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**PARTISAN NARRATIVES ON THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:  
A CRITICAL GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE**

MA Thesis

Supervisor: Eiki Berg, Professor

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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# **PARTISAN NARRATIVES ON THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A CRITICAL GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE**

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## **Abstract**

As the Cold War drew to a close, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck coined the concept of reflexive modernization to describe the structural risks inadvertently produced by modernity's progress. Through the approach of critical geopolitics, such risks radically began to transform traditional understanding of space and territory, allegedly deterritorializing traditional spatial structures, such as nation-states. However, scholars maintain that the process of reterritorialization, defined as the "inscription of new boundaries" reattaching space to "newly imagined visions of state, territory, and community," cyclically follow deterritorialization (Albert 1991, 61; Ó Tuathail 1996, 230). Nevertheless, few scholars in the field of International Relations (IR), have seriously analyzed the process of reterritorialization. However, following the 2016 US presidential election, popular discourse in the US on Russian interference appeared to reterritorialize previously deterritorialized space, such as cyber and information space, by likening Russian hacks, leaks and collusion to the violation of the sovereign territory of the US. Thus, this thesis aims to research how US popular discourse reterritorializes Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, while comparing and contrasting the partisan narratives constructed in light of the political polarization of the US in recent years. To achieve this goal, a discourse analysis is conducted on storylines from 30 online news articles, from three right-wing and three left-wing media outlets. As hypothesized, the analysis confirms that both partisan narratives reterritorialize previously deterritorialized risks associated with reflexive modernization, transcribe the storylines into traditional US geopolitical culture, and call for assertive measures towards Russia which violated US territory, as well as towards internal Others, which weakened US territory.

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## **1. Introduction**

Following the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in November 2016, the right and left-wing media in the US fiercely debated Russia's role in Trump's victory, spawning a period of broad speculation and accusations. In general, this discourse rarely construed allegations of Russian hacks, leaks and collusion as "unintended consequences" or inherent risks of a technologically wired society and globalized world (Beck 1999, 3-4). Rather, most discourse reterritorialized Russian actions in cyber and information space as an illegal breach of the sovereign territory of the US. Such discourse appeared to escalate already strained US-Russia relations, with US Senator John McCain even quickly stamping Russian interference as an "act of war" (Schleifer & Walsh 2016). If one considers the US as a typical case of Beck's risk society, discursive reterritorialization may be an attempt to recast risks of reflexive modernity as traditional threats with traditional solutions, which are applied to classical violations of sovereign territory, such as the declaration of war (Beck 1994).

Unfortunately, previous scholarly literature has failed to appreciate the potential ramifications stemming from the process of reterritorialization. While previous studies have analyzed discourse surrounding presidential campaigns (e.g. Toal 2009), US-Russia relations (e.g. Belova 2016), and the role of the media (e.g. Bayulgen & Arbatli 2013), it appears that none have specifically analyzed discursive reterritorialization through each. Those studies which do examine reterritorialization almost exclusively stem from the field of geography (e.g. Berzi 2017; de Castro & Martins 2018; Popescu 2008), with only limited, theoretical discussions in the field of International Relations (e.g. Ó Tuathail & Luke 1994). Furthermore, there are few scholarly works which singularly focus on the American media's representation of Russia in the post-Cold War era through the lens of critical geopolitics. Thus, this research attempts to contribute to greater insight of US-Russia relations, US partisan narratives, and how discursive reterritorialization can construct escalatory calls to action which may influence public opinion and ultimately the foreign policy agenda of the US.

Therefore, it is the aim of this thesis to explore how US popular discourse on Russian interference following the 2016 US presidential election is reterritorialized, grafted onto traditional US geopolitical culture, and produces particular calls to action. Furthermore, given the discernable polarization of US politics in recent years, this thesis compares and contrasts the partisan narratives by analyzing the storylines of right and left-wing online news articles. This thesis maintains that risks arising from reflexive modernization, which have traditionally been deterritorialized, like cyber and information space, are being discursively reterritorialized in order to present ‘the conflict’ between the US and Russia in familiar geopolitical terms which warrant escalatory responses reserved for traditional violations of a state’s territory.

In order to achieve this aim, this thesis focuses on American popular discourse produced by the online news media. Although analyzing television broadcasts would have been the preferred method, given its superior popularity as a news source, it would have been extremely time consuming and costly to gather, transcribe and analyze the data. Instead, this thesis gleans news articles from online media outlets which are an increasingly common source of news, and are easily and freely accessible for student researchers. Mindful of time-constraints, this thesis selected 15 articles from three right-wing media outlets (*Fox News*, *The Daily Caller* and *Breitbart*) and 15 articles from three left-wing media outlets (*MSNBC*, *Vox* and *HuffPost*). It chose these particular sources after taking into account the methodologies of previous studies while also conceding that some subjectivity was unavoidable. A poststructuralist discourse analysis broadly following Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory was then conducted to analyze each article’s storyline. Building off Ó Tuathail’s (2002) description of a geopolitical storyline, this analysis examines how each article answers four central questions, including: what happened, how did it happen, by whom and for whose benefit, and what are the consequences. Lastly, the thesis compares and contrasts the partisan narratives, and summarizes their discursive reterritorialization and calls to action.

Consequently, the research tasks included garnering the necessary theoretical knowledge, surveying previous scholarly literature, examining US geopolitical culture, selecting sources and employing the research methodology, and finally compiling the

empirical findings. Thus, the structure of this thesis logically follows the sequence of its research tasks. The first section lays out the theoretical framework by expounding upon Ulrich Beck's theory of reflexive modernization and risk society, and then how such risks may have transformed conceptions of territory through the approach of critical geopolitics. The second section presents the background information imperative for comprehending this single case study by providing an overview of US geopolitical culture and an outline of key events occurring after the 2016 US presidential election which are frequently referenced in the online news articles. The thesis then proceeds to comprehensively describe the research methodology utilized, and the sources and data selected for the analysis, in the analytical framework section. Fourthly, the thesis presents the findings of its discourse analysis, separately evaluating right-wing and left-wing storylines. Finally, this thesis concludes with a summary of the research findings, comparing and contrasting the partisan narratives and their calls to action, while further demonstrating how such narratives contribute to US geopolitical culture at large.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Reflexive Modernization and Risk Society**

The end of the Cold War and the passing of the longstanding bipolar rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union ushered in numerous postulates of what the new era would hold. The most preeminent concept to emerge and christen this new era was the concept of postmodernity. The adjective postmodern refers to something occurring in or characterizing a time following modernity, and which is distinguished by the erosion of “the notion of a stable and ultimate knowledge;” thus, subverting the stark hierarchies and boundaries solidified during the modern era (Lemke 2011, 82). In the field of International Relations (IR), the erosion of traditional nation-states, the rise of non-state actors and the prevalence of transnational security threats are often perceived as just a few features of this new, postmodern era. In the 1990s, many scholars produced a wide range of postmodern theories in an attempt to explain such transformations in the international system.

In particular, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck conceived the concept of reflexive modernization, arguing that modernity’s successes had actually bred the seeds of modernity’s destruction, at the dawn of a “new state, in which progress can turn into self-destruction, in which one kind of modernization undercuts and changes another” (Beck 1994, 2). For Beck, reflexive modernization describes “a social reality that is qualitatively new,” and chiefly characterized by a constant state of insecurity, which he later termed ‘global risk society’ (Beck 2009; Selchow 2016, 372; Williams 2008, 63). However, Beck’s concept of a ‘risk society’ is “not a theory of ‘risk’” per se but rather “attempt[s] to deconstruct and question the usefulness of the modern idea of ‘risk’ in its political function and applications” (Selchow 2016, 370). In contrast to the concept of risk as linked to probability in the physical sciences, Beck’s definition of risk means “the anticipation of catastrophe[ies],” as “industrially generated insecurities and dangers” (Beck 2009, 7-9). Problematizing the standard definition of risk, Beck draws attention to risks as inherently “neither visible nor perceptible,” unable to be factually corroborated and without “any spatio-temporal or social concreteness” (Beck 2009, 9; Williams 2008, 27, 31). Rather,



risks are merely constructions created when “confronted with the openness, uncertainties and obstructions of [a] self-created future” (Beck 2009, 4).

Thus, the theory of reflexive modernization is non-linear, not “suggesting a ‘forward movement’ or ‘progress’,” seeing that its chief characteristic is “uncertainty and ambivalence” (Beck 1999, 119; Holmquist & Lundborg 2016). These risks produce what Zygmunt Bauman describes as a culture of “derivative fear” or “a steady frame of mind” of “being susceptible to danger; a feeling of insecurity [...] and vulnerability” (Nohrstedt 2010, 24). These characteristics stem from reflexive modernization’s very “medium” which is “not knowledge, but – more or less reflexive – unawareness” and its “distribution and defense” (Beck 1999, 119). As Beck (2009) succinctly states:

World risk society is a *non*-knowledge society in a very precise sense. In contrast to the premodern knowledge, it cannot be overcome by more and better knowledge, more and better science; rather precisely the opposite holds: it is the *product* of more and better science. (p. 115)

One of the primary examples Beck provides is nuclear energy, reflecting on the aftermath of the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine in 1986. For Beck (2009), the tragedy at Chernobyl awakened the realization that

The world has in the meantime become a laboratory. [...] Just as sociologists cannot force society into a test tube, engineers [should not] let nuclear reactors blow up in order to test their safety. [...] Instead, testing *follows* the application, production *precedes* research (p. 36).

These risks, whether from nuclear energy or global warming, are mainly caused by the simultaneous expansion of industrialization (e.g. pollution) and scientific advancements (e.g. nuclear power) (Beck 1994). Not surprisingly, such risks produce “ongoing crises of governance,” as world leaders “struggle to comprehend, conceptualize and contain the proliferating risks,” which they, ironically, simultaneously produce (O Tuathail 2001, 26). For example, Beck (2009) describes how governmental responses to global terrorist acts “are not simply [the] effects of actual catastrophes” but are equally the result of “their globalized anticipation,” which may be more destructive than the catastrophe itself (Beck 2009, 10).

Ultimately this obliges constructing “new ways of conducting politics at social ‘sites’ that were previously consider unpolitical,” like the environment, reproductive health, or even, more recently, social media (O Tuathail 2001, 26). These new social ‘sites’ become nearly all-encompassing and mirror Foucault’s concept of the ‘art of living,’ where politics becomes “a fundamental universal condition of human existence” (Beck 1999, 93). Therefore, as briefly noted above, such risks are no longer limited to the confines of modern boundaries like the nation-state, but become global, even challenging the Earth’s very ability to continuously sustain life. For Beck, the two primary catalysts of this reflexive modernization, which are extremely prominent in the current public debate, are the inadvertent consequences of globalization and rapid technological advancements. The following sections will proceed to discuss both in further detail and, subsequently, how reflexive modernity’s risks attribute to a reconceptualization of geopolitics.

### **2.1.1 Globalization**

Sergei Prozorov succinctly summarizes the concept of globalization as “usually approached in quasi-universalist terms as the progressive integration of the world’s economic, cultural or even political (sub)systems that erase the boundaries between particular communities” (2014, xvii). The catalysts behind this global integration appear to be the economic growth of capitalism and the political promulgation of liberal democracy, creating a globally connected network of goods, services, people, and information. In an all-consuming manner, this “integrated circuitboard of capitalism” leads to “every act of consumption draw[ing] us into a palimpsest of places, we may never visit, but whose effect and determination are now inescapable” from our own (Murphet 2004, 130). As conjectured by many postmodern theorists, globalization – economic, cultural and political – challenges “the roles of the sovereignty and identities of states,” as well as their separately bounded societies (Albert 1999, 56; Passi 1999, 71). For example, this can be discursively seen in the increasing prevalence of terms such as world politics, global security, and “international society” (Albert 1999, 56).

Thus, the era of reflexive modernity seems to be a time and space of in-betweens, producing crises of “colossal contradictions in social space: homogeneous and fragmented,

same and different;” a tenuous and probably unsustainable hybridity (Murphet 2004, 131). This may be due, in large part, to “increasing deterritorialization,” or the dissolving of modern constructions of space, which “increase[s] insecurity” and uncertainty that are the hallmarks of reflexive modernization (Ó Tuathail 1996, 254). Giddens (1994) expresses this most eloquently: “Globalization is essentially ‘action at distance’; absence predominates over presence, not in the sedimentation of time, but because of the restructuring of space” (p. 46). Nevertheless, as has become arguably more evident in recent events such as Brexit, “people all over the world resent loss of control over their lives” which often stems from globalization (Stevenson 2002, 195).

Beck (2009) labels this process as the “cosmopolitan moment” when “Global risks force us to confront the apparently excluded other,” destroying boundaries and mixing the “native” with the “foreign” (p. 15). However, while Beck maintains that the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ does not necessarily evoke reactionary backlashes, Selcow (2016) hints at a more hybrid “both/and” concept (p. 376). Having worked closely with Ulrich Beck, Sabine Selcow (2016) builds upon Beck’s theories to produce the concept of the “cosmopolitized world,” composed of “the interplay of two moments: the ‘cosmpolitized reality’ and the ‘tradition of national perspective’” (p. 369). Pertinent for this thesis, ‘the tradition of national perspective’ is the conventional “way of looking at the world that is grounded in ‘the equation of the nation-state with national society’,” and which may attempt to reject the “reality of the internal cosmopolitization of societies” (Selchow 2016, 369). Thus, the ‘cosmopoliticized reality,’ as evident in globalization, may be met with reactionary backlashes, which attempt to reterritorialize or reinstitute traditional boundaries such as the nation, against an ever-increasingly deterritorialized reality. Moreover, as a feature of reflexive modernization, it does not appear to resemble a process with a concrete beginning and end, but as a consistent cycle. For example, David Harvey took a Marxist approach to argue that global capitalism was driving globalization’s time-space compression, but this was only one moment in the “restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes” which were “increasingly created, destroyed and reconstituted” as need be (Brenner 1999, 43). Such theoretical discussions on globalization and its effects logically

extend to similar discussions on technological advancements, which appear to be accelerating deterritorialization at an even more momentous pace.

### **2.1.2 Technological Advancements**

In the post-War era, technological innovation appears to have multiplied at an astonishing rate. Heise (2004, 137) notes that “computer technology and biotechnology” in particular, have inspired “utopian hopes as well as [...] apocalyptic fears, and [...] most strikingly created the sense of an epochal break” after World War II. These technological advancements culminated in the creation and mass distribution of the computer by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was the internet that arguably advanced the greatest “sense that the computer was not so much a tool as an entirely new medium, an alternative environment or space,” deterritorialized and limitless in potential (Heise 2004, 140).

Like globalization, rapid technological advancements have disputed the longstanding veneration of space in Western thought. For many theorists, technologies appear to “have radically remade [or decimated entirely] the bonds, boundaries and subjectivities” of the modern era (Ó Tuathail 1998a, 11). This can easily be seen in the popularization of the word cyberspace, which was first coined in a “cyber-punk,” science fiction novel, “combining “cybernetics” and “space”” (Cavelty 2013, 107). While “physical space and the world of electronically mediated connection do not exist as somehow two separate layers” in reality, cyberspace is often perceived as “a vast and complex world inside the machine” holding a distinct, “virtual reality” (Edwards 1996: 20; Massey 2005: 96). For some, such as security practitioners, it may be an “anarchic” space “in need of new rules and control” (Cavelty 2013, 112-113). For others, it may be a liberating, “unexplored land” free from “legal and social constraints” (Cavelty 2013, 107). Yet, for both, the crucial component of this “artificial world” is information, in that cyberspace is “primarily [seen as] a site of linkage and communication, an abstracted reality where everything has become information and information is all that matters” (Edwards 1996, 308). It is little surprise then that with the proliferation of computers and the internet, the twenty-first century is often deemed the ‘information age.’

Others like Manuel Castells (1996), have proposed the term “network society” to accentuate the defining “linkages and connections rather than spatial barriers” which compose the new norm (Dalby 1998a, 308). Without such barriers, many argue that the “politics of speed and time,” or chronopolitics, has made ‘flows’ of information more significant than traditional geopolitics of “territory and distance” (Dalby 1998a, 308). The French philosopher, Paul Virilio is perhaps the most well-known scholar to make such an assertion, emphasizing the magnanimous impact of technology in the military:

Politics is now war carried on by other means, and the doctrine of security founded upon this recognition leads to ‘the saturation of time and space by speed, making daily life the last theater of operations, the ultimate scene of strategic foresight’ (*ibid.*: 92). And embittered victory in these digitalized internal wars comes in fully mediatized on-line form. Indeed, ‘beating an enemy involves not so much capturing as captivating them.’ (Luke 1998, 281)

While speed has always been a consideration in all such costly operations, speed for Virilio is paramount above all other factors, such as “national boundaries.” For Virilio, this leads to an ominous prediction of a “totalitarian power, a technological control over civilized societies” (Campbell 1992, 251; Massey 2005, 96). While many of Virilio’s posits can be aptly critiqued as “exaggerations,” there appears to be some merit in his warnings (Luke & Ó Tuathail 2000, 265). For example, the practices of “risk assessment[s], game theorizing, [and] operational simulation[s]” have become commonplace and even required in most institutions of government, not least the defense sector. Such ‘precautions’ attempt to mitigate the uncertainties inherent in reflexive modernization by “reposition[ing] state agency systematically in a partially anticipated future so that it might enact designs as it trie[s] to foresee them” (Luke & Ó Tuathail 2000, 76). Yet such attempts cannot fully account for the global “consciousness of risks,” which have become unassailable by such “unanticipated consequences and ‘side effects’ of complex technological systems” (Ó Tuathail 2000, 25).

One possible side effect may be that states or even ideologies produce a “second self” through technology, just as many individuals do so psychologically (Edwards 1996, 20). For instance, many political theorists promote the idea that technological

advancements can lead to “the [positive] transformation of social structures” by “empower[ing] [marginalized individuals and communities through] easier and cheaper access to information,” thus “enable[ing] greater democratization of political processes” (Heise 2004, 140). Discussions on the utilization of and faith in technology to promote democracy and spread liberal capitalism are probably the most prominent examples that “technology and culture are not separable in many important ways” (Dalby 1998b, 299). Yet, such “politics of optimism” and belief in the the power of technology to transform social structures towards a utopian ideal is ingrained in a deeper belief that space is not only “merely distance, but as it [is] always a burden [and] constraint,” which should be overcome in order to progress (Massey 2005, 94). Nevertheless, these utopian, technological ideals are now seriously being challenged by the more obvious risks associated with increasing technological advancements, whether from cyber-attacks on a personal computer to shutting down an entire state’s critical infrastructure.

Putting aside such optimistic or pessimistic perceptions of technology’s potential, most agree that these technological advancements can induce risks associated with reflexive modernity, which deterritorialize the modern constructions of space. Cavelty (2013) expresses this vividly:

First, the protective capacity of space is obliterated; there is no place that is safe from an attack. Second, the threat becomes quasi-universal, because it is now everywhere, creating a sense of “imminent but inexact catastrophe, lurking just beneath the surface of normal, technologised [...] everyday life” (Graham 2006: 258). Threats or dangers are no longer perceived as coming exclusively from a certain direction - traditionally, the outside - but are system-inherent; the threat is a quasi-latent characteristic of the system, which feeds a permanent sense of vulnerability and inevitable disaster (p. 115).

Breaking down traditional spatial constructions and their borders also disrupts the traditional notions of sovereignty and security, the logic upon which all states operate. Laine (2016) however maintains that “state borders prevail, even if in reconfigured form” because the “borders are constantly negotiated and reconfigured by its actors at different levels” (p. 472-473, 467). Rationally, this de-structuring, and possibly re-structuring of

space, radically transforms our approach to geopolitics as the politics of territory. The next section will discuss how such features emanating from reflexive modernization have attributed to a reconceptualization of geopolitics, focusing on the cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

## 2.2 Critical Geopolitics

Taking a poststructuralist approach, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) define geopolitics as a “discursive practice [which depicts] a ‘world’ characterized by particular types of places, peoples, and dramas” (p. 190). Traditional geopolitical discourse since the ‘Age of Discovery’ and the height of European colonialism, has centered on geography and state territory, and how these foretell interstate or inter-civilization relations. It is grounded in the ideas of the Enlightenment and the development of modern science in the West, envisioning space as a mathematical Cartesian plane and elevating sight as the premier human faculty (Ó Tuathail 1998b, 6-8). Traditional geopolitics therefore may appear essentialist and deterministic, originally likening a state to an organism, and attributing the formation and development of a state to its natural environment. While the use of the term geopolitics has not been historically consistent, most traditional geopolitical thinkers share “an effort to systematize political life” in order to creat[e] rules that are seemingly ‘natural’” and favorable to their preferred state, empire or civilization (Dittmer 2010, 5). For example, the best known and most widely cited geopolitican from the Anglo-American school is Sir Halford Mackinder, who pioneered such geopolitical concepts as a closed global system, which he argued was becoming progressively more interconnected through advancements in transportation such as the railroad (Ó Tuathail 1998b). Most famous for his Heartland theory and his differentiation between land versus sea-powers, Mackinder’s notions and personal activism were singularly attempting “to manage the crises of late [British] imperialism” and to ensure its survival and supremacy at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sparke 1998, 199).

Although traditional geopolitical thinking has persisted, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as discussions on post-modernity and post-structuralism were arising, many critical theorists began to challenge traditional geopolitics’ deterministic claims. In particular, the French scholar Yves Lacoste took a Marxist approach in his celebrated pamphlet, *The purpose of geography is, above all, the making of war!*, in which he underlined geography foremost as a tool of conquering resources through warfare and colonization (Dittmer 2010, 5-7). Thus, geography could serve as a tool of the state in order to “control [...] space and territories” and to condition its public by legitimizing and naturalizing its expansion, through formal



education and popular culture (Ó Tuathail 1996, 162-163). Such a critical style popularized in the late 1980s came to form an approach fittingly termed critical geopolitics, which questioned the accepted depictions of places, and the people and cultures which reside there, while exploring “the triangle of intellectuals, institutions and ideology” which underpin such depictions (Dittmer 2010, 12; Ó Tuathail 1998b, 8).

In response to postmodern theorists like Ulrich Beck and Paul Virilio whom this thesis discussed above, more current scholars of critical geopolitics are reassessing ‘common sense’ constructions of space and territory, questioning their very importance and utility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In David Delaney’s book *Territory: a short introduction*, Delaney describes territory as “a bounded social space that inscribes a certain sort of meaning onto defined segments of the material world” (2005, 24). It is a social construct or “cultural artifact” as much about “strateg[ies] of control” as the organization and identities of individuals and groups (2005, 10, 12). Thus, constructing a territory automatically invokes an inside versus outside, othering in “specific terms of difference, limit, access, exclusion, [and] the consequences attached to crossing a line,” boundary or border (Delaney 2005, 24). In international relations, since the advent of modern nation-states and the development of international law, territory has also been inextricably associated with sovereignty, which endows states with “absolute authority within a territorial space and to suffer no interference by parties outside of that space” (Delaney 2005, 36). This fixation on state territory and sovereignty largely composes much of International Relations (IR) theory, particularly Realism and Liberalism, which recognize territory “in strongly dichotomous terms by way of mapping order/chaos, identity/difference, presence/absence, politics/power, and so on,” between sovereignty within and anarchy without (Delaney 2005, 37, 54). The political geographer John Agnew has labelled such misconceptions of territory in IR as the “territorial trap,” which includes: that states are “fixed units of sovereign space,” that global space is neatly divided between the domestic and the international, and that the state exists “prior to and as a container of society” (Delaney 2005, 58). Not surprisingly, all three components of Agnew’s “territorial trap” appear to be unravelling, with such traditional social constructs pivotal to IR no longer resembling reality.

In a similar manner, just as territory is a social construct apart of a “complex of state power, geography and identity,” so logically are the boundaries which define it (Ó Tuathail 2000, 140). As briefly mentioned in the discussion above on reflexive modernization, traditional notions of territory and sovereignty are wearing thin, further questioning the usefulness of boundaries between these subjectivities. For scholars of critical geopolitics, this unique process is termed deterritorialization and is nearly always coupled with reterritorialization. For Delaney (2005), “to territorialize” means “to deploy territory in a particular context by linking some phenomenon or entity to a meaningful bounded space,” a process which is a clear “expression[s] of power” (p. 16). Roughly beginning in the early 1970s, two French scholars, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, showed that state “sovereignty is something that has to be *practiced* through ‘marking’ space by boundaries of various kinds,” most often by marking a state’s territory (Albert 1999, 61). Taking a poststructuralist approach, Deleuze and Guattari argued that “for territory to be meaningful [...] a continuous *process of territorialization* [must] take[s] place,” which consists of a cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Albert 1999, 61). Deterritorialization is the “name given to the problematic of territory losing its significance and power in everyday life,” making location and distance no longer insurmountable inhibitors (Ó Tuathail 2000, 139).

The process of reterritorialization routinely follows deterritorialization, although often ignored by many grand theorists. Reterritorialization frequently repurposes the “fragments of the beliefs, customs, practices, and narratives of the older splintered world order” in order to attempt “to restabilize and reterritorialize identity amid global flux” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 230). As practices and discourse, reterritorialization “restructure[s], rearrange[s] and rewire[s]” geography to suit current affairs or policies. For example, Neil Brenner argues that globalization, “does not entail the appearance of a “borderless” or de-territorialized world” devoid of boundaries but rather “entail[s] *re-territorializations* on other scales” such as “regional state institutions [or] transnational economic blocks” like the EU and NAFTA (Delaney 2005, 69, 68; Brenner 1999, 52, 53). In another example, Ciuta and Klinke (2010) analyzed the German “debates on energy security” surrounding the “gas crises” between “Russia and Ukraine in 2006 and 2008” (p. 324). Their analysis found

that popular geopolitical discourse in Germany in recent years has “reproduce[d] the symbolic order and hybrid vernacular-part description embedded in Cold War geopolitics,” reproducing spatial boundaries to describe transnational energy links with Cold War dichotomies such as East versus West or freedom versus oppression, among others. (Ciuta & Klinke 2010, 326). Such research confirms that this dual process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization is not confined to theoretical debates or studies on political geography, but it “manifests itself in social and cultural practices, in legislation but also in movies, novels, memorials, ceremonies and public events, which are connected with boundaries [...] as well as definitions of the Other” (Albert 1999, 63).

Furthermore, one novelty to arise from critical geopolitics was its formulation of various typologies. This thesis addresses two types – structural and popular geopolitics. Structural geopolitics refers to the “structural processes and tendencies that condition how all states practice foreign policy,” such as globalization and technological advancements (Ó Tuathail 1999, 110). While popular geopolitics refers to the “everyday geopolitical discourse” steeped in all forms of texts – written, visual, audio and so forth (Dittmer 2010, 16). For example, Sharp (1993) examined the political articles in the popular American magazine *Reader's Digest*, which were published during the 1980s and 90s, finding clear re-articulation of “dualism” between the US and USSR, with the US portrayed as stalwartly standing against the “moral void” of the Soviets (p. 498, 501).

In a similar approach, this thesis analyzes how transformations in structural geopolitics arising from risks associated with reflexive modernization are being reterritorialized discursively in the popular geopolitical discourse of the US. In particular, this thesis examines how risks associated with technological advancements (e.g. the internet) and globalization (e.g. transnational contacts and travel), which were frantically discussed surrounding allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, were reterritorialized in the discourse of online news articles. However, the context of this specific case study requires sufficient background knowledge, including a general understanding of US geopolitical culture and the key events following the 2016 US presidential election.

### 3. Setting the Scene

#### 3.1 U.S. Geopolitical Culture

In critical geopolitics, a geopolitical culture describes the “ongoing debate” about a state’s “distinct spatial identities” which reveals “how states see the world, how they spatialize it and strategize about the fundamental tasks of the state” (Toal 2017, 10). Undoubtedly, all ‘civilizations,’ empires or states have had a unique geopolitical culture entrenched in specific “organizing myths, favored narrative forms, prevalent conceits, and [even] competing traditions” within them (Toal 2017, 10). In many ways, US geopolitical culture seems similar to most other nation-states, while in other important aspects it appears wholly unique. The commonalities and differences, their continuity and evolution, as well as their particular applications remain crucial for comprehending US geopolitical culture today, and how many Americans come to see the world and their place within it. This section will highlight four major characteristics of U.S. geopolitical culture, while concentrating on key applications within the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. While these four characteristics obviously do not cover the vast complexity and history of U.S. geopolitics, they do allow the reader to trace crucial themes drawn upon in popular culture when discussing Russian interference in the 2016 US election.

Arguably, the most overarching characteristic of U.S. geopolitical culture is what Toal (2017) ironically describes as America’s “absence of geography,” or its ability to be “at once real, material and bounded” “yet also a mythological, imaginary and [a] universal idea with no specific spatial bounds” (p. 10) (Ó Tuathail & Agnew 1998, 83). By “absence of geography,” Toal also specifically points to the relatively unique geography of the US, a “continent-sized country” physically separated from the mires of the ‘Old World’ and straddled by the large moats of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans (Toal 2017, 10). This perceived isolation was touted by many ‘Founding Fathers’ as one of the key “geographic and demographic advantages of America” and was reinforced by the gradual withdraw of many European empires’ from the Western Hemisphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dijkink 1996, 59). This “absence of geography” was complemented by a unique lack of nationality and ancient history upon which many nation-states’ ‘imagined communities’ are consolidated

around. As Campbell (1992) reminds us, ‘nationalities’ and history before the arrival of Europeans were denied significant meaning and effectually erased (p. 144). Therefore, the identity and history of the US appear to be exceptionally clear examples of social constructs, as Campbell (1992) asserts, “‘America’ only exists by virtue of people coming to live in a particular place,” who are consolidated by “representational practice[s]” (e.g. the Pledge of Allegiance) rather than ‘fixed’ ethnicity, religion or other identity markers (although there have been dominant forms of each) (p. 105).

Such an “absence of geography” and ‘ancient’ history appears to have been largely replaced by a second significant characteristic of U.S. geopolitical culture, that of a divine mission and American exceptionalism. In his book *Writing Security*, David Campbell (1992) shows that the geopolitical imagination of the US began as early as the first wave of Puritan colonizers, who preached *jeremiads* or sermons calling for renewal and emphasizing America as the ‘New Jerusalem’ (p. 33). This religious justification was later replaced by a civilizational rationale which included a missionary zeal to spread ‘American values,’ as the zenith of Western liberalism, to the anarchy of ‘lesser races’ (Hunt 1987). This logic naturalized US continental expansion in the creeds of the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny, which later justified imperialism in the Western Hemisphere as “inevitable” and “natural” (Hunt 1987, 129). By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Manifest Destiny took on global proportions with the U.S. playing the role of global defender of ‘civilization’; a civilization which should be made in its capitalist image.

When Communism and its protégé Socialism’s popularity rose, the New World’s shining City on the Hill could no longer afford to be a sedentary beacon but must be ignited worldwide or be snuffed out by its antithesis. Not surprisingly, the prevailing policy and buzzword of the Cold War era became containment, which was effectively limitless in scope. As Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1998) poignantly put, “Its genuine space was the abstract universal isotropic plane wherein right does perpetual battle with wrong, liberty with totalitarianism and Americanism with the forces of un-Americanism” (p. 85). “Fueled by triumphalism” with the end of the Cold War and the success of the Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. began to justify the claim that the world “could and should be shaped in America’s image” for a new “American century,” characterized by the global spread of liberal-

democracy (Haglund & Kertzer 2008, 525; 539-540; Pamment 2014, 56; Salter 2002, 128). Predictably, many presidential administrations began to unsparingly employ foreign interventions, justified as protecting core American values now expanded as values of mankind, such as efforts to promote democracy abroad and the justification of preemptive strikes. Such efforts were often legitimized by maintaining that the US was bringing order and peace to the chaos of violent and oppressed places.

Not surprisingly then, a third important characteristic of U.S. geopolitical culture is the perpetual distinction between an internal order and an external anarchy. The Othering of the US is chiefly recognized in these terms, whether applied to space beyond the U.S. as a whole or to a particular race, region or state. Perhaps the most well-known example is the origin myth of the frontier outlined in 1893 by Fredrick Jackson Turner, who helped brand the frontier as an ever-roving boundary separating “‘barbarism’ and ‘civilization,’ chaos and order, and ‘feminine’ and masculine” (Campbell 1992, 165) (see e.g. Slotkin 1973). This boundary would naturally expand from the American continent around the globe as the US began to expand into Central America and the Pacific islands at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pamment 2014, 48). This construction continued unabated during the Cold War, when the U.S. ‘Othered’ the Soviet Union, most famously in the Truman Doctrine which pitted the “seeds of [Communist] totalitarian regimes” against the civilized, “free peoples of the world” (Truman 1947). The policy of containment institutionalized such ideological Othering, differentiating anarchy and order, by likening communism to a “malignant parasite” that required eradication through both external “quarantine” and internal “neutraliz[ation]” (Campbell 1992, 175; Hunt 1987, 153-154).

The idea of a divided world between order and chaos, and America’s exceptional role within it, also further fuelled political Realism in the US and attempts to use geography as a tool of US foreign policy, most prominently associated with Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brezinski. It also created the faith of many government institutions’ in game theory, statistics and various risk assessments as accurate predictors of global affairs, granting probability in spite of anarchy. This ‘strategic culture’ largely continued unabated, although the chief Others at the end of the Cold War became more postmodern in characteristic, whether identified as terrorism or drugs (Sharp 2000, 143). The Bush

Doctrine and the Global War on Terror (GWOT) are prime examples of these new Others, which are still described with similar moral discourse, such as the ‘Axis of Evil’ which constitutes those countries antithetical to ‘freedom.’ These examples justify Campbell’s (1992) poignant assertion that the Cold War was “not specific to one state or one ideology” but was rather due to a “powerful and pervasive historical configuration of the discursive economy of identity/difference,” not exclusive to the enmity between the U.S. and USSR, but habitually reconstructed (p. 249-250).

The fourth, and final, characteristic of U.S. geopolitical culture this section will discuss is a general optimism towards technology as a tool of US policy and often synonymous with American identity. The steam-engine and railroad seem immortalized in myths of US continental expansion, just as advances in naval and airpower coincided with greater US internationalism. However, the creation of the nuclear weapon and its exclusive use by the US to ‘help speedily end’ World War II is arguably a key turning point in equating US power with technological advancements. Such advancements appear to feed the American perception of itself as a global leader, the guide along the march of progress, purely rational and innovative. The most relevant example may be the Clinton administration’s “techno-optimistic vision of the power of technology to enrich human lives” and multiply liberal democracy (Ó Tuathail 2001, 9). For example, former Vice President Al Gore “announced major public investments in an ‘information superhighway’ that would put a networked computer in every [American] classroom,” treating it as an essential, almost natural resource (Athique 2013, 198). Following US leaders have continued to portray technology, specifically the computer and the internet, as just “the latest frontier proliferating freedom and forging the American character.” This “digital pastoralism” seeks to spread “a form of ‘direct democracy’ reminiscent of the illusionary “‘self-government’ of the Wild West” (Antique 2013, 193, 195). Nevertheless, when technology was critiqued from a foreign policy perspective in the post-Cold War era, it has almost been exclusively coupled with threats from ‘pre-modern’ Others, such as terrorists, rather than being perceived as inherently vulnerable itself (Ó Tuathail 2001, 21). Instead it came to represent a space defined by American exceptionalism and the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s

Manifest Destiny, resembling a tool of Selchow's "tradition of the national perspective" (Ó Tuathail 1998b, 16; Selchow 2016, 369).

While not conclusive, these four characteristics of US geopolitical culture appear to provide a sufficient degree of background knowledge to comprehend most sites of US geopolitical discourse. Nevertheless, this thesis focuses on roughly two-and-a-half months of a nearly 242-year history of the US, and thus the events within this short time period should be specifically addressed in greater detail. While this brief discussion on US geopolitical culture will contribute to the assumptions and environment upon which the online news articles draw, the majority of their context centers on the events directly following the election of Donald Trump in 2016. The following section will attempt to succinctly outline the key events referenced in the majority of online news articles which were analyzed.

### **3.2 Key Events Following the 2016 US Presidential Election**

The victory of the Republican candidate Donald Trump in the November 2016 US presidential election was largely unprecedented in US electoral history. Until the final hours of polling night, major news organizations predicted a landslide victory for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. In the days following Trump's astonishing win, political analysts and journalists alike attempted to explain what they thought they had chiefly failed to surmise beforehand. Retrospections ranged from faulty survey methodology to low voter turnout. However, one of the most popular explanations remained the dual allegation of Russian interference in the election, including both cyber hacks and leaks on the one hand, and corrupt ties to the Trump campaign and his cabinet nominees on the other. The preceding paragraphs will briefly highlight some key events related to Russian interference and the 2016 US presidential election, which occurred between Trump's election and his inauguration, and are widely referenced in the empirical analysis.

Throughout the presidential campaign season, many speculated that the Russian state or its proxies were responsible for the hacking of John Podesta's (the campaign chairman for Hillary Clinton) personal email account and servers at the Democratic



National Committee (DNC), later providing this information to its distributors, most famously WikiLeaks. Confirmation came on December 29, 2016 when the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a declassified Joint Analysis Report (JAR), which stated that “the Russian civilian and military intelligence Services (RIS) [had] compromise[d] and exploit[ed] networks and endpoints associated with the U.S. election,” in particular those of the DNC (DHS & FBI 2016, 1). In response, the Obama administration authorized new sanctions against Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and its Federal Security Services (FSB), the expulsion of 25 Russian ‘operatives’ from the US, and the closure of two Russian estates in New England which had been conducting intelligence operations (Sanger 2016).

Nevertheless, Russia’s goal in interfering in the election was still hotly debated until early January. On January 6, 2017, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) under James Clapper, released a lengthy, declassified report garnered and validated by the FBI, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA), who all confirmed that “DC Leaks, Guccifer 2.0 and Wikileaks had all obtained documents via Russian government-backed hackers” (Nussbaum 2018). Yet, most importantly, the report clearly stated that “Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency” (ODNI 2017, ii). These revelations appeared to escalate doubts about the legitimacy of Trump’s electoral victory, especially when coupled with earlier allegations that some of his campaign staff and cabinet nominees had colluded with Russian officials.

Immediately following the election of Donald Trump, revelations on and media investigations into alleged collusion began, particularly surrounding Trump’s nominee for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and his original pick for National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn. For example, merely two days following the election, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov divulged that there had been contacts between the Russian government and the Trump campaign (Nussbaum 2018). Later that month, the *Washington Post* reported that Flynn had been alerted by Trump’s transition team about US intelligence agencies monitoring his relations with the Russian Ambassador to the US at the time, Sergey Kislyak (Bump 2018). However, such reports did not seem to initially cause

the Trump team to caution its dealings with Russian officials, whether unofficial or professionally. For instance, on December 1, Trump and his son-in-law turned Senior Advisor, Jared Kushner, met with Russian Ambassador Kislyak at Trump Tower in New York City (Nussbaum 2018).

The cycle of close contacts appears to have continued, some of which included discussing the remainder of US foreign policy under the departing Obama administration. For example, in response to Obama's recent sanctions against Russia enacted in late December 2016, Flynn frequently contacted Kislyak, requesting that Russia not escalate the tenuous situation. The next day, Putin announced no counter-measures on behalf of Russia, a decision which Kislyak later attributed to the request made by Flynn. Furthermore, on December 13, despite warnings of an intense round of Senate confirmation hearings, Trump officially nominated Rex Tillerson, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the American oil mammoth Exxon Mobil as Secretary of State, despite his nearly "two-decade relationship with Russia" (Shear & Haberman 2016). His nomination on January 11, 2017 only excited accusations of Russia's intentions, with those opposed to Trump's election claiming that Tillerson and Flynn represented another Russian victory over the US (Everett et al. 2017).

Such discourse was then fueled by the actions of the online media outlet *BuzzFeed*, which published a dossier of brazen but unverified accusations made by Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence officer who had privately investigated Trump. The dossier, which was heavily criticized as unverifiable and 'fake news,' accused the Trump campaign of illegal collusion with the Russian government, as well as, secret discussions between Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen, and "Russian officials in Prague" on "how to pay Kremlin-associated hackers for targeting Hillary Clinton" (Smith 2018). Despite widespread criticism, the dossier's allegations precipitated suspicion that not only had Russian interference favored Trump, but that members of the Trump campaign may have even illegally solicited such interference for an unknown exchange.

In reply, a pattern of press releases and public comments began to emerge from both the Trump administration and Putin's executive. During the roughly two-and-a-half-month transitional period, Trump's response to such allegations evolved from one of complete dismissal – "I don't believe they [Russia] interfered" – to hesitant concession as his

inauguration neared – “As far as hacking, I think it was Russia” (Nussbaum 2018) (Bump 2018). Nevertheless, Trump steadily and openly doubted the feasibility and surreptitious purpose of the congressional and Intelligence Community’s (IC) plans for more extensive investigations. For instance, Trump remarked that “hacking is very hard thing to prove” and compared the whole investigation to a “political witch hunt” characteristic of Nazi Germany (Nussbaum 2018). Adding fuel to the fire of controversy, Trump and Putin also periodically and publically congratulated and complimented one another with the use of social media (Nussbaum 2018) (Bump 2018).

Yet these events and the news coverage surrounding them spurred a time of exceptional suspicion about foreign intervention, which appeared to inspire numerous conspiracies and exaggerations from those both on the right and on the left. In comparison to the proceeding 25 years following the Cold War, near frantic discussions in the US about Russian global power and intentions reappeared, but seemingly along different party lines than those characteristic of the Cold War. During the Cold War, left-wing Democrats had generally been labelled soft on security or ‘doves,’ while the right-wing Republicans were labelled hard on security or ‘hawks’. However, after the shocking election of Donald Trump, it appeared that roles could have reversed to some extent, with the Left much more assertively confronting perceived Russian interference. In addition, many analysts began to stress the powerful role of the media, especially domestic partisan media outlets. Many prominent figures attempted to blame the opposing partisan media for misleading portions of the American public, favoring one candidate or platform over the other. Thus, popular discourse came to dominate the coverage of these events, whether debating the validity of the claims or the intention of the claims themselves.

## 4. Analytical Framework

### 4.1 Research Methodology

Discourse can be defined as “a set of capabilities that allows us to organize and give meaning to the world and our actions and practices within it,” often as a presumed common sense expressed through a variety of texts, whether written, visual or audio (Ó Tuathail 2002, 605). Most scholars appear to elevate texts of “formal authorit[ies],” conducting discourse analysis on texts such as presidential addresses or campaign speeches (Flint et al. 2009; Toal 2009). In utilizing a critical geopolitical approach, these texts are often associated with formal and practical production sites of geopolitics, enacted by state practitioners or theorists, rather than popular discourse generated by the public or media. However, in many respects, popular discourse serves as a blunter source, quicker in responding to surprising events and arguably, consumed by a wider audience (Sharp 1993, 493). Certainly, this can be observed in the production of the news media, especially in commentary or opinion pieces, which tend to address the wider public and attempt to simplify complexities, while drawing upon the popular and geopolitical culture of the state, region or other locality.

These discourses usually construct narratives, which “report a sequences of events” centering on a key incident which “triggers a chain of causality,” ultimately either presenting the world as “getting better, getting worse, or staying the same” (Boundana & Segev 2017, 318; Dittmer 2010, 69). In fact, in media and communication studies, such narratives are likened to frames which “help make clear what kind of problem a problem is, what sort of tools are used for dealing with it, and which actors are protagonists and antagonists” (Vultee 2011, 79). These narratives or ‘frames’ are usually biased yet surprisingly durable over long periods of times (Klar et al. 2013, 178). Moreover, these narratives or ‘frames’ appear particularly evident when political “parties are polarized (i.e., far apart and homogenous,” because they tend to “drive opinions regardless of the strength of the argument” (Klar et al. 2013, 178, 183-184).

For many Americans, politics appears to have become increasingly polarized in recent years, with the conservative Right and liberal Left isolating themselves to an ever

greater extent. Not surprisingly, many studies confirm this. For instance, party identification “has become a better predictor of vote decisions,” and the average voter is “less likely to [be] split” their election ballot between different parties” (Prior 2013, 105). Although party polarization has been authenticated, a direct “causal link between more partisan [media] messages and changing [public] attitudes or behaviors” remains inconclusive, partially due to serious methodological constraints (Prior 2013, 101). Nevertheless, it appears that scholars do agree that partisan media messages are prevalent sources of US popular discourse, and may seriously effect public opinion and/or the foreign policy agenda of the US. The partisan differences in narratives may best be seen by tracing their divergent storylines.

Storylines, like plots, compose narratives and can often be considered geopolitical by describing “the way in which geopolitical events, locations, protagonists and interests are organized into a relatively coherent narrative of explanation and meaning” (Ó Tuathail 2004, 284-285). For Ó Tuathail (2002), most storylines answer five key questions, including: “where?”, “what?”, “who?”, “why?”, and “so what?” (p. 619). In order to effectively answer such questions, storylines primarily employ various representations, which are simply abstractions holding “in unchanging form what is moving, changing and interconnected,” frequently through “ideology and discourse” (Klinke 2012, 684; Ó Tuathail 1998a, 3). These representations “provide[s] a means of linking together events according to a desired endpoint” and can often be spatial (Pamment 2014, 50). For example, one type of representation frequently employed is that of a metaphor, defined simply as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” which are already “in a person’s conceptual system,” such as the well-known English metaphor “time is money” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5-9). Likewise, how a storyline answers the question of “By whom or for whose benefit?” is often tied to its representations of Other(s), a process which is an “inherently spatial,” “boundary-producing practice” of “exclusion” (Ó Tuathail 1996, 179, 171).

Therefore, it is the aim of this thesis to examine how US popular discourse on Russian interference following the 2016 US presidential election is reterritorialized and grafted into traditional US geopolitical culture. Given the apparent polarization of US

politics in recent years, this analysis compares partisan media narratives in order to determine whether they significantly differ in their construction of a geopolitical storyline and the calls to action they produce. This research argues that US partisan narratives may reterritorialize risks associated with reflexive modernization, which have conventionally been perceived as deterritorializing, such as cyber and information space, employing calls to action customarily introduced for the breach of US sovereign territory. For example, the US media seems to periodically portray Russia as having breached US cyber and information space, presenting such ‘spaces’ as if they were traditional territories governed by traditional sovereignty and state responsibility. At the same time, such discourse also attempts to revive aspects of Cold War geopolitical discourse to describe possible collusion with a foreign Other. For example, some coverage additionally highlights the theme of infiltration or political ‘cells’ (‘the traitors among us’) when reporting on cyber trolls or Russia ‘sympathizers,’ both as actors who have physically breached ‘our’ territory.

Thus, this thesis pursues a single case study of US popular discourse immediately following the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016. Due to time constraints, it focused on the two partisan narratives which emerged following the election of Donald Trump from Election Day on November 9, 2016 until his inauguration on January 20, 2017, in order to cap the amount of articles required to analyze and to limit coverage to certain key events. This roughly two-and-a-half-month time period revolved around the post-election media climate, which attempted to answer the question of how Trump won, why previous electoral predictions had failed, and to what extent Russia was involved and responsible for Trump’s victory. Before the large-scale congressional investigations began, this skeptical and reflexive environment where truth, American identity and boundaries were being disputed, provides a prime sample for a poststructuralist discourse analysis focusing on the “socially constructed and contingent, addressing questions of “how” and “how possible” related to identity and boundaries of the Self (the US) and an Other (Russia) or Others (internal opponents) (Dunn & Neumann 2016, 10, 11-12). Thus, this research is not an investigation to determine the ‘facts’ of Russian interference or collusion, but rather how popular, partisan sources sought to construct ‘facts and reality’ when the knowledge or evidence of such was largely, publically unavailable or inconclusive. In

particular, this thesis conducts a poststructuralist discourse analysis based upon the post-Marxist approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, which takes a "radical materialist position" that sees all discourse as "a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed" by "articulatory practices" rather than the exclusive product of "an extra-discursive 'reality'" (Carpentier & De Cleen 2007, 26; Howarth 2003, 272; Laclau 1988, 254). This empirical analysis draws primarily upon the second level of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory or the "political identity theory," in which articulatory practices construct all "social phenomenon" as an "ensemble of linguistic differences in which the identity of any element depends on its relation to other elements in the system," but which is never finally fixed and is nearly always being politically disputed (Carpentier & De Cleen 2007, 267; Howarth 2003, 272, 274).

#### **4.2 Data and Sources**

In order to compare and contrast the partisan narratives on Russian interference following the 2016 US presidential election, this thesis analyzes the storylines of right-wing (conservative) and left-wing (liberal) online, news articles, where are readily and freely available to the public. However, to determine which US online news outlets are considered right or left-wing always contains a kernel of subjectivity which is difficult to eliminate, especially given that previous surveys and studies on partisan media choose vastly different methodologies and sources. Ultimately, this thesis examines online, news articles from three right-wing (*Fox News*, *Breitbart* and *The Daily Caller*) and three left-wing (*MSNBC*, *HuffPost* and *Vox*) online news outlets. These six news outlets were chosen based on previous studies on political polarization and the media.

By far, the most widely cited study is the Pew Research Center's (PRC) 2014 report entitled, "Political Polarization and Media Habits," which summarizes how and why Americans get information from certain "news media, social media and the way people talk about politics with friends and family" (Mitchell et al. 2014, 1). The report outlines the findings from the PRC's American Trends Panel, which consists of an online survey "conducted [between] March 19 [and] April 29, 2014 among 2,901 web respondents," and which further categorizes respondents according to "ideological consistency" (p. 1). Most

strikingly, the survey confirmed that consistent liberals and consistent conservatives, “who together comprise about 20% of the public overall,” are the most politically active and, thus, have a disproportionate influence on politics (p. 1). Not surprisingly, the two ends of this spectrum have vastly divergent media diets. Consistent liberals “rely on a greater range of news outlets” compared to consistent conservatives who mainly rely on *Fox News* (p. 2).

In a similar study, almost one year following Trump’s election, scholars at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University published findings from their large-n content analysis of “over two million stories related to the [US presidential] election, [which were] published online by approximately 70,000 media sources between May 1, 2015 and Election Day in 2016” (Faris et al. 2017, 17). The report adamantly disagreed with some previous claims of symmetric polarization of both right and left-wing media. Instead, the researchers assert evidence of asymmetric polarization on the right, including a “hallowing out of the center-right [media, like the *Wall Street Journal*,] and its displacement by a new, more extreme form of right-wing” media, like *Breitbart* (Faris et al. 2017, 18). Interestingly, their analysis of media coverage during the election additionally found that the topic of a ‘Trump-Russia’ scandal was the least covered topic per candidate, in comparison to the most covered topic of immigration (Faris et al. 2017, 6). Overall, however, Faris’s et al. (2017) study appears to correspond to Prior’s (2013) forecast that the new partisan media, coupled with developing technologies, may “cater to ideological niches” of polarized political activists, effectively granting them “disproportionate political influence” compared to the average, more moderate voter (p. 123). All the same, Faris’ et al. (2017) survey on which media sources people relied on for coverage of the 2016 campaign season discovered that the left-wing sources, *MSNBC*, *HuffPost* and *Vox*, as well as, the right-wing sources *Fox News*, *Breitbart* and *The Daily Caller* were “popular across all platforms,” including “inlinks,” Twitter and Facebook (p. 13). Thus, this thesis chose these same six sources from which to draw the 30 news articles, given their popularity during the 2016 campaign season and their reputations for representing a larger partisan narrative.



In order to retrieve these articles, this analysis utilized the online, open source platform Media Cloud<sup>1</sup>, created by the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. This platform allows users to freely and easily search for online news articles according to a variety of variables, such as by sources, keywords or even a particular time period. In order to initially keep the data collection broad, this analysis searched for articles from each source, including only the keyword “Russia,” and which were published between Trump’s election on November 9, 2016 until his inauguration on January 20, 2017. This initial search yielded a whopping 3,503 articles – 1,575 articles from the right-wing outlets and 1,928 articles from the left-wing outlets; possibly qualitative example of the mass anxiety surrounding allegations of Russian interference following the election. These results were then compiled into two large Microsoft Excel files and subsequently filtered in several rounds.

The first round eliminated those articles which did not solely focus on Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. For example, articles addressing the crisis in Syria, nuclear weapons, Russian domestic politics, the Olympic doping scandal, and other irrelevant coverage, such as travel pieces or recaps of late-night comedy sketches, were removed from further consideration. Despite significant cuts, the first round of filtering still yielded an unwieldy 1,707 total articles. Thus, the second round of filtering attempted to privilege longer articles and opinion pieces, while eliminating reprints, videos and transcripts of previous TV/radio broadcasts, or shorter text solely rehashing the quotes of political leaders. The third and last round of filtering organized the right and left-wing articles by topic, ensuring that allegations of Russian hacks, leaks and collusion were sufficiently represented in quantity and quality. In light of the significant time constraints, 30 articles, 15 right-wing and 15 left-wing articles, were chosen, all of which were considered opinionated, lengthy and representative of many similar articles. This analysis then utilized MAXQDA: Qualitative Data Analysis Software to code key themes for the discourse analysis. These codes coalesced around the four questions which structure the analysis of the articles’ storylines, including: what happened, how did it happen, by whom and for whose benefit, and what are the consequences. Thus, the codes concentrated on

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<sup>1</sup> The platform can be found at [www.mediacloud.org](http://www.mediacloud.org)

collecting the articles' descriptions of Russian hacks, leaks and collusion, the use of metaphors and Othering, and calls to action, concentrating on examples of reterritorialization among them all.

## 5. Analysis of Partisan Narratives

Having provided a synopsis on reflexive modernization and critical geopolitics, as well as, a brief background on US geopolitical culture and the events proceeding the election of Donald Trump, this section will present the empirical results of the discourse analysis. The main focus of this analysis remains how risks arising from reflexive modernization, which are often perceived as forces of deterritorialization, may be reterritorialized in popular discourse, necessitating certain calls for action which attempt to re-stabilize and re-secure. As such, this analysis will note the “specific terms of different, limit, access, exclusion, [and] the consequences of crossing [that] line [...]” which are discursively produced to separate the inside and outside, as well as, “the identities” of those within, without and in-between (Ciuta & Klinke 2010, 326; Delaney 2005, 24). To achieve this, the analysis also examines major cases of Othering and the prevalent use of metaphors, both of which are crucial representations of the process of reterritorialization. For example, the “definition of the Other” involves “exclusion” which “is inherently spatial,” while “spatial metaphors” (e.g. “close allies,” “reapproachment”) form a crucial “part of the vocabulary of politics” (Albert 1999, 63; Chilton 2004, 67; Ó Tuathail 1996, 179). The remainder of this section will then present the analysis of partisan storylines of Russian interference following the 2016 US presidential election. Building off of Ó Tuathail’s (2002) description of a geopolitical storyline, this analysis will answer four key questions, including: what happened, how did it happen, by whom or for whose benefit, and what are the consequences. First, it will discuss the storylines of 15 articles from the right-wing sources *Fox News*, *Breitbart* and *The Daily Caller*. Secondly, it will discuss the storylines of 15 articles from the left-wing sources *MSNBC*, *HuffPost* and *Vox*.

### 5.1 Right-Wing Storylines

#### 5.1.1 What Happened? Russian Hacks, Leaks and Collusion

For the majority of right-wing articles, to answer the question what happened is not a straightforward endeavor nor more important than answering the question of intent. Therefore, it appears that the violation of space may be partially predicated on the target,

the means, the outcome and the intention of such violations. For many articles, the majority of which appear to approve of Trump's election as legitimate, Russian attempts to influence the election are plausible, but claims that Russian influence could have predetermined the outcome of the election seem unlikely or infeasible. At times, the articles perceive that the allegations themselves are a greater threat to American democracy than whether or not such allegations are in fact true or false. Overall, the right-wing articles appear to reterritorialize Russian interference as the violation of US territory, while tending to qualify this intrusion as ineffectual and minor.

In the right-wing storylines, the target and means of Russian interference depend on how the article defines 'true' intervention. For example, Tancredo (2016) states that "While Russian hacking of both industrial secrets and government agency data is widespread [...] there is [no] evidence of hacking into election machines or any attempted compromise of 2016 election tabulations." Rather, "actual cheating" or true intervention would involve "manipulating voting machines, bribing and blackmailing members of the Electoral College, or planting and disseminating false information about a candidate," which according to Benkoff (2016), was committed by internal Others on the Left rather than Russia. Likewise, Stirewalt (2017) states that "While there are lots of reasons to believe that Russia was involved in hacking Democratic campaign emails, there is no reason to believe that Russia interfered in the recording or casting of votes." Therefore, for many right-wing articles the target of Russian interference was not the election results. The election results are represented as the vital core of the election and American democracy but are limited to the cyberspace contained within the devices which tally and record the votes, rather than simply "influenc[ing] American public opinion" or only "fiddling with the campaign narrative" (Stirewalt 2016) (Tancredo 2016). Thus, the campaign process and election day are represented as two separate temporal occurrences and spaces. It appears that cyberspace (e.g. election results) is reterritorialized and represented as an exclusive territory or property of the US, while information space (e.g. campaign, media) may be deterritorialized, allowing for greater, open access.

The means through which Russia did interfere are described as almost lesser crimes, whose condemnation is also disputed. On the one hand, the right-wing storylines attempt to

normalize Russian hacking of government institutions as “simply the use of new technologies to pursue traditional foreign policy goals” and something which the US government conducts “TODAY in a dozen places around the globe” (Tancredo 2016). In fact, the reputed Russian hacking and leaking of the Clinton campaign emails and DNC servers are even described as a moral act which may have “actually increased the transparency of the election” and made it more democratic (Peek 2016). Revere (2017) even boasts of Russia’s moral superiority over internal Others, like the main stream media, writing “Russia is alleged to have done what should have been the job of the American Press [namely,] objective reporting on Hillary.” Thus, although Russia “fraudently obtain[ed] true information soon distributed by WikiLeaks” and others, it still appears morally excusable as having possibly contributed to the identity (and strength) of the internal space and its vital “representational practice” of the presidential election, “regardless of its provenance” (Benkoff 2016).

Therefore, the violation of space may be excused or allayed in the right-wing storylines if the outcome somehow serves to buttress the function and identity of the internal space, or if it exposes subversive violations committed by internal Others. Not surprisingly then, the external violation of space by Russia and internal violation of space by the Democrats are often equated – “The United States should not tolerate cyberattacks from a foreign government; nor should we tolerate cheating in our politics” (Peek 2016). In another manner, West (2017) compares Russian President Vladimir Putin to a criminal informant, who rightly exposed the villain, Hillary Clinton:

To dismiss this avalanche of evidence of crime and corruption because, let’s say, Putin himself pushed the button to release it, would be like dismissing the evidence against a Mafia don or mass murder that is genuine, but passed to law enforcement by a criminal informant.

Thus, while the means may have been ‘criminal,’ the target and outcome may have been preferable in that the ‘truth’ was revealed about the ‘criminals’ within US territory/space. Moreover, in reference to the quote above, this “law enforcement” figure appears to be those organizations which officially leaked the information hacked by the Russians, the most well-known being WikiLeaks. By being analogized to a law enforcement agency,

WikiLeaks is portrayed as a passage between spaces or as a protective middleman between the American public and its pursuit of internal criminals by “doling out juicy information” (Virgil 2016). In contrast, Pollock (2017) describes the unverified Steele “dossier” published by the online media outlet *BuzzFeed*, as “almost certainly a clumsily created fake” whose “author violated basic standards for intelligence reporting.”

While WikiLeaks was generally praised for its role in increasing the transparency of the election, the right-wing articles appear more divided in their description of other middleman figures, like the alleged colluders affiliated with the incoming Trump administration. Allegations of collusion between Russian government officials and close associates of Trump were widely scrutinized after the election, with the perceived colluders portrayed as possible pawns of Russian interests. The right-wing articles chiefly focus on Trump’s nominees for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and for National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, almost never broaching other key associates like Paul Manafort or Steve Bannon. The key example of reterritorialization expressed in these descriptions relates to the idea of proximity, with their personal relationships with Russian officials or business interests in Russia demonstrating their closeness and, thus, possibly their “instrumentality and accompaniment” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 134-135). In such portrays, Tillerson and Flynn appear as neither fully Us nor Them and, therefore, compromised and untrustworthy.

As Trump’s nominee for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson’s alleged collusion stems from his past business investments in Russia and relations with Putin, in his former role as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the American oil mammoth, ExxonMobil. In contrast to portrayals of Flynn, Tillerson’s proximity to Russia and Putin are debated among the articles. Some articles condemn Tillerson as a tool for further Russian interference primarily because Tillerson’s and Russia’s oil interests are aligned. For example, Schoen and Smith (2016) describe Tillerson as a “friend and ally of Vladimir Putin” and someone who will continue “negotiation and appeasement that had handed Putin his greatest victories,” which are assumed to stand against US interests. On the other hand, some see his past proximity as an asset, portraying Tillerson as possessing a unique knowledge of the Other and, thus, an ability to pragmatically deal with Russia. For instance, McGrady (2017) styles Tillerson as a “calculated choice” whose “close relations” with Russian political

leaders are a benefit that “giv[es] him a hand up in any future dealings with the Eurasian adversary.” Moreover, *Fox News* (2017a) also depicts Tillerson as a stalwart and calculating figure who, in contrast to allegations, “took a noticeably harder line toward Putin and Russia than Trump” and whose “more deliberative vision” actually strengthens rather than weakens the boundary separating the Other. Nevertheless, these articles still necessitate that Tillerson publically and consistently criticize the Other, by condemning Russian hacks and leaks, as well as, other Russian actions abroad, like the illegal annexation of Crimea.

On the other hand, nearly all right-wing articles condemn Flynn as a colluder who clearly serves Russia’s interests and whose loyalty to the US is seriously questioned. His disloyalty to the US is portrayed by his repetition of the Russian state narrative and his excuses for Russia’s actions abroad. For example, Schoen and Smith (2016) point out Flynn’s titular position within Russia, having once “been honored by Russian state propaganda network RT, [while] sitting at Putin’s right hand during the awards dinner.” Referring to the same event, *Fox News* (2017b) further analogizes it to Flynn’s future position, warning of his simultaneous proximity to Trump “in the West Wing close to the Oval Office.” Thus, Flynn seems to be a much more active actor than Tillerson, a suspicious double-agent like figure who dangerously connects the inside and outside, and whose proximity and relations with Russian officials are not limited to past business deals. In particular, one sign of Flynn’s ‘gateway’ role is his use of personal telephone calls to high-level Russian officials, which can be extremely powerful enough to even help “shape - - Russia’s [lack of a] response” to Obama’s sanctions (*Fox News* 2017b). Thus, Flynn mires the secure distinction between the Self and the Other, helping to shape policy on both sides of the boundaries while regurgitating the Russian state’s narrative.

### **5.1.2 How Did It Happen? Metaphors**

The question of *how* did it happen, may best be answered by concentrating on the use of reoccurring metaphors, all of which convey reterritorialization. In the right-wing articles these three metaphors include likening events to military operations, sport games and natural phenomenon. By far, the right-wing storylines most frequently employ the

metaphor of military operations, which analogizes Russian interference to a military conflict between physical adversaries, usually initiated by the violation of a sovereign, physical space, like the traditional domains of operations, land, sea or air. The right-wing articles use this familiar analogy to describe an inter-state conflict between the US and Russia and, more often, internal conflicts between Trump and a number of his domestic ‘opponents.’

For example, by referring to Obama as “commander-in-chief,” Stirewalt (2016) asserts that the appropriate role of the US president at the time of Russian interference was as leader of the armed forces, implying that their use against Russia may have been appropriate. As “commander-in-chief,” Obama should have “kep[t] the American public safe and protect[ed] the integrity of our election system” from “devastating blows” (James 2016; Stirewalt 2016). Therefore, the US was attacked by the enemy, who compromised the integrity of American democracy and the physical well-being of Americans, which were equated and which necessitate a strong, possibly even military, response. Furthermore, a military failure abroad or the perception that the US is lagging behind in a particular capability are seen as precursors to the failure of US leadership to thwart foreign intervention on the ‘home front.’ For example, Revere (2017) emphasizes that “Prior to November 9 [Election Day], Obama and the rest of the Left expressed little concern about Russia’s move to modernize and expand its military forces, including its strategic nuclear arsenal.” For Revere (2017), Russia’s military posture and ability to interfere in the presidential election are directly correlated, a reasoning which naturalizes prior confrontation abroad as one possible solution to prevent future interference.

Nevertheless, the most popular use of the metaphor of military operations describes a conflict between Trump and his domestic opponents. For instance, Virgil (2017) draws a very personalist “battleline” dividing “pro-Trump and anti-Trump” “forces” which are preparing for a future struggle during Trump’s presidency. The key weapon of these “anti-Trump” “forces,” will continue to be the allegations of Russian interference and collusion, or the “Weaponization of Rumors” in order to delegitimize Trump and/or have him removed from office (Tancredo 2016). West (2017) also likened the entire domestic debate on Russian interference to a “political battle [that] has been joined, locked, over these



charges, creating a firefight in tunnel vision.” In this “political battle,” the most referenced opponents to Trump were perceived to be the Democratic “operatives,” the “Deep State” and the Intelligence Community (IC) as a whole (James 2016; Virgil 2017; West 2017). For example, the Deep State appears like a well-armed submarine hidden and submerged from view, yet “full speed ahead, still seeking to torpedo Trump” (Virgil 2016). Thus, the question of how did it happen is not only answered by external violation of territory, but additionally by internal division and, thus, the weakening of the territory by internal Others who have corrupted the strength of its order and unity.

In a less combative tone, some articles also relate these external and internal conflicts to descriptions of a sports game played by opposing teams. Echoing the Realist paradigm and game theory in IR, global politics is portrayed as a game with many opposing players but with few explicit rules. For instance, Tancredo (2016) describes Russian hacks and leaks as simply the “political involvement in other nations’ elections [as] a game played by major powers,” in which Russian actions have not necessarily violated any rules of the game, but were simply successful in this round, at the expense of the US. Such representations reterritorialize the election process or, more broadly, cyber and information space, by likening them to a playing field where states compete and are often personified by the decisions of their executive leaders. Thus, Obama’s apparent “inability to act decisively when confronted with complex situations” is compared to “a quarterback who freezes when faced with [an] unfamiliar blitzing and zone scheme” (James 2016). Consequently, in the game between the US and Russia, the field of play can be both internal and external space, with team Russia overcoming the weak US and its clumsy Capitan, both at away-games or on the home-field.

On the home field, the domestic space is also metaphorically divided into two opposing teams, most often represented as Trump versus his numerous domestic opponents. For example, Stirewalt (2017) presents Trump as the coach of ‘his team,’ crafting the strategy straight from “his own playbook” in order to ultimately “advantage[s] himself in the final showdown.” One of these opposing teams is the “Deep State” who plays “the game [against Trump] from R Street to Rosslyn, from Reston to Rockville” along the sports field that is Washington D.C. (Virgil 2016). These metaphors of sports games, chiefly

American football, do not emphasize the violation of space per se but rather the strategy required to move within the space and overcome unforeseen obstacles and outsmart one's opponents.

Finally, a few right-wing articles also liken political events to natural phenomenon. In particular, the Virgil (2016, 2017) employed a number of metaphors of natural phenomenon to explain Trump's opponents, the Deep State, and their battle against him. For instance, the Deep State lurks in the "DC swamp," a corrupted and dangerous space, an internal chaos which requires discipline and should be "drained" by the outsider, Trump. Virgil (2017) also portrays the Deep State as an almost all-powerful and surrounding force, which has conjured "the storm [against Trump] on many fronts," like a "leviathan, a metaphorical Moby Dick, vortexing the waters around Trump, seeking, if it can, to sink his ship of state" (Virgil 2016). Such metaphors of natural phenomenon or creatures depict the internal space as a wild, anarchical space of struggle created by internal Others who continue to further corrupted it. As the example above shows, these spaces seem to reflect those who reside there, while Trump as the "ship of state" represents order or civilization attempting to progress amid this hostile environment.

### **5.1.3 By Whom? For Whose Benefit? Othering**

In the right-wing storylines, many articles differentiate between the external perpetrator and internal Others. Thus, the external anarchy can violate the internal order of the U.S. when the citizenry is not united around the "representational practice" of a legitimate, democratic election (Campbell 1992, 105). Therefore, when 'our' space is violated, this is partially due to 'our' faulty decisions in failing to defend our boundaries or unite around our identity. So the breach of the US' boundaries is not primarily due to the success of the "bad guy[ 's]" external violation but rather the failure of 'our' internal defense (Stirewalt 2016). In a very Realist manner, the unique impenetrability of the US is further predicated upon its exceptional role in foreign affairs and its perceived rank on the global hierarchy of power. As a result, the world is seen as a closed system of zero-sum, inter-state relations, in which the diminishing power of the US naturally leads to foreign

manipulation and intervention. The chief Other attempting to remove US exceptionalism and leadership abroad appears to Russia.

Despite questioning the intent and effect of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, Russia constitutes the chief external Other in the majority of right-wing articles. Most prominently, Russia stands in stark contrast to the US as a ““strategic competitor” of America” and “a [perpetual] Opponent,” just like “its predecessor, the Soviet Union” (Revere 2017). While its tactics may appear to be the common practice of major powers, they are also characterized as distinctively anti-American, joining the ranks of the “Chinese, North Koreans, Iranians, [and] Cubans” who challenge US supremacy (Tancredo 2016). At the same time, the internal workings of Russia are draped in mystery, with Virgil (2016) quoting Churchill’s famous maxim on Russia as “a riddle wrapped inside a mystery inside an enigma” – a space hidden behind layers which mask its intentions, making it appear inconceivable and impenetrable.

Yet those who occupy this seemingly impenetrable space are donned an essentialist nature, with Russia and Russians chiefly personified and understood through Russian President Vladimir Putin. In particular, Schoen and Smith (2016) present Putin as a brutal mastermind who has “invaded” and “murdered” with a “body count that continues to climb.” Stirewalt (2016) extends such characterization to the civilizational identity of all ‘Slavs,’ noting that “Slavic standards for brutality in war differ sharply from our more-delicate, laser guided rules of engagement in the West.” Such negative representations of the Other, whether Russia, ‘Slavs,’ or Vladimir Putin, are also frequently extended to those inside ‘our’ territory who have equally violated its identity or boundaries.

For the right-wing articles, the key internal Other responsible for weakening the US and failing to defend its boundaries is former US president Barack Obama. For example, Russia’s actions are the predictable and inevitable result of “foreign nations sensing weakness in an indecisive President [Obama],” while likening Russia’s actions to the sexual assault of a weaker, feminine victim, “which has led Russia to manhandle his Administration” (James 2016; Stirewalt 2016). Yet, the most obvious example of Obama’s failure is his lack of leadership in addressing the crisis in Syria – “Obama pulled back and bought a lemon of a Lada off of Putin’s car lot. It was laughable for America to cede the

lead role in Syria to the most obvious bad guys [...]” (Stirewalt 2016). Therefore, the failure to secure a boundary, to lead abroad or to enact consequences for such a boundary’s breach automatically weakens the integrity of the boundary at home, which serves as the protective buffer separating the order and strength inside from the anarchy outside. However, the weakest internal space appears to be that of the US capitol, largely a product of the internal Others which reside there.

In addition to the Obama administration, the right-wing storylines also partially blame the elites of Washington D.C. and the mainstream media, both of which are perceived to benefit from the promulgation of allegations on Russian interference and collusion. The Washington elites are presented as a separate internal Other, whether Republican or Democrat, who are disconnected from the ‘real’ America and are “desperate to keep [...] these parties of corruption going” (West 2017). They represent one of the main sources of internal weakness having corrupted the internal space by not uniting around the legitimacy of Trump’s victory or his future presidency, which are seen as a legitimate election result. Accordingly, Virgil (2016) uniquely labels them “the Deep State,” as those “complex of bureaucrats, technocrats, and plutocrats that like things just the way they are and wants to keep them like that – elections be damned.”

While the source of such allegations may be the D.C. elites, ‘they’ propagate these allegations through the mainstream, “Left media” who “regularly [seeks] approval and editing suggestions from their Democratic sources” (Pollock 2017; Revere 2017; Trancredo 2016; Viril 2017; West 2017). Not surprisingly, the right-wing articles seem to denounce all claims made by such media, often using quotations or italics to connote doubt when recounting said claims (see Revere 2017, West 2017). For West (2017), by pandering allegations of Russian interference, they are simply refusing to admit that Hillary Clinton’s “woe-begotten campaign” failed due to its inauthentic, “horrible candidate” (James 2016; Stirewalt 2016). Therefore, allegations that the internal space was breached by the external Other Russia, may be nothing more than excuses extensively exaggerated by internal Others refusing to admit electoral defeat or as the byproduct of their own internal corruption.

#### **5.1.4 What Are the Consequences? Predictions and Calls to Action**

The right-wing articles tend to be divided over what constitutes the required response of the US towards Russia, as well as, the necessary response to internal Others. For those articles which seem to take a more assertive stance towards Russia, the US must proceed with serious investigations, consider retaliation and prevent Russian-friendly nominees from sitting in Trump's cabinet. According to similar storylines, Russia will only respond to aggressive counter "pressure" and not to the failed policies of "negotiation and appeasement" which have left "the nation more vulnerable than it has ever been" (James 2016; Schoen & Smith 2016). This vulnerability persists as a target, ensuring that "we should expect that [(Russia)] will attempt to [attack us] again" (Revere 2017). Such discourse necessitates a proactive defense, which Schoen and Smith (2016) define as "strengthen[ing] NATO, finish[ing] the missile shield in Europe, arm[ing] Ukraine, [and] aggressively disrupt[ing] Putin's relentless cyberwarfare and propaganda operations." Thus, for such storylines, defense may mean proactive actions abroad rather than primarily buttressing domestic boundaries. Furthermore, no articles directly dispute the recently announced congressional investigations into Russian interference, but rather "agree with [the] calling" for such investigations (Schoen & Smith 2016). However, some call for investigations into the acts of internal Others who are also partially blamed, such as James (2016) which wishes to investigate "how and if Obama and his intelligence czars failed to protect us from the most significant and embarrassing act of cyber terrorism ever directed against this country." The right-wing storylines thus call for investigations into both external and internal Others, for alleged violation, collusion, corruption or incompetence.

Yet, many right-wing articles also predict that "the real storm is yet to come" as those on the Left, led by their "great helmsman, Barack Obama" will "continue to whine" about Russia in order to change the result of the election, the very allegation they continuously make against Russia (Benkoff 2016; Virgil 2016). Many articles agree that such allegations on Russian interference should seize because they are detrimental to American democracy by leading "Americans [to] stop believing their votes matter" and "obscure[ing]" the "real news" of corruption within and between the Democratic party and mainstream media (Benkoff 2016; West 2017). Thus, it is acceptable for the American

public to simply “ignore them” as those “Democrats [who] continue to whine that Russia “hacked the election”,” at least until such ‘childish’ allegations naturally expire or are later proven false (Benkoff 2016). Therefore, it appears logical that the true intention of the internal Others is not chiefly to investigate or to combat Russian interference, but rather to “mislead the public and cast a shadow of illegitimacy over the electoral victory of Donald Trump” (Trancredo 2016).

The right-wing articles also seem somewhat divided on how to approach the future of the alleged colluders, particularly Rex Tillerson. Schoen and Smith (2016) clearly state that “Rex Tillerson is not the man for the job” because he will not “stand up to Putin,” proposing even Mitt Romney or John Bolton as acceptable replacements. In contrast, McGrady (2017) supports Tillerson’s nomination as someone who “could do actual good in the State Department and deliver on long-awaited accountability in his position,” including ceasing the failed policy of “nation-building” (McGrady 2017). However, nearly all the right-wing storylines remain opposed or indecisive, at best, of Flynn’s nomination to National Security Advisor. Even *Fox News* (2017b) bolsters the need for the Senate Intelligence Committee to “investigate possible contacts between Russia and people associated with U.S. political campaigns” especially given that “Flynn’s post does not require Senate Confirmation.”

## **5.2 Left-Wing Storylines**

### **5.2.1 What Happened? Russian Hacks, Leaks and Collusion**

The majority of the left-wing articles conclude that the hacks and leaks were conducted by the chief external Other, Russia, who violated the sovereign space and internal order of the US. While the left-wing articles agree that there “is no evidence” that Russia “hack[ed] actual voting machines or vote tallies,” Russia’s “campaign of cyberattacks and attempted interference” still constitute a “foreign adversary’s attack on our democracy” (Benen 2017; Yglesias 2016). Thus, numerous articles described Russian hacking as violating the private territory or property of the US by an authorized intruder. For example, Podesta’s personal email account is conceived as a protected space which “the hackers ended up securing access to,” in order to “steal Podesta’s emails and give them

to WikiLeaks” (Yglesias 2016). Likewise, WikiLeaks is portrayed as a dirty proxy or middleman, specifically chosen by “agents of Russia’s military intelligence service, the GRU,” as the figurate weak link separating the inside, Us and the outside, Them (Beauchamp 2017).

Yet, these relatively unsophisticated hacks and the dissemination of information are escalated as just “one part of a broader disinformation campaign targeting the U.S. election” (Beauchamp 2017). This widens Russia’s means and target space, which is not only limited to the personal email accounts of the political elite but to American society as a whole, by way of “Russia’s increasingly sophisticated propaganda machine” (Lance 2017). For instance, Graham (2017) claims that Russia’s true target was the public’s minds, maintaining that Russia did not attempt “to electronically change vote totals” because “they were content to mess with our heads.” The main means by which Russia accomplished this was through the help of the media, whether providing the “basis for a lot of negative stories about Hillary Clinton in left-wing media outlets or using online trolls to propagate “right-wing sites across the Internet” (Lance 2017; Yglesias 2016). In particular, RT, “the Kremlin’s international, English-language propaganda media outlet” is depicted as a key tool used by Russia to sway public opinion, which was “gullible enough to swallow it” (Beauchamp 2017; Graham 2017). Likewise, Beauchamp (2017) seems to expand the scope and time period of Russian interference, noting that Russia continued hacking “the day [immediately] after the election” targeting “US think tanks and NGOs.”

On the other hand, Ritter (2017) and Wright (2016) stand out as outlying articles which seem to question the validity and intention of allegations of Russian interference, revealing a division within the left-wing narrative. In many ways, Ritter (2017) and Wright (2016) resemble the narrative of the right-wing articles, rather than those on the left. For example, like many right-wing articles, Wright (2016) seems more concerned with the content of what was revealed in the hacks and leaks, rather than their source or the source’s intentions. Even if Russia is the external violator, it may be morally excused for having revealed the true, internal threats within – “They hacked the VOTERS with evidence that showed Bernie got railroaded. [...] My conclusion to this, is this “Russia hacked the election” narrative is a distraction” (Wright 2016). In a similar manner, Ritter (2017)

counters allegations of Russian interference, positing that the leaked, “accurate information [is] pertinent to decisions necessary in an electoral process” and, therefore, beneficial to American democracy. However, nearly all of the left-wing articles openly condemn the alleged colluders among the incoming Trump administration or Trump himself, with no deviant outlying articles arguing otherwise.

For nearly all of the left-wing storylines, Trump’s friendly relationship with Putin and his call for cooperative relations between the US and Russia serve as proof that Trump is an “ally” of the Kremlin, possibly even viewing Putin as a “role model” or holding a childish crush, dotting “the ‘i’ in ‘Putin’ with little hearts” (Abrams 2016; Beauchamp 2017; Benen 2017). In many articles, Trump’s underlying incentive remains his financial conflicts of interests, with which Trump has been “feathering his nest with Kremlin gold” and purposefully hiding with “complete opacity” (Abrams 2016; Khrushcheva 2016). Such business deals are just another sign of Russian violation and access, allowing for insight and control of the internal actors and space. However, the most unambiguous sign of Trump’s collusion remains Trump’s cabinet choices of “great con-men” which clearly display that “Trump has long been, at best, in Putin’s corner. At worst, in Putin’s pocket” (Khrushcheva 2016; Wedel 2016). These cabinet choices are collectively Othered as elites, resembling corrupt authoritarian rulers rather similar to Putin’s oligarchs, with Lance (2016) bluntly maintaining that Trump’s “cabinet and WH picks [are] pregnant with enough generals to constitute a junta in most Third World countries.” Like the right-wing articles, the two main alleged colluders of Trump’s potential ‘pro-Russia’ cabinet are Rex Tillerson and Michael Flynn.

The majority of left-wing articles describe Tillerson, first and foremost, as a close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin, as “Putin’s top U.S. ally” “with extensive ties” to Putin (Aleem 2016; Benen 2016). The multitude of such descriptions paint Tillerson as inappropriately close to the Russian, autocratic Other, like a gateway figure between the inside and outside, dangerously at once apart of ‘Us’ and apart of ‘Them.’ Khrushcheva (2016) takes it a step further, analogizing the relationship between Tillerson and Putin to a “Love affairs with a major adversary,” or the ultimate and “unprecedented” betrayal of one’s biopolitical kin, the US. The primary physical example referenced throughout nearly



every article is that “In 2013, Putin bestowed upon Tillerson the Order of Friendship, a high state honor” “from the Russian government,” for allegedly serving its interests (Aleem 2016; Lance 2016; Wedel 2016). Likewise, ExxonMobil is even allegorized as a rogue state lead by Tillerson, for having opposed the US and partnered with its ‘historically’ chief Other, Russia. As Benen (2016) writes, “ExxonMobil, one the most profitable businesses in the history of global capitalism, is so big, it sometimes has its own foreign policy, which occasionally is at odds with American foreign policy.” Just as Russia has defied international law and US interests, so ExxonMobil under Tillerson “cynically” “belittled” U.S. sanctions against Russia, “maneuver[ing] to complete [an oil project] even after the U.S. imposed sanctions,” (Aleem 2016; Khrushcheva 2016; Pope 2016). Thus, Tillerson, as CEO of ExxonMobil, has obviously strengthened Russia at the expense of the U.S. and its allies, and naturally would do so again should it serves his interest.

Correspondingly, the left-wing articles describe former U.S. Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, Trump’s original nominee for National Security Advisor, as a “mercurial,” “ardent Russophile” who is “deeply disliked by much of the intelligence community and the top military brass” (Lance 2017). For Dreazen (2016), Trump’s nomination of Flynn as NSA is chiefly due to their common far right-wing stances, such as calling “for Hillary Clinton to be imprisoned.” While both Yglesias (2016) and Drezen (2016) even ponder whether Flynn may have been the catalyst behind Trump’s softer stance towards Russia which may not reflect “much more than gut instinct and affection for Flynn” (Yglesias 2016). The source of Flynn’s “love [of] Russia” apparently commenced after being “fired by Obama for his incompetent management of the Defense Intelligence Agency” (Wedel 2016). Flynn’s most widely cited past experience is his “semi-regular appearances” on Russia Today (RT), in which he once received “a speaking fee” from RT and “conveniently [sat] next to Putin” at the “black tie RT dinner” (Lance 2016; Khrushcheva 2016; Wedel 2016). While “not the result of brainwashing,” Flynn is likened to a glutinous pig who has “been feasting at the Kremlin trough” or even possessed by “Kremlinophilia,” unquestionably consuming whatever the Kremlin tosses his way (Khrushcheva 2016). As such, he is likened to a Kremlin insider, more than inappropriately close to Putin and other Russian officials, but even analogized to their property or puppet.

In addition, a few left-wing articles also briefly discuss other alleged colluders associated with the Trump campaign or his incoming administration, most significantly including: Paul Manafort, Carter Page and Steve Bannon. Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager who was "force[d] to resign" [...] having already served one "Putin puppet" in Ukraine, is described as a "political operative," who continues to uphold Russian interests in the US (Khrushcheva 2016; Wedel 2016). In a similar manner, Page is described as a "foreign policy wannabe" who despite being investigated for "'back-channeling" information to high-level Kremlin officials," naïvely traveled "to Moscow for a meeting with "business leaders and thought leaders"" shortly after the election (Wedel 2016). Yet the descriptions of Steven Bannon appear to be the most colorful, with Lance (2016) analogizing him to a "modern day Joseph Gobbles" propelling "Trump's use of "the big lie theory." Thus, such descriptions clearly see the US, like Ukraine, as having been violated by internal Others who hold another's interest above the US, whether chiefly Russia's or their own greedy interests.

### **5.2.2 How Did It Happen? Metaphors**

Like the right-wing articles, the left-wing storylines also employ three key metaphors which convey reterritorialization, including likening political events to military or coup operations, games and well-known references to American pop culture. The most frequent metaphor employed reterritorializes Russian interference as a physical, military attack or coup on the US. For example, Benen (2017) explicitly states that "The foreign foe appears to have launched an attack against the United States," by an "army of trolls" who initiated "a broader disinformation campaign targeting the U.S. election" (Beauchamp 2017; Graham 2017). Likewise, many specifically accuse the media in particular for "operating as essentially unwitting dupes of [the] Russo-Trumpian plot", just one part of "Valdimir Putin['s] [ability to] pull[ed] off a coup d'etat on America" (Lance 2017; Yglesias 2016).

Thus, one key actor in this alleged 'campaign' appears to be the media, with a right-wing media outlet like Steve Bannon's *Breitbart*, accused of having "perfected the dark art of "fake news" and [having] used it with reckless abandon both as a weapon and a shield"

(Lance 2017). Likewise, Trump's cabinet nominees are also likened to foreign infiltrators in this 'war,' as Pope (2016) boldly asserts:

Exxon is a key beneficiary if producers win this economic war. And Exxon's CEO has just been nominated to govern the U.S. response to this war. It's as if AFTER Pearl Harbor Franklin Roosevelt had nominated a key Japanese industrialist to mobilize American industry to win the war.

For Pope (2016), the US and Russia clearly are already at war, which does not resemble the Cold War but the bloodiest war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, owing to the Russian's surprise attack against US territory.

Moreover, the military metaphors also appear to describe internal conflict, between individuals, political parties or institutions. For example, Yglesias (2016) claims that "Donald Trump went to war with the CIA" after openly criticizing intelligence findings on Russian interference. In American society at large, Yglesias (2016) uses military discourse to describe fissures in the Left, and between the Left and the Right. For instance, Yglesias describes the disagreement between supporters of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton as "competing factions of left-of-center America [who] have been engaged in an interpretative battle about the election."

In addition, many left-wing articles apply the metaphor of a winner-take-all game with opposing teams to a wide variety of actors and scenarios. Most prominently, Russian interference is likened to a game as "Cyberwarfare and social media disinformation campaigns are games that anybody can play" (Graham 2017). Likewise, Graham (2017) and Beauchamp (2017) compare Putin to a coach, who is able to survey the field and prescribe a strategy by which "Putin will [predictably] try to run a similar playbook in future democratic election[s]," given his recent success on the field of the US presidential election. In a different approach, Wright (2016) criticizes Others on the Left, by likening the US electoral process (specifically the controversial role of the Electoral College) as an unalterable game, which cannot be disputed afterwards:

You can't change the rules AFTER the game. The Rules of the Game are set in advance. [...] You can't play a game of baseball and lose the game 3-2, but say ... "hey, we had 11 hits and they only had 9 hits, so we are technically the winner."

Thus the territory of such a game, not only possesses particular boundaries, but also particular rules which define the space and must be followed in order to maintain the space's identity and strength.

Lastly, the left-wing articles also compare contemporary political actors and current events to American movies or their famous characters, particularly those produced during the Cold War. For example, Khrushcheva (2016) compares Donald Trump to "The Manchurian Candidate," a 1962 film in which an American is brainwashed by the Soviet Union to become a Communist assassin and almost enacts a plot to assassinate a presidential candidate. In a similar manner, Lance (2016) entitles one article subheading as "FROM RUSSIA WITH HATE," as a twist on the 1963 James Bond film "From Russia with Love." On the other hand, Ritter (2017) criticizes former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper by comparing him to the mysterious 'wizard' in the 1939 classic film, "The Wizard of Oz":

"The Great Oz has spoken!" the giant talking head proclaims. But one of Dorothy's companions pulls back a curtain next to the giant head, revealing a short pudgy man manipulating a contraption, and speaking into a microphone. The man – the "Wizard of Oz" – sees Dorothy as he speaks. "Oh...I...Pay no...attention to that man behind the curtain. The...Great...Oz has spoken!" [...] DNI Clapper has spoken, not once, but several times.

Therefore, Ritter (2017), as an outlying article, alludes to an internal boundary or "curtain" which divides the domestic space of the US in order to hide the fraudulent state-within-the-state and its nefarious leader Clapper (Ritter 2017). Thus, the question of how did it happen can be answered as an external, almost military violation of US territory, the defeat of the US in a competitive game or the victory of a well-known villain in American pop culture; all of which relate to and simplify conflicts for the average reader, often likening the process of reterritorialization to other familiar references.

### **5.2.3 By Whom? For Whose Benefit? Othering**

For the left-wing articles, Russia is the primary Other who conducted and benefited from interference in the 2016 US presidential election. It is branded as "an adversary of the

United States,” and “the biggest threat to the US,” above even “China, Iran, [and] North Korea,” due to its repeated attempts to destabilize the US-dominated ‘democratic’ world order (Benen 2017; Yglesias 2016). Pope (2016) even paints Russia as a key threat to all life on Earth, for having “declar[ed] war [...] on climate protection, and the long term survival of the planet” along with “Saudi Arabia and Iran.” Most significantly, however, the left-wing articles personify Russia through its President Vladimir Putin, whom they describe as an “ex-KGB,” “autocratic leader,” and brutal “strongman” (Aleem 2016; Benen 2017; Lance 2016). As “the authoritarian top dog,” some articles portray Putin as a shameless degenerate having “crushed dissent in his own country, ordered the killings of political rivals, and invaded several of his neighboring countries” (Aleem 2016; Wedel 2016). This disregard of personal, spatial boundaries serves as key evidence of Putin’s moral disregard, and his insatiable need to seize and control space. Thus Russia’s aggressive actions appear to stem from “Putin’s [personal] aspirations to recover influence and perhaps control over areas on Russia’s borders which were formerly part of the Soviet Union,” by seizing its former territories or through its rebranded “old Cold War tradecraft” of disinformation (Lance 2017; Pope 2016). These have been partially achieved as a result of Putin’s cunningness in foreign policy, as Lance (2016) even portrays Putin as an effortless, chess master who had been “tossing down vodka shots yesterday when he outflanked Barack Obama on the global chessboard.” Nevertheless, it is Putin’s perceived “paranoia” that drove his intention to seek revenge against Hillary Clinton whom “he blamed [...] in particular, for the 2011 anti-government protests in Russia,” only later coming to view “Trump as a potential ally” against her (Beauchamp 2017). Thus, the intention of the chief Other Russia is synonymous with the intention of Putin himself, taking a personalist approach to interpret Russian interference as Putin’s personal retribution. In a similar manner, the left-wing articles also name two main internal Others which have divided the internal space of the US, intentionally and unintentionally.

Case in point, many left-wing articles differentiate between the elite Democrats, often associated with the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the Democratic voters in general. For some articles, the elite DNC are sharply criticized as conniving yet incompetent, who “active[ly] connived to sabotage the campaign of Sen. Bernie Sanders”

yet consciously remained vulnerable to “Russian-based hackers,” despite having been “warned by the FBI” (Graham 2017). As such, the DNC may be partially to blame for Russian interference and, thus, the victory of Donald Trump by having first corrupted the internal space, handing Russia the ammunition. As Wright (2016) declares that not only did the “DNC rig[-] the primaries,” but the DNC actually “propped [Trump] up and had their media cronies legitimize his campaign. [...] Because they knew they could beat him.” Thus, for an outlying article like Wright (2016), it is the DNC who rigged the election and pre-damaged the internal space’s integrity, weakening its boundaries in the process. Wright (2016) even further divides all of on the Left, not only the DNC elite, depending on their location of residence (e.g. rural versus urban) and on their generation. For example, Wright (2016) states that those of “the [younger] participation trophies generation” are those, in particular, “on the left [who] continue to spew venom at Trump and his supporters,” portraying them as simply immature, sore-losers too accustomed to winning ‘bogus’ competitions. Rather, the responsibility for Clinton’s loss primarily lies with the incompetence of her campaign, including the “gross mismanagement of their personal data and devices,” and failure to effectively “campaign in Michigan, Pennsylvania or Wisconsin” (Wright 2016). Rather than predominantly blaming the external Other, Russia, Wright (2016) points to the incompetency of the Clinton campaign and the corruption of the DNC, who have both failed their Democratic voter base and now blame Russia in a futile attempt to distract from their own shortcomings. Similar articles echo these sensibilities in a less forward manner, but all appear to agree that such internal Others contributed to the violation of US territory by the external Other. Yet descriptions of incompetent domestic actors do not stop at the DNC or Clinton campaign, but extend to a lesser but important extent towards leaders and organizations in the Intelligence Community (IC).

While the majority of the left-wing storylines approve of the assessments conducted by those in the Intelligence Community (IC), there are a few notable exceptions which strongly critiqued the IC and doubted the legitimacy of its assessments. For example, just as the Democrats were depicted as internally divided, Yglesias (2016) notes a division within the Intelligence Community (IC), before the release of the ODNI unclassified report

on January 6, 2017, before which the CIA and FBI appeared to have conducted “dueling [...] congressional briefings,” and did not agree on Russia’s intent (Beauchamp 2017; Yglesias 2016). Yglesias (2016) also seems more critical of the FBI and its former director James Comey, claiming that “the FBI disagree[ment] with the CIA’s assessment” partially caused the “basic partisan frame” restraining the debate today, and is possibly responsible for improperly magnifying the impact of Russia’s violation. For example, articles partially blamed Comey for the timing of his official statements on Clinton’s email scandal, noting that “Clinton was hurt very badly by late-breaking revelations from the FBI” (Lance 2016; Yglesias 2016).

Nonetheless, Ritter (2017) and Wright (2016) stand out as the most obvious exceptions when Othering the IC. For instance, Ritter (2017) delegitimizes the IC as an unreliable source, failing in its responsibility to defend and counter against threats. Ritter (2017) lists a series of IC “failure[s] to accurately predict Russian actions” as prove of a larger “track record [that] is not impressive.” In particular, DNI Clapper is personally condemned for enacting “an overall policy of politicization and obfuscation” “designed from the start to sway public opinion” (Ritter 2017). Similarly, Wright (2016) appears equally suspicious of the IC as a cynical, state-within-a-state, imparting that “Former CIA director, William Casey, famously said, “We’ll know our disinformation program is complete when everything the American public believes is false.”” Thus, for the outlying articles, Ritter (2017) and Wright (2016), the IC seems to occupy an internally hidden and inaccessible space which excludes the oversight of the public eye, almost analogized to a restricted, authoritarian space, which corrupts from within.

#### **5.2.4 What Are the Consequences? Predictions and Calls to Action**

The chief call to action evoked by many left-wing articles is ‘getting to the bottom of things’ behind “Donald Trump’s “big lies”,” because “America has the right” “to know what the hell is going on” (Lance 2017; Ritter 2017; Wedel 2016). For such articles, discovering ‘the truth’ is predicated on the continued investigations conducted by the IC and Congress, which many hope will lead to conclusive evidence of Russia’s responsibility and to the removal of colluders from positions of power. Regardless, the majority of left-

wing articles wish to continue increasing pressure on Russia, directly proceeding and expanding Obama-era sanctions against Russia. Some articles even appear to approve of future physical conflict against Russia, with Lance (2017) applauding the rhetoric of politicians who call for “the defensive use of the military if the new administration of “45” gets too cozy with” Putin. Likewise, Dreazen (2016) criticizes Flynn for “doubling down” on “the wrong war” against the Islamic State, implying there is a ‘right’ or just war against “Russia’s powerful armed forces [which] could [soon] become an existential threat to this country.”

On the other hand, Graham (2017) takes a different approach asserting that “cyberspace is no one’s property and [that] the Russians have as much right to use it as anybody else.” Thus, Graham (2017) hopes that Trump will “follow through on” his “announcement that he’ll level-up our own cyberwarfare game” so that foreign interference “should never happen again.” Similarly, the two outlying articles break away from the standard left-wing calls to action. For example, Ritter (2017) calls for an investigation of the IC’s investigation, in that “Representative Nunes [should] follow through on his request for an analytic and tradecraft review of the ICA,” which “would expose any potential politicization of intelligence that may have occurred.” Additionally, Wright (2016) pursues a tangent by attempting to address vulnerabilities of the electoral system the articles concedes were not necessarily targeted by Russian interference, arguing for the implementation of Voter ID and Blockchain, which would “would be impossible to hack.”

Nevertheless, the majority of left-wing articles seem united in their verdicts to deny perceived culprits of Russian collusion any official positions in the incoming, presidential administration, particularly Rex Tillerson and Michael Flynn. For example, Pope (2016) calls for Tillerson’s “nomination [to] be quashed” “in his confirmation hearings” for disloyalty to the United States. Similarly, many articles argued that Flynn should, at the very least, should be “kept [...] out of classified briefings” since “little can be done about his appointment” to NSA, which does not require Senate confirmation (Khrushcheva 2016; Wedel 2016). Yet, Yglesias (2016) predicts that Flynn will “be discarded as a liability soon enough,” by the Trump administration, just as former New Jersey Governor Christ Christie “[fell] from grace” after his corruption scandal (e.g. Bridgewater) went public.



However, few articles seriously predict Trump will effectively respond to allegations of collusion, rather hinging their bets on Congress who should “ratchet up the pressure” now that “Trump is not [even] going to support his own intelligence apparatus” (Wedel 2016). Yet, if successfully instated, Lance (2016) predicts that these colluders will increase “the level of profiteering,” at least until “the Dems [...] likely regain control of the Senate” in 2018, after which they should “begin the kind of hearing Secretary Clinton faced over her email server and Benghazi” (Lance 2016). Abrams (2016) even argues that “Russian Involvement Confirm[s] [that the] Electoral College Should Deny Trump the Presidency,” just as Lance (2017) compares Trump to former US president Richard Nixon who left office due to corruption charges. Yet, as an outlier, Wright (2016) predicts that such an attempt would “do irreparable damage to the [US] Constitution” and could possibly lead to a violent “a civil war,” disadvantaging the “the left [which] is against guns...and the right [which] hordes guns.” Nevertheless, most left-wing articles predict internal confrontations ahead against internal Others who should be investigated and removed from power, as well as, opposition to in-depth probes into the extent of Russian cyber and information interference.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite the seemingly increasing prevalence and growing awareness of risks associated with Ulrich Beck's concept of reflexive modernization, it appears that "human knowledge and our capacity to grasp the nature and importance of these dangers [remains] insufficient and perhaps even unreliable" in the near future (Nohrstedt 2010, 18). One manner in which this can be discerned may be found in the description of such risks in popular discourse, particularly by examining the work of the news media, which largely guides the public's attention and directs the national narrative, for average citizens and policy makers alike. This thesis sought to analyze how US popular discourse produced by the news media constructed such risks in the peculiar case of allegations of Russian interference directly following the confounding 2016 US presidential election. It was hypothesized that US popular discourse would reterritorialize such risks foremost by casting allegations of Russian hacks, leaks and collusion as the violation of sovereign US territory. Furthermore, it additionally hypothesized that this discourse may reflect dichotomous, partisan narratives, having both notable similarities and differences in discursive reterritorialization and the calls to action they produce. As expected and demonstrated above, the empirical analysis confirms these hypotheses. In this final section, this thesis will conclude by briefly comparing and contrasting the partisan narratives, summarizing its overall findings and illustrating how such examples of reterritorialization reflect and contribute to key characteristics of US geopolitical culture.

Given the relative durability and consistency of US geopolitical culture, despite recent evidence of political polarization, it is still not extraordinary to find that the right and left-wing narratives share a few features in common. Most significantly, each narrative agrees that the chief external Other to the US remains Russia, which violated its sovereign space/territory, diluting the internal order and, thus, its secure and exceptional national identity. However, both narratives also concur that the domestic, internal space's fragmentation and weakness are due more to the negative choices of internal Others. Thus, rather than seriously contemplating the inherent risks of cyber technology or globalization on which, to some extent, the electoral process remains dependent and vulnerable, the narratives prefer to focus on personalist politics, defending themselves and criticizing

Others, who have maliciously or improperly used technology or the products of globalization (e.g. global transportation, communication or investments) against the US and its interests. Not surprisingly then, both narratives call for further investigations into the technical methods of Russian interference, strengthening the US' defenses (possibly including but not limited to military means), and reducing weakness of the internal space, which may call for ousting or preventing individuals from assuming certain positions of power or refitting entire institutions. Therefore, last and not least, right and left-wing narratives ominously predict an arduous struggle ahead, both globally against Russia and, to a greater extent, between their Self and their domestic Others. Each narrative's unique construction of this struggle is only one example of their divergence which will be discussed.

The storylines of the right-wing articles appear to be more in unison, in their presumptions, argumentation and overall tone, making the right-wing narrative appear more united in challenging the prevailing frame of Russian interference. In particular, the right-wing narrative seriously doubts and, at times, may outright deny that Russian interference had a significant impact, let alone changed the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election, especially given that polling machines and tabulations were not altered. According to this narrative, Russia's intention in interfering was simply to undermine faith in American democracy rather than to specifically elect Trump. Instead, the articles prefer, above all, to buttress and defend the legitimacy of Donald Trump's electoral victory and upcoming presidency. This is partially accomplished by denouncing internal Others for weakening the internal space with corruption, and failing to secure its boundaries. Thus, although Russian interference warrants condemnation and a serious response, it was crucially conditioned by the insecurity of the internal space, already degraded by internal Others. In general, the right-wing narrative calls for an aggressive, near neo-conservative, stance toward Russia abroad, strengthening the US defenses and 'our' boundaries, while simultaneously ignoring those allegations crafted by internal Others who only wish to delegitimize Trump's election and presidency. The only noteworthy divergence within the right-wing narrative concerns the future role of Tillerson in the incoming Trump administration, in contrast to the unanimous condemnation of Flynn's nomination.

In the opposite manner, the left-wing storylines display greater divergence in their perception of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. In particular, the presumptions and arguments of roughly two to three articles resemble the right-wing narrative in many respects, such as focusing on the damaging content of the hacks and leaks rather than their illegal acquisition or its unlawful source. Nevertheless, the majority of left-wing articles were in consensus on their interpretation and construction of Russian interference and the actors involved. For instance, the extent of Russian interference and its target space are defined in much broader terms than in the right-wing narrative, by emphasizing Russian disinformation campaigns and the use of the media to target the American public at large and powerfully influence the election. Yet, this interference does not appear surprising for many left-wing articles which presume a pre-existing conflict between the US and Russia, with recent Russian interference only constituting its latest investigation. Therefore, the most prevalent left-wing storylines which comprise the seemingly dominant left-wing narrative call for increasingly stringent investigations into Russian cyber and information operations as well as possible conflicts of interest in the Trump administration, particularly on the part of the Intelligence Community (IC) and Congress, and a more assertive stance towards Russia abroad. Particularly regarding allegations of collusion, the left-wing storylines agree that alleged colluders, especially Tillerson and Flynn, should not be allowed to take office, as representing containers of Russian interests who are another means of an internal breach. Yet, the constructions of both the right and left-wing narratives are not completely new, but expand upon an ever-evolving geopolitical discourse.

While the narrative's similarities and differences in discursive reterritorialization remain the focus of this thesis, it is also important to access how these narratives build upon and contribute to US geopolitical culture at large, specifically considering the four key characteristics touched upon in section 3.1. For example, just as US geopolitical culture appears to possess an "absence of geography," so do many articles construct boundaries which are seemingly everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, holding no fixed logic in their usage (Toal 2017, 10). Some articles equate Russia's violation of boundaries in Syria or Ukraine as precursors to Russia's violation of the internal space/territory of the US. Yet,

in a similar manner, Russian-state run media like RT or Sputnik, as well as its use of social media sites, were analogized to having violated the boundaries of the American, public mind. This “absence of geography” appears to be replaced by the “representational practice” of the presidential election, representing American democracy as a whole (Campbell 1992, 105; Toal 2017, 10). Thus, American democracy characterized through its free and fair elections appears to serve as the identity marker for the US and its citizenry, and the key to American exceptionalism as a moral vanguard fit to lead in world affairs. Thus, in both narratives, the US’ failure to lead or effectively respond to global threats may corresponds to a rupture in its identity, whether due to external interference or internal corruption.

Such constructions of US global leadership or Russian actions abroad clearly portray the most prevalent characteristic of US geopolitical culture referenced in both partisan narratives as the distinction between an internal order and an external anarchy. For example, when articles Other actors or institutions, such Others were frequently portrayed as disorderly, chaotic and corrupted containers or spaces which were sources of weakness and/or incompetency. Hence both narratives painted Russia and its president Vladimir Putin as having ‘disturbed’ the world order and its democratic process by interfering with its global vanguard, and thus, compromising its proper, predictable and peaceful order. Lastly, as presumed, both partisan narratives also found it nearly impossible to separate technology from American identity and interests. Rather than contemplating the risks inherent in basing an electoral process or society as a whole on technology and globalization, the articles contend that the technology had been perverted or used improperly by deviant actors. Alternatively, the proper use of technology is to serve the American interests and buttress conceptions of American identity, such as the promotion of democracy rather than its possible impairment.

In conclusion, this thesis finds evidence that US popular discourse reterritorializes allegations of Russian interference following the 2016 US presidential election and produces escalatory calls to action usually reserved for the physical violation of US territory. By conducting a discourse analysis analyzing the storylines of 15 right-wing and 15 left-wing online, news articles, this thesis demonstrates how partisan narratives compare

and contrast in their discursive reterritorialization and calls to action, while also examining how the use of metaphors and Othering further constructs space, its boundaries, its identities, and terms of access. Likewise, this thesis displays how reterritorialization of risks associated with reflexive modernization may be efforts to restabilize and resecure a growing sense of vulnerability, primarily drawing from traditions in US geopolitical culture. While this thesis focused on a single and extremely unique case study, future research on discursive reterritorialization should be conducted in a variety of methodologies (e.g. large-n studies, process tracing) in order to establish a working, scholarly literature on a process rarely understood and appreciated. Given recent evidence of reactionary backlashes against globalization (e.g. anti-immigration movements, Brexit) and technological advancements (e.g. the discussion of privacy and social media), there appears to be ample material on which to examine discourse and practices of reterritorialization. Although this thesis took a difficult approach in attempting to combine and analyze the complex theories of risks and reterritorialization, it does significantly contribute to this near barren field of research and, hopefully, will spur future studies on the subject, at the very least, for its author.

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