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Neutrollization: industrialized trolling as a pro-Kremlin strategy of desecuritization

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Abstract

This article considers the significance of trolling for security processes through a contextual analysis of industrialized pro-Kremlin trolling in the Russian blogosphere. The publicity of Russia's hacking activities in international politics conceals the significance of the domestic trolling culture in Russia and its role in the 'trolling turn' in Russia's foreign policy. We contextually identify the practice of 'neutrollization' - a type of localized desecuritization where the regime adopts trolling to prevent being cast as a societal security threat by civil society. Neutrollization relies on counterfeit, yet ostensibly citizenry-originating, Internet activism that produces political disengagement by breeding radical doubt in a manner that is non-securitizing. Rather than advocating a distinct political agenda, and in contrast to conventional understandings of the operations of propaganda, neutrollization preclude the very possibility of meaning, obviating the need to block the Internet in an openly authoritarian manner. It operates by preventing perlocution, i.e. the social consequences of the security speech act. This prevention occurs by breaking or disrupting the context in which acts of securitization could possibly materialize and it is made possible by a condition of 'politics without telos,' which differs from more familiar varieties of depoliticization in Western societies.

Introduction

Boris Nemtsov was assassinated on 27 February 2015 on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge near the Kremlin. The immediate reaction of the blogosphere and the official TV channels to the assassination were mirror images, proliferating bewildering (but seemingly coordinated) theories as to what stood behind the murder. Dmitry Kiselev's programme on the Rossiya 1 channel, notorious for its unabashed embracement of the Kremlin's style and agenda, illustrates the trolling frame that straddled both media. The programme on 1 March 2015 mashed up personal motives, the role of the West, the involvement of Ukraine, the sacrifice of Nemtsov by the opposition for the purposes of furthering its goals with regard to an upcoming opposition march, and the connection to radical Islamists, allegedly following from Nemtsov's position on the Charlie Hebdo affair (Rossiya 24, 2015a). The blogosphere simultaneously produced multiple identical or similar messages with a matching thematic template to

that of Rossiya 24.¹ Kiselev's programme one week later covered the official arrest of the suspects from Chechnya and Ingushetia; however, it did so in parallel with a prior statement by investigative committee spokesperson that Nemtsov be a strategic sacrifice for the anti-regime cause (Rossiya 24, 2015b). And it furthered this troll-like behaviour by connecting the arrests with a Chechen battalion sponsored by a Ukrainian oligarch, supposed to support the Kyiv authorities in Eastern Ukraine.

Why persist with such multiplication of allegations if the official arrests excluded a direct commission by the Kremlin? Why should the emulation of a trolling frame get immediately underway across the pro-Kremlin media and the seemingly citizenry-originated blogosphere? How to make sense of the intensity and the effects of political trolling in, and beyond, today's Russia?

We submit that the widespread publicity of Russia's hacking activities in international politics, featured as much in late-night comedy shows as security briefings, conceals the origins and daily practices of trolling culture in Russia and its subsequent spill-over into the international realm. In the contextual analysis that follows, we argue that empirical manifestations of a trolling frame, as quoted above, represent a wider practice of what we call *neutrollization* – a type of localized desecuritization-by-trolling that disrupts and thus prevents perlocution, i.e. the social consequences of the security speech act. Kremlin trolls generate meaninglessness, neutralizing civil society attempts to cast the regime as a societal security threat. Rather than advocating a distinct political agenda, however, neutrollization despoils and precludes the very possibility of meaning. Political mobilization, then, becomes absurd. The modus operandi of neutrollization is not, however, a counter-securitization in any recognizable discursive form. Neutrollization operates through the multiplication of *non*-securitizing (although highly sensationalized, contradictory and seemingly citizenry-originated) speech acts. As such, it signifies a practice that challenges the standard conceptualization of desecuritization as normatively superior but theoretically and practically inferior to securitization, and typically performed by non-state actors. The broader historical precondition for this type of preventative desecuritization to occur and succeed has been the tradition of 'politics without telos' and the consequent non-relation between the state and society in Russia. Such condition, as we discuss below, differs from the notion of depoliticization as erasure of politics and also demonstrates a need for a more rigorous contextual analysis.

It was, we claim, a sustained attempt by civil society to undermine this non-relation and construct the Kremlin as a societal security threat that triggered the onset of neutrollization, a radical intervention

¹ We explain and analyse it in the empirical part.

to preserve 'politics without telos'. Bolotnaya Square in Moscow became emblematic of the nation-wide wave of protests between 2011 and 2013 against the legislative and presidential election results. The so-called non-systemic opposition² joined forces, formed a coordination committee, mobilized tens of thousands of people to participate in anti-regime protests, and formulated a series of programmatic anti-regime documents (e.g. the 'Manifest of Free Russia'). The government was forced to make a number of concessions, such as to reinstall elected governorship and liberalize party legislations. But in the summer of 2013, the Internet Research Agency Ltd. (Russian: ООО «Агентство интернет-исследований»), also known as 'a troll factory', was founded. We claim that this organisation belongs to a larger agenda of neutralizing the potential for further political mobilization. While industrial-scale, institutionalized political trolling has affinities with the wider trolling culture, neutrollization is an example of hackers' activities being co-opted by a government and, as such, constitutes a new type of trolling practice. Specifically, against the basic trolling premise of 'doing it for the lulz' – i.e. for the digital Schadenfreude produced by pranks, insults, and misrepresentation – pro-Kremlin trolls create meaninglessness for the purpose of shielding the regime. At the same time, trolling agents themselves remain estranged from this purpose as their fabrications are not part of trolling self-expression but are performed on commission. Such commission is also antithetical to the activist sensibility epitomized by hacktivist collectives and their ethic of trolling 'for justice'. Although invariably dressed in offensive humour, Anonymous, for instance, have mobilized against censorship and the crooked state of governments and corporations alike, acquiring, in at least some depictions, the reputation of being purposeful agents broadening and opening public debate against established power structures and hypocrisies (e.g. Coleman, 2015; Anon, 2013). In contrast, the practice of pro-Kremlin trolling radically deactivates the very telos of public debate, creating another category of political trolling, wherein neither justice nor 'lulz' figures as a primary rationale. In terms of security theory, organized, regime-supporting trolling implodes the security equation as established in a foundational early model of securitization (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Examined in contextual detail, neutrollization countervails dominant models of desecuritization, compelling reconceptualization in manner that challenges not only existing concepts but also prevailing modes of theorizing.

In what follows we, first, define the practice of trolling and how it has been appropriated by Russia's pro-regime blogosphere. We then re-conceptualize desecuritization as a contextual phenomenon of

² Systemic, i.e. parliamentary, opposition in Russia is widely believed to have been co-opted by the regime to perform a largely symbolic function, creating a semblance of political debate, but remaining incapable of bringing genuine change. 'Non-systemic opposition' is a label used to signify divergent anti-regime groups outside of the parliament.

neutrollization to designate and more precisely articulate the state-co-opted practice of desecuritization-by-trolling. In contrast to the apriorism of security theory drawn, for example, from sociolinguistics, we rely on the abductive move back and forth between the empirical reality of trolling in the Russian blogosphere, embedding these traced processes in the tradition of depoliticization, and contextualizing existing formulations of desecuritization. In doing so, we situate our re-conceptualization within various strands of contextualism in security theory and with regard to tensions present in apriorist (as opposed to theoretically abductive) formulations of desecuritization. Similarly to Bourbeau and Vuori (2015) and Vuori (2018), we suggest that desecuritization can take preventive forms as an independent security practice; however, we concretize this insight by bringing to bear the local condition of ‘politics without telos’. Conceptually, we utilize Wæver’s early (1989, 1995, 2002) understandings of desecuritization, conceived as staying below securitization’s threshold, which we substantiate through the sociological model of securitization and, in particular, Balzacq’s concentration on perlocution (that which is thwarted by the practice of trolling). We subsequently demonstrate the overall logic and concrete *modus operandi* of neutrollization through an analysis of interviews with former trolls – both those available in the public domain and those conducted on our own, and through an examination of trolling trails generated after the assassination of Boris Nemtsov.³ Our method is informed by digital ethnography⁴ which involves immersion in the Russian blogosphere, engagement with embedded journalists, and interaction with participants.

A caveat is due before we proceed. It is undoubtedly difficult to definitively distinguish voluntary pro-regime commenting from institutionalized trolling activity. The secretive nature of the industry, as well as the creative and continually renewed manual composition of most of the posts, prevents drawing definitive conclusions about the overall scope of trolling activity and, at times, makes the unambiguous identification of trolls problematic. Nevertheless, an estimation of the prevalence and the reliable identification of some troll accounts is not out of the question. The former has already been achieved to some degree through the use of large-N methods and network analysis (Alexander, 2015a,b) and the latter can often be accomplished by examining suspected accounts for patterns discordant with human behaviour, such as identical phrases posted from different accounts, the absence of connections, photos and basic information correlated with the time and date of accounts’ creation, etc. (Soshnikov, 2015). Several detailed journalistic investigations, quoted below, demonstrate that institutionalized political trolling has become an identifiable phenomenon and we take this as our

³ Our material is mostly in Russian and appears in our own translation. We established communication with a former troll via personal networks and the person wishes to remain anonymous.

⁴ See Pertierra (2017) for an introductory text on digital anthropology.

starting point, without making definite claims about the exact scope of this activity or its exclusive and fully demonstrated connection to the presidential administration.

Pro-Kremlin trolls: when tricksters lose their lulz

The word ‘troll’ originally denoted a provocative post intended to sow discord by generating a trail of contentious posting. Online trolling is the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose. Philips (2015: 1) specifies two basic rules of trolling: Nothing should be taken seriously, and if it exists, there is porn of it. In fact, the only reason for a troll, qua troll, to do anything is amusement derived from another person’s anger. It is all about ‘lulz’, arguably the most important concept within the troll community. Lulz, a corruption, or perfection, of ‘Laugh out Loud’, is a sort of primeval, chaotic joy derived at the expense of others. It celebrates the anguish of the laughed-at victim and, crucially, does not distinguish between friends and foes (Philips, 2015: 27-28). Lulz is more important than where or from whom it is derived. Yet it has a deep significance in that it infiltrates and affects the consensus around politics, ethics, and aesthetic sensibilities (Coleman, 2015: 32). It is common to compare trolls to mythological tricksters. Both kinds are liminal figures who defy norms and revel in causing chaos; both almost never editorialize or tell the audience what to make of their message. ‘Genuine’ trolls do not posit clear political meaning. Any display of sentimentality, political conviction, or ideological rigidity is a call to trolling arms. Crucially for our argument, both tricksters and trolls are agents of cultural digestion rather than being alienated rebels. Although trolling is a counterhegemonic cultural practice, trolls in fact emerge from mainstream culture: They are embedded within dominant institutions and tropes and they exploit and repurpose existing materials (Phillips, 2015: 10). Trolls’ acts of aggression are neither random nor revolutionary – they are consistent with a certain symbolic framework.

In the pro-Kremlin Russian blogosphere, the original chaos-generating element of online trolling is preserved in an institutionalized form. Instead of trying to consistently argue in favour of a political position in order to transform users’ political preferences and mould their allegiance to the current regime, enlisted trolls generate a superfluity of conflicting opinions, producing a flooding effect. Their practice thus operates as a coordinated spread of prefabricated pro-regime views on politically sensitive issues, produced by creating posts and comments using fictitious profiles in social networks. This is not, however, to alter political preferences of the audience (cf. Nosik cited in Soshnikov (2015)), at least not in the sense of changing one ideologically-loaded and coherent political position (e.g. liberal) to another coherent political position (e.g. statist). The outcome rather is that the audience becomes disoriented and begins to perceive politics in general as a realm of irreconcilable contradictions and moral filth. Neutrollization erodes willingness to contribute to online political

debates and annihilates the influence of civil society's speech acts when those still appear. It fuels the population's resentment of political engagement and their disillusionment with the possibility of meaningful communication in the public sphere. In such a mode of techno-authoritarianism, the ability of an ordinary Internet user to separate truth from fiction is fundamentally sabotaged: 'Nothing is true and everything is possible,' as Pomerantsev (2015) puts it.

Furthermore, if, traditionally, trolling is a recreational activity by relatively privileged private individuals that self-organize in an *ad hoc* manner, pro-Kremlin trolling campaigns are two-tiered: They are orchestrated by collectives that develop their agenda in-line with regime interests and they get implemented, at least partially, by precarious workers who craft their posts to the guidelines provided (Volcheck and Sindelar, 2015; Polyanskaya, Krivov and Lomko, 2009; Rezunkov 2016). Evidently, Russian political trolling is done neither for the lulz, nor for justice. While this does not eradicate the agency of the posting trolls, the agency becomes irrelevant and the anonymity of the trolling agents acquires a new dimension. It is not about being a proud anon, either a ruthless bully or a defiant activist. It is instead about being estranged from the message. Acting according to the template also effaces the quality of transgression. The command to be ludic kills the lulz.

The language game of desecuritization

Neutrollization stifles the conditions of possibility for bottom-up attempts at constructing the Kremlin as a societal security threat and thus establishing an accountable relation between the state and society. Political trolling here is a contextual mechanism of desecuritization and its tools take shape in accordance with the local political experience. This local political experience and the mechanism of neutrollization can only however be captured contextually. In order to make contextualization possible, we first situate the analysis with regard to the role of context in security theory and then problematize impediments to contextualism pertinent to the problem at hand: a typology of politics informed by the Western democratic experience, and the prescriptive take on desecuritization. We build from there to offer an original conceptualization of neutrollization.

The debate on contextualism in contemporary security theory has been robust, with three distinct positions occupied by, respectively: radical contextualists, who deduce the rules of security from contextual security practices (Bubandt, 2005; Ciuta, 2009); the sociological approach to securitization, which builds on the intersubjectivity of the security act but upholds the significance of a priori rules that structure the intersubjective process (Balzacq, 2005, 2010, 2014; Stritzel, 2007); and the 'Copenhagen' model of self-referential security wherein the successful speech act of security under prescribed rules alters the context accordingly. The latter early securitization model supplies the

vocabulary that sets the parameters of the debate. The sociological focus on perlocution – i.e. the social consequences of the security speech act – makes it conceptually possible to identify the local mechanism of neutrollization, or more broadly ‘desecuritization by trolling’, which prevents perlocutionary effects. By preventing perlocution, trolling disrupts the constitution of the intersubjective space where civil society’s move to construct the regime as a threat could be meaningfully recognised, or even attempted. As a consequence of the particular problematique presented by trolling in the Russian case, however, we take the *in situ* logic of analysis from radical contextualists and reconstruct Russian security practices from within local political history (cf. Budbandt, 2005; Guzzini, 2011). This approach, notable as a contextual analysis of desecuritization wherein the meaning of the concept crystalizes from within an evolving social practice, tends to remain below the analytical radar of security theorists. While a major criticism against desecuritization has been its lack of conceptual rigour, which renders the concept unwieldy for empirical application (Snetkov, 2015, 2017), we suggest, by contrast, that desecuritization should be understood, primarily, as a political process and problem. Given its own particular logic, greater conceptual rigour alone will not allow us to resolve these issues

Conceptual fiat may, in particular, render concrete practices invisible. In our case, the context of neutrollization becomes difficult to grasp if approached through the concepts of politics as applied in securitization studies thus far. Pram Gad and Lund Petersen (2011) delineate three such concepts: politics as the production of meaning, politics as a modern institutional organization, and politics as ethical science. None of these, it must be said, reflect the politics that underpins the state-society relations in Russia – a contrast aptly captured by Prozorov’s notion of the deactivation of the teleological dimension of politics (2008) and Wilson’s ‘virtual politics’ (2005). There has been an exodus of Russian society from value-based political antagonism, consolidated according to Prozorov during the 1970s and the early 1980s, while the regime has moved to a strategy of deliberately fostering depoliticization from the beginning of 1990s onwards (Prozorov, 2008: 214). However, while the undermining of value-based antagonism can be understood as depoliticizing on one level, in another respect it is itself a form of politics – a form that is, indeed, central to a particular ethico-political project. In the Yeltsinite era, such politics without telos was enacted through experimenting with countless political projects without ever approaching their logical ends. In Putin’s Russia, the condition of depoliticization is forcefully preserved through the prioritized telos of ‘stability’, imposed on a purportedly directionless world wherein stability, from anything but a regime-centred perspective, loses its meaning. One expression of ‘politics without telos’ is Wilson’s ‘virtual politics’, a ‘political technology’ which is a localized version of political manipulation, and a continuation of a tradition of double-speak inherited from the Bolshevik era (Wilson, 2005: xv). The system of virtual politics

requires neither tyranny nor exploitation. It relies on invention, both of the authority and of the opposition, with virtuality as important as control in containing democracy and preventing a real pattern of representation and accountability (Ibid: xvi, 39).

And so, what looks like depoliticization if approached through the mainstream of Western political theory, is a configuration of politics if approached contextually. The prescription of what desecuritization should be similarly functions as an impediment to contextual conceptualization. There are three issues in particular that hinder a contextual analysis of desecuritization:⁵ its postulated normative superiority, its conceptual inferiority vis-à-vis securitization, and the assumption that desecuritization necessarily follows securitization, both temporarily and logically. We discuss each of these points in turn in order to fully articulate our own conceptual claim.

First, as initially articulated by Wæver (1995: 57, 1999: 335, 2002: 49), desecuritization has been portrayed as a normatively preferable option to its alter ego; a universally and 'morally right' goal to which one should aspire. Early examples of embracing desecuritization as normatively preferable include Huysmans' definition of desecuritization as a normative project (1998) and Aradau's pitch to understand it in terms of emancipation (2004). Huysmans suggests that if, in a government's rationality, securitization is about reintroducing value content and antagonism into social relations, then desecuritization's task is to break down such a passage (1998: 587). In a similar normative vein, Aradau argues that whereas securitization institutes the politics of enmity and exceptionalism, and is enacted through the non-democratic constitution of authority, societal actors should desecuritize socially relevant issues through disidentification with the regime and by creating relations that are not rooted in the exclusionary and non-democratic logic of security (2004: 398-400). Aradau has, however, been criticized for the universalizing premises of such argument and the consequent erasure of political particularity from security as concretely realised (Behnke, 2006; Roe, 2009). Subsequent works have further questioned the necessarily normatively favourable effects of desecuritization. In the analysis of US environmental policies, Floyd (2010) demonstrates how desecuritization potentially produces diverse outcomes, including normatively ambiguous depoliticization, and its moral standing should be judged based on concrete social effects. MacKenzie's case of desecuritization by exclusion (2009) shows how labelling female ex-combatants in Sierra Leone as 'camp followers', 'abductees', or 'sex slaves' precludes securitization of their roles and thus their benefiting from post-conflict social policies.

⁵ For comprehensive reviews of desecuritization literature see Bourbeau and Vuori (2015) and Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard (2017). For a collection of desecuritization case studies see Balzacq (2014a). For earlier arguments against desecuritization as a process reverse to securitization see Morozov (2004) and Bilgin (2007).

Second, desecuritization has often been regarded as a conceptual twin (Aradau, 2004: 389; Hansen, 2012: 526) or opposite (Taureck, 2006: 55) of securitization which tends to be conflated, third, with the dominant understanding of desecuritization as necessarily following securitization. It is envisaged as a fully-fledged reversal mechanism for bringing a certain issue from the sphere of emergency politics to the sphere of normal politics. Such vision conditioned and was conditioned by the joint use of the terms, as in 'securitization/desecuritization' or '(de)securitization'. Hansen's (2012) typology of desecuritization (change through stabilization, replacement, rearticulation, and silencing) illustrates these practices. Built around a constrained range of what the political and the political sphere mean, the typology remains faithful to the principle of desecuritization occurring as a result of (reverse) speech acts: Desecuritization is the opposite to what we decide securitization to be. If, for example, securitization is based on Carl Schmitt's concept of the political as sovereign decision on exception and thus a move away from the Arendtian public sphere, then desecuritization, as securitization's conceptual twin, should do the opposite, i.e. unmake the decision and restore the genuine public sphere (Hansen, 2012: 529-533). Bourbeau and Vuori (2015) challenged this political and conceptual sequentialism by identifying 'pre-emptive desecuritization through rebuttal' in the Chinese foreign policy since the 1970s. They show how Chinese authorities have crafted a foreign policy discourse of a peaceful power to block the escalation of contention, i.e. crossing other states' securitization thresholds. Vuori (2018) substantiates this analysis by delineating specific practices of preventative desecuritization in different moments of the Chinese post-Cold War relations with other major powers. Recently, Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard (2017) have brought the normative and sequential dilemmas of desecuritization to a sharp relief by demonstrating how it is often performed simultaneously with securitization, thus facilitating swaying the audience towards accepting securitizing moves.

In context of the latter works, neutrollization can be seen as a normatively corrupted and preventative desecuritization. We conceptualize its mechanism by bringing together the nuanced relationship between securitization and desecuritization in Ole Wæver's early work and the sociological model of securitization developed by Thierry Balzacq. Such conceptualization reveals neutrollization to be a form of political intervention that contextually prevents perlocution in order to maintain the non-relation between state and society in Russia. In Wæver's early work (1989, 1995), desecuritization is not envisaged as a speech act designed to move a securitized issue away from the sphere of exceptional politics for two reasons. First, in the cases of European security between 1960 and 1990 and Europe in 1989, the question of the power to desecuritize eludes easy designations. During the Cold War, the authority to introduce certain issues into the political agenda was severely restricted. Desecuritization therefore amounted to keeping things below securitization's threshold. In 1989, the conversation was predominantly held among elites which reduced the scope of politics. Second, a

desecuritizing speech act would necessarily employ security language while security terms had to be avoided. In this context, Wæver discusses two strategies of desecuritization that we tentatively call: (1) desecuritization through effacement/prevention of securitizing speech acts, and (2) desecuritization through speech act failure. The first works to prevent the mechanism of securitization; however, it is not a purely counteractive option. It does not take a securitized issue, delegitimize the emergency measures mobilized against a security threat, and then move the issue back into normal politics. Rather, it effaces decisive acts in order to deliberately mask certain resistance strategies by relegating them to ordinary spheres of economics, culture, and non-exceptional politics where they cannot be mobilized as a cause for securitization.⁶ The second strategy creates conditions that make it difficult or impossible to transit from the illocutionary uptake of a securitizing speech act to its intended perlocutionary sequel.⁷ Wæver conceptualizes securitization as an illocutionary speech act (Wæver, 1995: 79-80, endnote 23; Stritzel, 2011: 349; Vuori, 2008), i.e. a 'pure speech act dimension,' which does not depend on the effect on the receiver and, hence, is a matter of force, not truth or actual outcome (Wæver, 1989: 42-44). The possibility of speech act failure that desecuritization mobilizes resides, however, at the border between the illocutionary speech act of securitization and its perlocutionary effect, which is a perlocutionary act in itself. We turn to the sociological model of securitization to explain it.

Perlocution, i.e. successfully swaying the intended audience of the speech act, is, as Balzacq argues (2005, 2010), specific to context. It is a historical process (Balzacq, 2010: 14) and a strategic, pragmatic move that occurs within particular circumstances informed by antecedent conditions and power relations, requiring the use of contextually appropriate tools that take into consideration the psycho-social disposition of the audience (Balzacq 2005; 2010). In effect, security practices must respond to commonly accepted values if they are to be socially binding (Balzacq, 2014b: 3). The tradition of 'politics without telos' caters to such contextual proviso for neutrollization to occur and succeed. Perlocution, or the act of preventing perlocution, is best understood through the intersubjectivity of the sociological model of securitization which has three core assumptions: the centrality of audience; the co-dependency of agency and context; and the dispositive and the structuring force of practices (Balzacq, 2010: 8-18). Trolling implodes the security equation so conceived. It disrupts the very basis

⁶ E.g. it was a common phenomenon in Central European and Soviet culture to feature implicit dissident elements difficult to directly categorize as subversive by state censorship but which were nevertheless grasped as such by society/the audience, creating a type of an intersubjective understanding among societal actors against the regime.

⁷ John Austin distinguished between three dimensions of a speech act: 'the locutionary act (and within it the phonetic, the phatic, and the rhetic acts) which has a *meaning*; the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; and the perlocutionary act which is the *achieving of certain effects* by saying something [emphasis original]' (Austin, 1962: 120).

of intersubjective agreement and, in the case of neutrollization, the conditions of possibility for such a relation between civil society as a would-be securitizing actor and the broader Russian society as the audience. It does so, most strikingly, by distorting the requirements of intelligibility for the security speech act. The words and arguments that could be used to securitize lose their performative power. They are ironized and become useless. They can therefore no longer deliver perlocutionary effect – that is, the persuasion of the audience and legitimization of emergency measures. More fundamentally, neutrollization disrupts the very act of the constitution of the audience that could emerge in the intersubjective process of threat construction. It does so by breaking or disrupting the context in which acts of securitization could materialize and, therefore, thwarts the recognition of the legitimacy of a subject attempting securitization against the state. Few ties can be forged in the context of such chaos when cynicism is the primary rule of engagement. In the below, we demonstrate how this unfolds in practice.

Political trolling: how it works

An interview with a former troll

The interview with a former troll published in a private Russian newspaper *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* in November 2013 is one among many publications investigating the operations of Russian troll factories (Merkacheva, 2013).⁸ It helps grasp the logic of political trolling and what it does to the context of public discussion. The journalist Eva Merkacheva builds her investigation on two main sources: a report on trolling operations during the 2012 presidential elections obtained through unnamed channels, and a contact person named Maksim who used to work as a troll during that campaign. Merkacheva confirms what other media have reported as well: Political trolling is a prolific pro-regime practice generating the ‘flooding’ of political posts written in accordance with a set of guidelines handed down ‘somewhere from the top’. As secrecy is one of the main conditions of trolling’s efficiency, Maksim assures Merkacheva that her publication will come under a trolling attack. He speculates that the commenters will ‘write that this was all bullshit, and [that the author was] a complete fool and a taleteller.’ And so it happens.

Many comments are hateful, obscene, or nonsensical. *Ne dayushchiy otpor*⁹ asked to ‘return the time spent on reading the article, [for it was all] bullshit from the first letter to the last.’ *GENNOFIL* lamented, using Padonkaffsky jargon,¹⁰ that ‘the author knows nothing about the true trolling’, then enumerated several troll nicknames and seemingly started a bizarre conversation with some of them. *KAROTCHE*

⁸ All the quotes in this part come from the interview and its comment section.

⁹ We use italics for the names of users.

¹⁰ A slang language developed by a subculture of the Russian-language Internet community called padonki.

decided to comment in an openly obscene way in the same Padonkaffsky jargon that ‘Vedmedev [a ridiculing variant of Medvedev] is a JEW and ANAL JEW, and it makes no sense to fight for them [i.e. the government]!’ In response *GENNOFIL* pointed out that *KAROTCHE* was ‘one more troll [capable of] flipping the script very deftly [and probably had] a degree in journalism.’ To this, *Muzhik* attested that ‘one should not overestimate the role of trolls. If one has a brain of one’s own and lives in a real society, no troll is able to lead one astray.’ This thought received an almost immediate response from *Gost’* who declared: ‘I am not sure about this. But I snub Yankees for free here. No one is paying me.’

Other users trolled Merkacheva in a subtler way. *Not a troll* repeated word-to-word what Maksim said that the trolls would write in the comment section: ‘The article is bullshit, and the author is a complete fool and a taleteller.’ An elegant joke, especially coming from the user with such a handle and, following a flood of insults and obscenities, this comment points to a larger issue. Trolling, at its very root, creates an urge to challenge it. It triggers a cycle of irony which breaks the possibility of meaningful exchange. Ridicule and doubt become endlessly recursive, stalling any debate. For example, for us, the authors of this article, it would make no sense at that point to write anything substantive and serious in response to *Not a troll* and others. We would merely ‘feed the troll’. Somewhere in the process, the possibility to securitize a politically pressing issue vanishes. Political energy is not, any longer, refuted or even closed down in a traditional authoritarian manner but is, rather, eroded. A potential securitizing move would not only be slaughtered immediately by its context, the very willingness to make such move is compromised by the expectation of ridicule. In the same comment thread, *Gerda* puts their finger on this predicament:

I have noticed another type of trolling: it is when really topical articles are commented with a stream of windbagery, which completely floods the forum/blog... One relevant comment is usually followed by around ten idiotic comments; eventually, after reading the article and then the comments to it, the willingness to say something meaningful disappears completely... it works and this simple tactic is easier ... for the trolls than persuasion and dissuasion...

Aleks agrees with *Gerda* and maintains that, “Not everyone is so information-proof. Litter the comment thread, make real users waste their time and leave the discussion – all this is trolling.” This *modus operandi* of an Internet forum and its dynamics has been projected to the wider public sphere. All becomes noise. Thus issues potentially offering an opening for constructing the regime as a security threat receive orchestrated trolling treatment that alters the context to prevent securitizing moves. For example, the spread of outlandish conspiracy theories about the downing of MH17 (Toler, 2017), the sponsoring of a bizarre New York photo exhibition about Syria and Ukraine (Cush, 2015), the running of the so-called Federal News Agency, a news hub not infrequently promoting pre-fabricated

opinions with specific key words,¹¹ all operate in accordance with the troll-logic. The efficacy of top-down institutionalization makes this kind of trolling very different from trolling for justice or lulz. Its troll-logic (dis-)engages the audience by the elimination of argument and agency not by *containment* within a restricted space but by *dissolution* within an open space. Individuals who speak through the channels of trolling become alienated from the messages they produce, while pre-fabricated templates obliterate the element of transgression otherwise characteristic of trolling. This serves to build a security cordon of discourse-dissolving noise around the current regime. The regime is, thus, entrenched by nonsense.

The perfect pro-Kremlin troll: a trickster or a cog?

The image of a factory where numb workers mechanically assemble a product from pre-manufactured parts would still be a misleading metaphor for industrialized trolling. Our source, Iwan,¹² who worked at Saint-Petersburg troll factory for four months, describes the complexity of internal structure and the multi-level functional differentiation of the ‘worker bees’. The majority of the factory’s employees work on forums and social networks. Some produce comments and posts in Facebook, Vk.com, LiveJournal, etc.¹³ Others contribute to political forums or create and post funny pictures that use chauvinistic humour ‘to lift the overall spirit.’ However, the factory also has a number of elite departments. Allegedly, one of such teams writes speeches for the Russian TV. Another is said to create content for Federal News Agency, which involves highly professional research work. The employees of those elite squads also maintain popular social network accounts that have hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of followers and get cited in the press. Such activity requires talent, social media skills, and possibly a degree in journalism, strategic communications, or cognate fields.

Unlike in the case of ‘worker bees’ whose efficiency is measured by quantity, for elite teams quality is imperative. The main requirement in Iwan’s job description was ‘to raise the account’s profile, to trigger wide reaction, to be picked up by international information agencies, and to promote the account as a deft and reliable source of news.’ In his department, ‘efficiency was measured in retweets by accounts of celebrities and politicians, other accounts with many followers, media publications [referencing some factory-produced content], as well as by the level of detail in reports.’ For what it was, this job was anything but mechanistic and boring, and, in Iwan’s own words, ‘it was truly exciting

¹¹ Retrieved from our anonymous source who is a former employee of the troll factory. Federal News Agency’s website is <https://riafan.ru/>.

¹² Pseudonym. All quotes in this part come from several chats with Iwan in Vk.com in winter 2016/17 and spring 2017.

¹³ Vk.com is Russian analogue of Facebook popular in post-Soviet space; LiveJournal is a widely popular Russian social networking service where users can keep a blog, journal or diary.

to work there, except for those days when we were getting a call from the top [to promote some opinion by disseminating key words].'

Iwan's narrative conjures a distinct profile of a perfect pro-Kremlin troll, or a professional of nihilism: punctual, with excellent research and writing skills, able to screen and evaluate discovered data swiftly and independently, in command of foreign languages, and capable of producing exciting and timely content generating massive response. Simultaneously, however, such an individual should be ready to promote, if necessary, a prefabricated position without asking questions about the purpose and the source of such task. The perfect troll should either support Russia's political trajectory or be utterly indifferent to politics. The content produced by the perfect troll 'ought to be popular in the first place, then relevant and fresh (for maintaining the account's reputation as an information source for large media channels), then it should be pro-regime... *or not openly anti-regime, to be more precise*' [emphasis ours]. It is not necessary to glorify Russia, according to Iwan. Resourcefulness is the key as long as the troll does not openly bash the country.

Such mandated resourcefulness is not to be taken for agency per se. As in a beehive where each bee's labour has meaning only in the context of a higher goal of the swarm's survival, the top-down organization and the pre-existing agenda of a troll factory are geared towards consolidating the stability of the regime, not towards political self-expression of its workers. Once they enter the online public space as trolls, they are to agitate, in the trolling mode, not to converse and trade in sound (or even meaningful) arguments. Factory-affiliated accounts and posts invariably muddy the waters. The predicament of exposure becomes twofold: Confronting such content on its own adopted terms ignores the complex and powerful indifference of political trolling and merely 'feeds the troll'. The ever-present ambiguity of trolling protects a troll from being unmasked. It is close to impossible to truly blow the whistle on a troll. Meaningful outside intervention is thus preventively precluded. Dialogue loses its transformative potential while techno-authoritarianism thrives, with impunity.

The following section now examines the trolling frenzy in the aftermath of Boris Nemtsov's assassination in order to demonstrate the effects of neutrollization *in situ*.

Nemtsov's assassination

Nemtsov was one of the most outspoken critics of the current Russian regime and one of the few members of the Russian opposition who had a history of public service and an impressive political profile. In the 1990s, he was a Deputy Prime Minister, a Minister of Energy, and a Governor of the Nizhniy Novgorod region. His background and political disposition made him the unofficial leader of

the Russian political opposition and his assassination became a profoundly sensitive issue. It could have cast a shadow on the Kremlin and undermined the unspoken social contract founded on the idea that Putin's regime was the cure to the lawlessness of the 1990s. However negative the general population's views on Nemtsov and other opposition figures, the idea of physically eliminating the opposition was discursively unthinkable in 2015. The assassination thus presented a viable opening for civil society to construct the regime as a societal security threat. The documents leaked in one of the publications related to the troll factory in Saint-Petersburg show that the activities of the factory were immediately re-directed after the event.¹⁴ Bloggers and commenters were instructed to switch from covering the Ukrainian issue to writing about Nemtsov's murder. They received a detailed instruction with exact messages and key words to disseminate through their LiveJournal accounts. Below, we examine messages laid out in the leaked instruction and compare them to the actual posts generated by the users whose nicknames were included in the leaked shift lists.¹⁵

Guidelines for post generation about Nemtsov's assassination mandated spreading speculations about the motive of his murder together with negative portrayals of the adversaries of the Russian regime: the opposition, the US, and Ukrainian authorities. The set aim was to demonstrate that 'the murder of the opposition activist Nemtsov was not in the interest of the official authorities and that there was an obvious provocation behind it' (Khachatryan, 2015). The guidelines included a list of key words to insert in every piece in order to facilitate searchability of the posts: 'opposition, Boris Nemtsov, assassination of Nemtsov, provocation, opposition in Russia' (Ibid). Three themes were stressed in particular: (1) 'Ukrainian officials could be involved in the death of Russian opposition activist'; (2) 'the opposition members are trying to boost their political capital on the death of their peer'; (3) 'this event became a convenient excuse for [the US] to interfere into [Russia's] internal affairs' (Ibid). Even though only one of the themes directly blamed the Ukrainian authorities, in practice all of them fostered speculations about potential paymasters and executioners. Notably, the main version of the official investigators, that the killing was contracted from Chechnya, was not among them. Subsequently, there appeared a great number of LiveJournal posts that corresponded to the guidelines and contained the key words. We analyse several individual accounts.

On 28 February, *demouu1* (listed under no. 25 in Kazakbaeva's shift list) published a post entitled 'Opposition made a human sacrifice?' to lament that 'political opposition is shouting that it was Putin

¹⁴ The archive of leaked documents is available for downloading in Soshnikov (2015). We have a repository of those files as well.

¹⁵ This analysis is based on the investigations by Diana Khachatryan (2015) published in *Novaya Gazeta* and Andrey Soshnikov (2015) published in *Moy Rayon*.

himself who shot Nemtsov, although, and it is a scary thought, it must have been the opposition itself that “sacrificed” Nemtsov right before the meeting that was supposed to take place on the first day of spring’ (*demouu1*, 2015). *demouu1* insisted that ‘the assassination of Nemtsov is an outright provocation. It is obvious that the government has nothing to do with it, and it is in the opposition’s interest right now to whip up tension in the country’ (Ibid). This post was commented a dozen times. The comments that supported the same idea and also used some of the key words come from the accounts that appeared in the leaked shifts list. For instance, *bagrat12* (no. 156 in Saut’s shift list) wrote that ‘this murder is an outright provocation. Yet, not everyone realizes that Nemtsov was taken out by someone from his own crowd’ (Ibid). Such cross-commenting is used by the troll factory’s employees to promote posts and accounts to the LiveJournal’s top-list. In a similar vein, *CaraDoxee5* shared their belief that the ‘assassination of Nemtsov was of benefit to the opposition’ (CaraDoxee5, 2015). They maintained that ‘Nemtsov’s assassination turned out to be a very handy thing for the opposition, which, by the way, looks very suspicious ... One cannot deny that provocation is their specialty’ (Ibid). This post was commented nine times. Again, the comments that either defended the same agenda (*davi90* and *kater971*) or simply said something completely unrelated to the topic to boost the post’s popularity (e.g. *llanpaclaive* and *pqalongese*), were left by users that can be confidently related to the troll factory.

Two users who commented on the post made larger contributions. *kater971* advocated that ‘Nemtsov was picked to attract the public’s attention right on the eve of the [opposition’s] march ... Such a provocation will not convince many people, but will be given publicity for sure’ (*kater971*, 2015). *pqalongese* managed to produce three similar posts on 28 February. Each developed one of the three themes included in the guidelines. In his anti-American post entitled ‘Instigation is the main quality of the US’, *pqalongese* critiqued the proposal to deliver arms to Ukraine saying that ‘[the US] are living by means of reproducing filth and stirring chaos and disorder in other countries’ (*pqalongese*, 2015a). In the post dedicated to the Russian opposition, *pqalongese* wondered (2015b) ‘why would people even involve themselves in such nonsensical activity (I am talking about the opposition activists now)?’ Finally, in their anti-Ukrainian post that attracted most attention, *pqalongese* brought direct accusations as the guidelines instructed:

As for my version of who was behind this murder, I would not be surprised if it was Ukraine’s doing. Why not? Apparently, Nemtsov had been well-connected with the Kiev authorities. Some even called him a friend. It was a very smart move, in my opinion. They kill an opposition activist and present it as if it was perpetrated by the Russian authorities that simply take out the unwanted persons. Plus, one can expect anything from Ukrainians (2015c)!

Many commenters to this statement posted from the factory-affiliated accounts, promoted one of the themes specified, and used the mandatory key words. *legaheddis* (no. 112 in Lebedyantseva's shift list) wrote that 'opposition in Russia is not really a target. Yes, their activities are often dirty. But such organizations exist in every country. And no one kills them. Why Putin should?!' (Ibid). *Feedpecosleft* (no. 68 in Lebedyantseva's shift list) blamed western politicians for organizing this assassination, 'I am almost certain that this was a doing of American and European politicians who conspired against the Russian state' (Ibid). *karina_great*, who also commented on *pqalongese's* post maintaining that the Russian government had nothing to do with Nemtsov's murder, does not feature anywhere in the leaked documents. Yet, a closer look at this profile leaves little doubt that the user writes from the troll factory. Frequent posts in the style of 'Good morning, everyone!' gathering tens of similar comments, impersonal and mostly entertaining content of the main profile that is regularly updated, and occasional pro-regime political posts bear striking resemblance to how an average troll account looks like.¹⁶

Unlike *pqalongese*, who split the mandated messages in three different entries, *ryypaulinm* managed to squeeze them all into one, and produced ten more posts on the same day. Their post entitled 'Who will benefit from the assassination of Nemtsov?' opened by stating that 'this was not in the interest of the Russian authorities' (2015). Then, *ryypaulinm* speculated that the assassination 'was just a provocation and this may have been in the interest of Boris' ... comrades-in-arms or American security services' (Ibid). Ultimately, *ryypaulinm* created a theory that the murder was organized through Ukraine's involvement:

By the way, Boris Nemtsov was in a very friendly relationship with the current Ukrainian authorities and often visited them in Kiev. They may have given him some financial resources for destabilizing political situation in Russia, yet as we can clearly see, they couldn't pull this through. Because of this, Nemtsov could have been liquidated, as someone who could not accomplish his task (Ibid).

ryypaulinm's post was accused of trolling by one of the commenters. User *al391* intervened by asking, 'Are you working for 30 pieces of silver, or for free, for your own potatriotic ideas [*vatnye idei*]?'¹⁷ (Ibid). *snowy_trail* (no. 172 in Kazakbaeva's shift list) came to rescue: 'And why are you pushing a pen here and put yourself to some bother? Don't you have anything else to do, except pretending to be very smart?' (Ibid). Having staged this counterattack, *snowy_trail* returned to the subject matter, 'I think that the assassination of Nemtsov can be in the interest of anyone but Putin. It is like shooting oneself in the foot. Putin is not a fool' (Ibid). It was also *snowy_trail* who left similar comments with

¹⁶ This user's profile is available at: <http://karina-great.livejournal.com/> (accessed 14 February 2017).

¹⁷ In Russian: за свои ватные идеи. Comes from 'ватник', a derogatory characteristic used by liberal opposition to denote a representative of the common folk who supported the annexation of Crimea.

several key words to the previously mentioned posts by *kater971* and *demouu1*, and, together with a great number of other trolls, reproduced the anti-American line in their own post from 28 February: 'I was mostly startled by the US' reaction. Before Nemtsov was halfway through crossing the Great Divide, the US already began to squeal... Obama, John Kerry and others immediately snatched the opportunity to throw clamours and accusations!' (*snowy_trail*, 2015).

Typically, *snowy_trail's* contribution sparked a discussion that was almost exclusively held by trolls, including *phidiwp507*, *mannaliobrit*, and *panebcaj* whose accounts can be found in the leaked documents. It exhibits the patterns similar to the one of *karina_great*, i.e. regular, impersonal and entertaining posts mixed with pro-regime interventions bearing resemblance to a number of related posts by other troll users on the same dates. *mannaliobrit* and *panebcaj* were also two of many profiles which suspended their operation in 2015 after being hacked and exposed by internet activists. A great number of other profiles, including the ones discussed in this paper, remain active until today. The number of friends each of the analysed users may have is anything from 323 to 2,049 but usually more than 1,500. The total journal entries some of them have produced may exceed 4,000. The sum of received comments sometimes goes beyond 40,000 (e.g. *demouu1*). The number of posted comments would usually be a similar figure. These results present an analysis of fewer than ten individual profiles while troll factories employ hundreds, if not thousands, of workers.

What this industrious trolling army managed to create in LiveJournal in the aftermath of Nemtsov's assassination was a quasi-political yet completely hollow public space with a multitude of diverse but prefabricated opinions that jammed the web, potentially disorienting the audience and crowding out civil society voices. They propagated various conspiratorial explanations but annihilated the possibility of meaningful engagement. An attempt at such would end up 'feeding the troll' whose agency had been already divested from the message. Trolls nurtured the ambiguity of their position, preserving the semblance of sincerity and authenticity, yet stringently followed the instructions provided. They thereby ensured that the online space would swell with the keywords and pre-fabricated ideas that pushed out or drowned out oppositional voices. They at the same time remained immune to possible change as they represented the figure of the deaf sovereign rather than his acting subjects. An attempt at securitization in such a carefully crafted environment would be doomed. A securitizing actor would find themselves surrounded by a crowd of human bots whose empathy is prohibited by their job description. A *bona fide* member of a wider audience would face a laborious task of muddling through the thicket of contradictory views without the means to sift the wheat from the chaff.

Conclusion

This article considered the significance of trolling to contemporary security through a contextual analysis of industrialized pro-Kremlin trolling. It identified a particular form of desecuritization, neutrollization, that reflects a type of techno-authoritarian practice by the government against its society. Neutrollization has little to do with coercion or with overtly coercive silencing. Nor is it fundamentally propagandistic in the classic sense of producing messages intended to convince, although doubtless many of its messages will be taken credulously. This is not (or not only), therefore, a matter of the production of 'false consciousness' as such. Its victims are not dupes or fools. On the contrary, neutrollization both presupposes and functions *through* the critical faculties of citizens, making them doubt everything and, hence, withdraw from public discourse with a dejected shrug. Neutrollization is not, therefore, the classic 'manufacturing of consent' à la Herman and Chomsky but, rather, the manufacturing of *cynicism*.

Agents of the regime thus mobilize their technological, economic but also context-dependent social capital in order to stage a political intervention and maintain a structural pattern of non-relation between state and society in a non-securitizing manner. This occurs via two strategies of desecuritization identified above: effacement or prevention of securitizing speech acts and speech act failure. These thwart the constitution of a societal audience by civil society actors and thus preclude the condition of possibility for the intersubjective agreement between civil society and society at large. Crucially, instead of an instance of popular resistance to the oppressive regime, neutrollization works as a defensive means for the regime itself. Its tools are made contextually appropriate: It lives off ironizing the rationale of the public sphere in order to keep the regime free from a relation of accountability, pre-emptively pacifying potential political mobilization. The logic of continuing trolling operations concerning Nemtsov's assassination when the official arrests excluded the involvement of the Kremlin is no longer puzzling: Establishing the real culprit hardly matters in the game of *securing the non-relation*. What matters is keeping up corruption by chaos. The non-relation between the Russian regime and society can hence be reproduced and intensified, shielding the regime from the kind of accountability that the establishment of such a relation might produce.

On the theoretical side, neutrollization, through its abductive derivation, nuances apriorist models of desecuritization based on one-scenario normativity and linear sequences of threat construction. Its condition of 'politics without telos' problematizes the security equation as we know it from securitization studies and prompts more context-sensitive conversation on security practice. Substantively, neutrollization textures the logic of the trolling turn in Russian foreign policy, beyond generic refrains about revisionist power. It is well-observed that Russia resorts to parody in

communicating its actions to the outside world, making Western liberal norms its principal object of travesty. One of the most striking precursors of this trend was Sergey Lavrov's justification of the intervention in Georgia in 2008 as exercising a responsibility to protect Russian citizens, inferred from the constitution of the Russian Federation – a direct mocking of the original liberal premise of the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect any individual regardless of their citizenship or ethnicity (Kurowska 2014). Official justifications of the incorporation of the Crimea in 2014 quoted in one breath the responsibility to protect Russian citizens and soldiers abroad, appeals to a humanitarian crisis, warnings of a minority group in danger, and the inviolability of the principle of self-determination (Reshetnikov, 2017). In her analysis of Russia's twisting the Western normative grammar, Burai argues that 'the parodic effect is to disclose the original normative discourse as just one possible "reality-making script"' (2016: 67). In other words, 'nothing is true and everything is possible.' Perhaps the most vivid, though mundane, example of trolling-like spill-over into Russian diplomacy is the communication, in an official and social media capacity, by the current spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who exercises the trolling vocabulary in ministerial briefings. In reaction to the news about the deaths of Russian servicemen as a result of the American bombings of Deir Ez-Zor in Syria in February 2018, Maria Zakharova denied a number of Russian deaths, be it 400 or 10, and continued, 'Interestingly, the anti-government Syrian militants were among the first ones, perhaps, even before the [Western] media, to pass along this disinformation on their media channels. For reasons unknown, they took a photo of the surface of Mars and superimposed an image – dated July 2014 – of destroyed, possibly Ukrainian, military equipment on it' (2018).

While domestically neutrollization is a techno-authoritarian practice that pacifies the space for dissent and is exercised from the position of force, the trolling-like quality of Russian diplomacy is a derivative of the domestic political culture expressed in contestation of the liberal order that the Russian regime sees as hegemonic. The Kremlin cannot unfold a fully-fledged neutrollization in the international sphere. However, its international trolling strategy must be understood in relation to that being constructed domestically – not so much to expose hacking antics, which have spectacular yet less than structurally profound effects, but more to reflect on the long-term effects of corruption by chaos, where value-based political antagonism becomes meaningless, or even eliminated.

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