in the coverage of the purported Greenland purchase.¹¹ Instead, Denmark is presented as reacting strongly against the United States while Greenland is

positioned as generally valuable. This suggests that a different kind of frame is being used in coverage of the Greenland purchase as compared with other coverage of Denmark. Rather than being a weak country, Denmark is arguably positioned as reacting strongly and reasonably to the United States, and being unified in that reaction.

Similarly, Deverell et al. find that Western states and their relationships with one another are consistently caricatured, and coverage of the West is “extremely negative in tone.”¹² However, this pattern is not found in the Greenland data. While coverage is not positive, the tone is generally measured and matter-of-fact. However, the fact that the conflict being covered is not manufactured works in *Sputnik’s* favour. There is no need to be overly negative because selective coverage of the tension in United States-Denmark relations is sufficient to create a wedge between them. In the context of creating disunity among NATO members (which Ramsay and Robertshaw find is a subset of narratives found in RT and *Sputnik*), this is potentially useful, and might demonstrate a shift in strategies owing to the particular context of the Greenland purchase story. One way in which NATO is portrayed is as “forcing members to act against their wills and against the wishes of the people, and riven by competition and conflict between distrustful members.”¹³ This seems more likely to be the frame being used in this coverage: the United States, with its history of purchasing other lands it sees as valuable, is here attempting to bully Denmark and Greenland for its own military advantage. This is also visible in repeated references to Thule Air Base. The base is mentioned consistently throughout the coverage, partially reinforcing Greenland’s strategic value, but also serving to demonstrate that the United States is already misusing Greenland, as Thule is discussed variously as being on Greenlandic land, negatively

impacting the likelihood of Greenlandic independence, economically harmful, and environmentally dangerous.

The key takeaways regarding article content are that the Greenland purchase is likely to occur either now or sometime in the future, on the basis of Greenland’s strategic value and the United States’ bullying and mistreatment of its allies. Denmark and Greenland stand more or less united against the United States, which has a history of purchasing land and has already historically misused Greenland for strategic purposes.

Headlines and Ledes

Another element of the stories examined were the headlines and ledes (the summarizing sentence/paragraph that opens the story). Because these two elements of the articles are the first things a reader will typically look at, they can have an impact on how the rest of the article elements are read.

While coverage itself, as noted above, is not overtly biased, headlines are frequently inflammatory, and especially push the narratives of the purchase attempt being serious and a rift having been created between the United States and Denmark. Regarding the seriousness of the purchase, for example, headlines include: “Under the Hammer: As Trump Reportedly Sizes Up Greenland, How Many Territories Have Been Purchased?”, “Green for Greenland: US Attempt to Buy Island Part of Arctic Land Rush,” and “Donald Trump Tweets Fake Pic of Gold Tower in Greenland Amid Media Frenzy Over Plans to Buy Island.” In many cases, these headlines seem to indicate that the purchase is very likely, or even is going ahead. While in many cases the content of these articles does reiterate Denmark’s refusal of the purchase and emphasize an overall

negative Danish reaction, someone only scanning the headlines may well come away with a different idea of the story's content, and even those who read through the article in-depth have been primed to view the information within in a specific way.

Headlines covering United States-Denmark interactions are also inflammatory. For example: "Danish Politicians Believe Trump's Idea to Purchase Greenland Is 'Absolutely Crazy,'" "Trump Blasts Danish Prime Minister Statement's That Greenland Sale 'Absurd' As 'Not Nice.'" In these cases, headlines are more technically accurate, in the sense that they can draw on the most inflammatory elements of politicians' reactions in order to emphasize the wedge that has been created between the United States and Denmark. However, this type of coverage is somewhat inconsistent. Headlines regarding warming relations are sometimes neutral ("Pompeo, Danish Foreign Minister Discuss Boosting Cooperation in Arctic") but do sometimes lean slightly more positively ("Trump Says Had Great Conversation With Danish Prime Minister Despite Canceled [sic] Visit"). In this latter example, it is unclear if the inclusion of the reference to the cancelled visit is strategically intended to tone down the otherwise positive development. The content of this particular story also does not shy away from re-stating positive comments made by Trump regarding Frederiksen.

Regarding ledes, the content is not particularly surprising. Most of the ledes are relevant to the information contained in the remainder of the article (that is, ledes are not typically misleading as summaries). The majority of them, throughout roughly the first half of the coverage, rehash basic information regarding Trump's interest in the

purchase and/or the (negative) Danish response. This is in line with the recurring content noted in the section above. Once again, a lack of particular spin may be facilitated by the fact that the story at the time contained sufficient conflict that *Sputnik* did not need to significantly modify any information being reported, so much as selectively choose what to report.

The key takeaways regarding headlines and ledes are that headlines are generally more inflammatory than the information contained in their articles and highlight more strongly some of the content themes and frames discussed in the previous section, which may prime readers to read the articles with those frames in mind. Ledes tend not to be misleading or overly inflammatory but do support the content and frames discussed in the previous section.

Comment Section and Users

The final element of the articles under review are the comment sections and users. Previous research has demonstrated that Russia makes use of "online trolls to sow confusion and disinformation, and to have half-truths and lies amplified by Russia's international broadcasting outlets."¹⁴ Giles (2016) also notes that trolls are "[o]ne of the most prominent aspects of Russian information campaigning in Western public consciousness."¹⁵ Importantly, it is (nearly always) unclear whether a) any particular online commenter is a troll, and b) whether these commenters are being directed by another actor or acting in their own capacity. However, there were several suspicious accounts involved in *Sputnik's* comment sections. For example, one commenter who has been on the site only two years has made 12,945 comments in that time.² This works out to almost eighteen comments written per

² This information is publicly available by clicking on the user's profile.

day. While this is certainly feasible, especially if we assume a low word count per comment, it is still an unusually high number, and over a dozen other accounts also have what appear to be unusually high numbers of comments given how long they have been active. While the focus of this article is not the comment sections, it is interesting to consider how Russian trolls might operate on Russian news outlets in addition to their presence on Western news outlets.

Regarding the topics in the comment sections, they vary wildly, apart from a high volume of anti-American sentiment. Additional topics of discussion include references to Greenland's resources, American imperialism, Thule Air Base, colour revolutions, anti-Semitism, Sinophobia, American debt, Donald Trump, Denmark's negative position relative to the United States, anti-Polish sentiment, and the law of the sea. The point here is not that there is a particular theme (beyond anti-Americanism), but rather that some of the messaging in the comment sections align well with the content of the articles and can be more openly critical and conspiratorial regarding the United States and its intentions. Thus, it is conceivable that a user who has read an article and perhaps not come away with an overly negative view of the situation could read the comments and decide, for example, that the Greenland purchase is an instance of American imperialism, or that the United States is in debt to China and therefore in reality a weak international player. It is also possible that reading the comments might confuse a reader regarding the facts of the situation, since such a wide variety of topics are covered with considerable vehemence and make them further susceptible to disinformation/misinformation.

The key takeaways regarding comment sections and users are the potential for some suspicious accounts to post comments supporting *Sputnik* narratives without being held to the same level of scrutiny, and an awareness that comments may lead readers to view article content in a particular light or create confusion regarding the facts of the situation.

Conclusion

The assessment of *Sputnik's* use of disinformation/misinformation is problematized in this case by the genuine tension created not only by the alleged purchase plans, but also by the public statements made by politicians at the time. These created a situation in which *Sputnik* could report the facts of the situation without much need for overly biased reporting.

At the same time, several strategies appear to be used both to make *Sputnik* appear to be trustworthy and to frame the issues in a specific way. *Sputnik* references trusted Western sources throughout its coverage, lending itself an air of credibility. This air of credibility extends to other, more questionable sources used, which allows *Sputnik* to sprinkle in conspiracy theories and biased accounts without overly damaging a reader's perception of its coverage. It also leans heavily on framing the Greenland purchase as a real potential, by highlighting strategic value and historical facts regarding the United States: in many instances, the possible purchase is presented as a *fait accompli*.

In this way, false information does not need to be used, because true information can be formatted in a way that drives a wedge between the two NATO allies. This frame is central to *Sputnik's* coverage of the event: emphasis is put on the divergent interests and conflictual encounter between Denmark and

the United States. The high volume of articles published by *Sputnik* on this political development is thus not surprising: overwhelming level of attention will be devoted to instances of Western allies' disunity. This can be furthered by the use of inflammatory headlines, which can prime readers to review information with particular frames already in mind. In addition, a review of comments in *Sputnik's* comment sections may further incline readers towards specific readings of the situation, or sow confusion regarding the broader facts of the situation: disinformation is displayed here, again not by *Sputnik* itself, but by anonymous users.

As was analysed in this brief, state-operated media agencies in Russia will use disinformation but in certain parts of articles and leveraging different mechanisms, often to spread disinformation through indirect means. In other instances, media coverage will promote specific frames and angles to describe events in a favourable (Russian) perspective. The latter should not be downplayed or discarded to only focus on blunt, direct disinformation: promotion of specific frames proposes plausible explanations, and constructs worldviews to interpret current events.

This brief represents a case study on how Russian press agencies cover Arctic developments. More efforts are needed to analyse Russian press agencies coverage of Arctic issues in general and to figure out if this coverage has evolved and changed forms over time.

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² Vivian Salama, Rebecca Ballhaus, Andrew Restuccia, and Michael Bender, "President Trump Eyes a New Real-Estate Purchase: Greenland," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 August 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-eyes-a-new-real-estate-purchase-greenland-11565904223>.

³ Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw, "Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation," *The Policy Institute Centre for the Study of Media, Communication & Power, King's College London*, 2019, 41. See also: Keir Giles, "Handbook of Russian Information Warfare," *NATO Defense College*, 2016, 26.

⁴ Evan Potter, "Russia's Strategy for Perception Management through Public Diplomacy and Influence Operations: The Canadian Case," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14 (2019): 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ Prashanth Bhat and Kalyani Chadha, "Anti-Media Populism: Expressions of Media Distrust by Right-Wing Media in India," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 13, no. 2 (2020): 169-170.

⁷ Erin Carter and Brett Carter, "Questioning More: RT, Outward-Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order," *Security Studies* 30, no. 1 (2021): 49-50.

⁸ Potter, "Russia's Strategy for Perception Management," 414.

⁹ "Green for Greenland: US Attempt to Buy Island Part of Arctic Land Rush," *Sputnik News*, 17 August 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/20190817/trump-greenland-military-industrial-complex-1076570178.html>.

¹⁰ Edward Deverell, Charlotte Wagnsson, and Eva-Karin Olsson, "Destruct, Direct and Suppress: Sputnik Narratives on the Nordic Countries," *Journal of International Communication* 27, no. 1 (2021): 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³ Ramsay and Robertshaw, "Weaponising News," 55.

¹⁴ Potter, "Russia's Strategy for Perception Management," 412.

¹⁵ Giles, "Handbook of Russian Information Warfare," 54.