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A MONSTER OR A HERO? HOW THE RT.COM FRAMED DONALD TRUMP'S AGENDA DURING THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN 2015-2016

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 presidential election in the United States ended with an unexpected result. Donald Trump, the Republican candidate and an underdog in this race, surprisingly succeeded over Hillary Clinton – a front-runner of the U.S. political establishment. One of the potential reasons for this outcome in the elections turned out to be a questionable database, which was made public at the crucial moment of the election campaign. The actions of a mysterious Russia-linked hacker or hackers targeting Democratic National Committee computers allowed thousands of stolen emails from the candidate and her collaborators to be published online, which weakened Clinton's image in the eyes of public opinion (Galante, Ee 2018: 9-10). This incident contributed to creating a series of new controversies, which dominated the course of this campaign. Many politicians, including Hillary Clinton herself, along with mainstream journalists and media pundits accused Russia of attempting to interfere in the electoral process in the United States. The Kremlin, according to these accusations, had both the capability and motivation to conduct such actions. An investigation was initiated by U.S. law enforcement agencies, which indicated that such endeavors took place. The report published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in January 2017 clearly stated that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic processes, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency" (*Assessing Russian Activities...* 2017).

Clearly, the leak of controversial e-mails was beneficial for the Republican candidate Donald Trump. Additionally, he and Vladimir Putin praised each other on multiple occasions.

Trump also proved to be much more abstemious than the rest of the U.S. establishment in criticizing Russian foreign policy in, for instance, the Middle East. In effect, some concerns about the bizarre “bromance” between both politicians were raised among the political elite and media in the United States. Trump’s critics frequently suggest that there is some sort of a link between him and Putin, which represents a threat to the legitimacy of American political processes, as well as a great challenge to the security of the United States. These allegations were dismissed by the Republican candidate, however, he still refused to follow Hillary Clinton’s narrative in criticizing Kremlin (Lo 2017, Splidsboel Hansen 2016).

In addition to controversial statements and cyber-attacks against Democratic politicians, Russians were also accused of conducting an information warfare campaign in favour of Donald Trump. One of its major tools, according to some key U.S. political figures, including members of the Hillary Clinton’s team, was the Russian television network – RT (formerly known as Russia Today) – funded by the Federation’s government (*Slaughter Donald for Putin bromance...* 2016). Even the aforementioned U.S. intelligence report followed the same narrative and accused RT of actively collaborating with Wikileaks, which disseminated leaked DNC e-mails. It also emphasized that “starting in March 2016, Russian Government-linked actors began openly supporting President-elect Trump’s candidacy in media, aimed at English-speaking audiences. RT and Sputnik – another government-funded outlet producing pro-Kremlin radio and online content in a variety of languages for international audiences – consistently cast President-elect Trump as the target of unfair coverage from traditional US media outlets that they claimed were subservient to a corrupt political establishment” (*Assessing Russian Activities* 2017: 3-4). This perception of RT’s activities has been discussed in recent years by the academic community. For instance, Monika L. Richter argued that RT has played a role in Kremlin’s “disinformation campaign against the West. Unlike other agents of this campaign, which operate primarily behind the scenes and whose ties to the Kremlin are less overt (e.g. bot networks, pro-Kremlin trolls, proxy-run disinformation sites, etc.) RT operates out in the open, pushing its pro-Kremlin agenda under the guise of ‘free speech’ and ‘alternative’ journalism aimed at countering the alleged bias of the mainstream media” (Richter 2017: 2). Interestingly, some pundits and journalists cast doubt on such assumptions. For instance, Danielle Ryan argued that – in fact – Trump was frequently criticized by RT America (Ryan 2017).

In this context, while the heated public debate on Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is far from being over, surprisingly there have been little to no serious scientific works published which attempt to verify how the Kremlin-linked media outlets presented both candidates, based on proper content analysis. This case study aims to fill this gap in research. Its major objective is to understand how RT.com presented Donald Trump, his candidacy and agenda, during the U.S. presidential campaign in 2015 and 2016. In other words, it attempts to find out whether this news website was involved in creating an artificial pro-Trump image and supported its cause against Hillary Clinton. Its secondary objective is to understand what kind of agenda (including the topics and issues discussed) was adopted by this web-

page when referring to this Republican candidate. In order to reach these goals, the study was founded on the concept of agenda-setting and exploited content analysis of the textual layer of RT.com.¹

The reason why this webpage was selected for this study is the fact that it is the main online tool exploited by RT television and it is quite popular. According to the analytics data published by the SimilarWeb in March 2019, RT.com was rated 352nd in the Global Rank category, and 61st in the category of News and Media. Between October 2018 and March 2019, the number of visits to this website ranged from 147 to 191.5 million per month, with a bounce rate of 67.99 (March 2019). According to this report, more than 35% of visitors were located in Russia, with 9.6% in the United States (the second highest country in terms of website traffic) (*Rt.com* 2019). According to Alexa statistics, RT.com was among the top 1000 most popular websites in the United States (*rt.com Traffic Statistics* 2019). All these data suggest that RT.com belongs to the most significant news websites in the world and it has significant reach in the United States, which confirms the aforementioned statements and opinions on the usability of this media outlet for influencing American citizens.

This paper has been divided into three chapters. The first discusses the methodology used by the study, including the significance and coverage of RT.com in the United States and early findings. The second chapter focuses on understanding what kind of themes were raised in articles mentioning Donald Trump, including, among others, political controversies, debates with other politicians, or various incidents and scandals. Finally, the third chapter discusses general tendencies in presenting the Republican candidate's agenda from the viewpoint of the framing concept.

This study has, however, two important caveats. Firstly, while it presents how RT.com referred to Donald Trump and his presidential run, it offers no answer to the dominating question of its efficiency in influencing American audiences. Secondly, it did not focus on understanding the image of Hillary Clinton. Her person and program, usually criticized by the website, were analyzed only in articles referring to Trump and in strict reference to his agenda. Thus, it offers no comparative perspective on how both candidates were depicted by this webpage.

ANALYZING THE CONTENT OF RT.COM: METHODOLOGY USED AND EARLY FINDINGS

The study was founded on the agenda-setting theory. This concept usually perceives communication as a two-stage process (Nowak 2016: 13). The first stage focuses upon directing the recipients' attention towards a given issue (through the strong exposure of information), while the second constitutes so-called "framing." On a side note, it has to be stressed that, according to some academics, framing constitutes an independent

¹ This means that the videos sometimes included on the RT.com website were not taken into consideration.

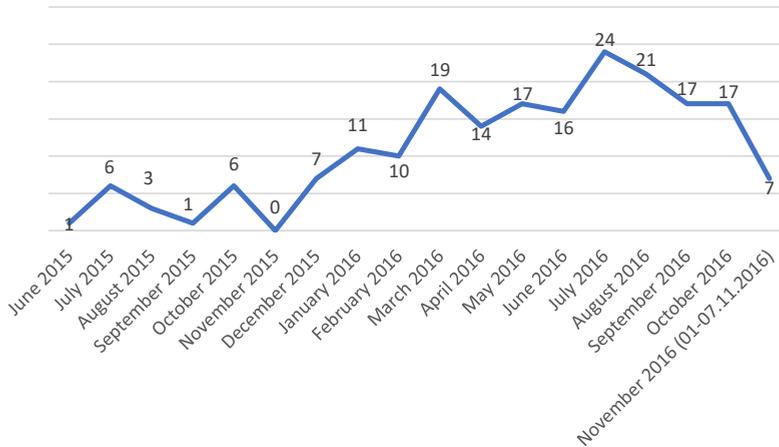
theoretical model (Sheufele, Tewksbury 2007: 11). An example of the first stage would be the introduction of the names of those candidates who are participating in the election campaign to the media agenda. When this issue has seeped into the public's consciousness and has become part of the public agenda, the second stage of communication may be initiated. Dietram A. Sheufele and David Tewksbury explained that "it is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Sheufele, Tewksbury 2007: 11). In other words, framing manifests in the curating of media content in a way that provides context and – through selection, display, omission and extension – indicates the importance of the matter. Framing seeks to select some aspects of reality and exaggerate their importance, in order to disseminate a specific view of the problem, interpretation, and moral evaluation. It aims to emphasise the specific attributes of the objects of the media agenda. Thus, the second stage of communication conveys to media consumers the manner in which they are to think. For example, in an election campaign, the second stage of communication will refer to the attributes of the candidates (e.g. experienced, educated, "green man", corrupt, competent, etc.). The power that the media possesses is, therefore, the ability to influence the image of political candidates.

Based on the agenda-setting concept, an attempt was made to determine what the significance of Donald Trump's agenda in the RT.com news was, and how frequently and when the website referred to him. We aimed to discover and analyse individual news on Donald Trump published in English on the RT.com website during the presidential campaign between January 1st 2015 and November 7th 2016 (the day before the election). We managed to identify a total population of 197 individual articles published at this webpage, which referred to the Republican candidate. Therefore, they individually constituted units of analysis for this research project. In this context, the first piece referring to him was posted online on June 16th 2015, but his activities and agenda only became a regular topic for the website in July. The last two texts which referred to him were published on November 7th 2016. A significant increase in reports on his candidature may be noticed at the turn of 2015 and 2016, which reflected his rising chances in the Republican presidential primaries. The apogee of the RT.com interest in Donald Trump was reached in summer 2016 (Figure 1).

We also aimed to understand the manner, in which Donald Trump was being presented. Based on the concept of framing, all individual units of analysis were coded as positive, neutral, or negative towards the candidate's agenda. Negative texts were defined as those which denominated Trump and his agenda with pejorative terms (such as "Nazi," "fascist," "racist" etc.), connected him to scandals or crimes, and lacked developed counterarguments. In contrast, positive pieces were understood as those which not only omitted various controversies which were evident in his campaign, but raised issues beneficial for the candidate, including his straightforwardness, financial independence from various groups of lobbyists, or the anti-Trump bias of mainstream media. Finally, neutral articles constituted these which either concentrated solely on reporting the events connected to Trump's campaign or consisted of balanced argumentation both criticizing and supporting his viewpoint.

Figure 1

Number of articles per month, referring to Donald Trump between January 1st 2015 and November 7th 2016



Source: Content analysis of RT.com

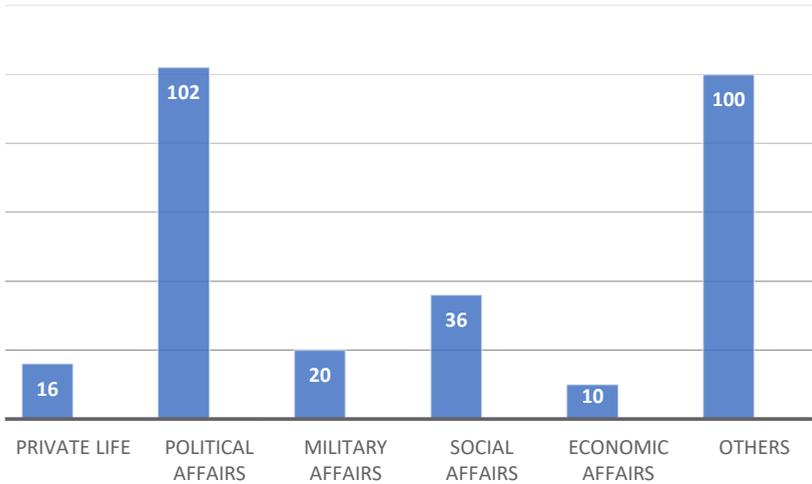
In addition to the attitude of the editors towards the candidate, this study also attempted to code the themes discussed in analysed articles. These topics were grouped into six distinct categories: politics, military affairs, social affairs, economics, private life, and issues which did not fit other groups. Each article could be coded in more than one category, depending on its content. Finally, the research project also attempted to understand what other politicians and states were discussed in reference to Trump's campaign.

SETTING THE AGENDA ON TRUMP: PROTESTS, PRIVATE LIFE, IMMIGRATION, AND RUSSIA

From a quantitative viewpoint, several interesting tendencies may be noticed when analysing the agenda of RT.com on Donald Trump in 2015 and 2016. To begin with, as Figure 2 shows, the vast majority of units of analysis referred to broadly understood political affairs, which is understandable considering the nature of the presidential election. However, military and economic issues played somewhat secondary roles in the RT.com reports. Their frequency was comparable to texts discussing the private life of the Republican candidate. This suggests that the RT's interest in his family and personal affairs was on par with his views on, for example, U.S. military involvement overseas or his ideas on how to boost the American economy. Moreover, a huge number of pieces referred to other issues which did not fit the aforementioned categories.

Figure 2

Dominating themes in the RT.com articles referring to Donald Trump



Source: Content analysis of RT.com

From the group of sixteen articles, which referred to Donald Trump's private life, most focused on doubts arising from his long business career and controversial statements in the past. For instance, in August 2018 RT.com published an article entitled "Donald Trump: A different shade of green," which featured his questionable actions as a businessman and clearly represented a negative trait for a potential leader of the United States. Among others, this text discussed alleged connections between him and Russian mobsters. Its author argued that "what the Koch Brothers do for oil companies, hedge funds, and vulture capitalists, Trump allegedly does for mob bosses, gangsters, and con artists: open doors, grease palms, and facilitate deals" (Draitser 2015). Other pieces of this kind were featured in April 2016, when RT.com cited top boxing promoter Bob Arum, who accused Trump of "swindling" him out of 2.5 million dollars, which contributed to his image as a ruthless businessman in the past (*Top boxing promoter...* 2016). Another group of texts from this category featured on RT.com referred to his family life, usually addressing issues, which were rather problematic for the Republican candidate, who – by definition – should avoid any controversies in this matter. For instance, the website informed its readers that children of Trump forgot to register and, therefore, they did not have the opportunity to vote for their father in the primary (*Two Trump kids...* 2016). Other pieces referred to the German hometown of Trump's grandparents, which attempted to downplay its link with the Republican candidate due to his disputed actions (*German hometown...* 2016), or even highlighted accusations that he was involved in raping a 13 year old girl (*Donald Trump accused of raping...* 2016). In a general sense, the vast majority of information provided by RT.com on his personal life usually referred to controversial issues. The image of him

which emerged from these pieces of news was one that was far from a “family men.” Instead, the website associated him with alleged crimes, controversies or ridiculous affairs. His predatory business practices were also emphasized.

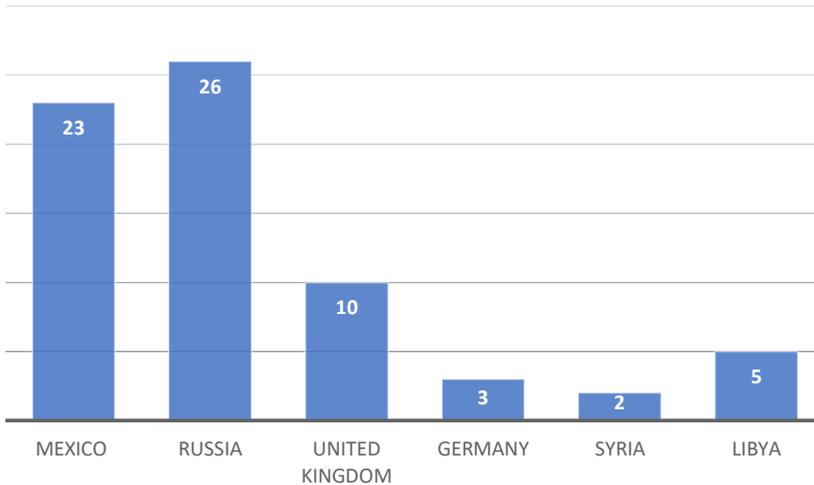
Numerous articles consisting of political deliberations, which is natural considering the nature of a presidential campaign, predominantly focused on three groups of themes. Firstly, RT.com reported on Trump's rise to power, first as a Republican nominee, and later as a “black horse” of the elections. It broadly cited or described his statements and speeches, including the most controversial ones. These were frequently contrasted with political – usually critical – opinions of other important figures, both Democrats and Republicans. Earlier in the campaign Trump's agenda was compared to the viewpoints of other Republican candidates, due to the primaries. Subsequently, RT was much more concentrated on reporting arising political tension between him and Hillary Clinton. As many as 72 of 197 articles consisted of at least one reference to the Democratic candidate. For example, in August 2016 this webpage featured the discussion between members of Clinton's and Trump's camps concerning the alt-right movements, which supported the Republican nominee. While the article itself was very critical towards these groups (which were even compared to cockroaches), the viewpoints of both candidates were briefly described (*The price is alt-right...* 2016). Aside from Hillary Clinton, also other high-profile American politicians were frequently referred to in articles on “The Donald.” One can mention President Barack Obama, who supported Clinton's agenda and frequently criticized Trump, Democrat Bernie Sanders, as well as two prominent Republican candidates: Ted Cruz and Mitt Romney. Arguments between the billionaire and the broadly understood political establishment proved to be the core of many of the analysed texts. In August 2015 RT.com published an op-ed authored by John Wight, who discussed the clash between Trump and John McCain. He supported the opinion of the businessman that McCain was no real war hero, while he remained somewhat critical on the other aspects of his agenda (Wight 2015). This issue was also mentioned in other articles (*No war hero, a loser...* 2015). Other texts of this kind were generally alike. When the website discussed Trump's controversial statement that he could shoot somebody and still wouldn't lose any voters, the position of another Republican candidate – Ted Cruz – who mocked this statement, was raised (*Trump says he could shoot somebody...* 2016). However, it has to be stressed that from time to time texts which referred to similarities between various politicians and Trump or their support for him were posted online. For instance, in January 2016 RT.com highlighted Sarah Palin's endorsement for the Trump candidature (*Sarah Palin endorses...* 2016).

Secondly, RT.com featured reportages on candidate debates and convention speeches. Both usually consisted of cited fragments of statements and presented the reactions of social media pundits and commentators. While some texts consisted of a description of the debated issues and exploited argumentation (*This could be Russia...* 2016), others focused on a selected, usually controversial or humorous statements or events, such as Melania Trump's unusual outfit at the presidential debate (*#PussyBowgate...* 2018).

Finally, RT proved to be very interested in the external dimension of Trump's political agenda. From a quantitative viewpoint, the vast majority of texts discussing these issues focused either on Mexico or on Russia. Other countries mentioned in the news were, for instance: the United Kingdom, Germany, and Libya (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Number of pieces of news on Donald Trump which mentioned the selected international actors



Source: Content analysis of RT.com

On the one hand, texts referring to Russia usually referred to the mutual admiration of Putin and Trump or to controversies over e-mail leaks and the alleged link between Trump and the Federation (*Red Scare2... 2016*). On the other hand, Mexico was predominantly mentioned in the context of the candidate's stigmatizing statements on Latin Americans, as well as his anti-immigration rants (*Iraq, Hillary and baseball... 2016*). Other texts discussed controversies in his contacts with British politicians or described his negative opinion on the effects of American foreign policy in the Middle East or Africa. The website also highlighted Trump's plans to restrain from meddling in the internal affairs of other states. This stance was highlighted by RT.com, among others, in the context of the *coup d'état* attempt in Turkey. His negative attitude towards NATO allies was mentioned as well; the Republican candidate demanded they fulfil their obligations towards the USA (*US can't lecture Turkey... 2016*).

Surprisingly little attention was given to military issues in Trump's agenda. Some of the news on RT.com related to this category referred to the aforementioned views of the Republican candidate on the idea of war heroism, while others focused on U.S. military members' political preferences prior to the presidential election, highlighting the popularity of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump (*US troops divided... 2016*). However, the website also mentioned the Republican candidate's

negative remarks on American warmongering in Iraq and Libya (*World would be... 2016*, *'America First'...* 2016). It has to be stressed that these opinions were generally in line with the attitude of the Kremlin, being one of the most prominent critics of U.S. militarism.

News concerning social affairs in the context of "The Donald's" campaign were dominated by the debate on illegal migration to the United States. The website not only discussed the controversial statements of Trump on this matter in detail, but also featured voices that criticised his attitude. These concentrated either on his suggested ban of Muslim immigration to the U.S (*Erdogan calls for... 2016*), or on the inflow of Mexican migrants (*Donald Trump agrees... 2016*), which were repeatedly mentioned by Trump in his speeches. His idea to build a wall at the Mexican border was also frequently emphasized. Among other discussed topics in this category abortion (*Mike Pence assures voters... 2016*) and his ambiguous attitude towards the LGBT community should be mentioned (*Trump and Cruz... 2016*).

Surprisingly, economic issues in Trump's campaign were scarcely reported. Most of the news covering this content merely mentioned issues connected to the American economy, while only a few articles were fully devoted to describing these complicated affairs. Among the most prominent topics in this area, RT focused on his criticism of the TPP agreement (*Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump slam... 2015*), Trump's opinions on the U.S. fiscal policy (debt) (*US will never default on debt... 2016*), and the economic effects of immigration (*Ex-Mexican President Vicente Fox challenges 2016*). Such a tendency may suggest that the website was generally uninterested in the economic program of Trump.

Finally, RT.com published a plethora of articles which did not fit the aforementioned categories. They usually referred to issues or events more or less connected to the reaction of society to Trump's controversial opinions and agenda. For instance, the very first news on the businessman published by this media just after he announced his candidacy focused less on his reasoning and more on reactions on social media, including Internet trolling (*Trump trumped by... 2015*). Another featured the notorious Mexican cartel leader Joaquin Guzman's threats towards him, due to his criticism of Latin Americans (*I'll make you eat your words... 2015*). Other pieces highlighted Trump's opinions on matters, such as torture (*Nothing should be taken off the table... 2016*) and discussed the activities of his associates. Finally, articles coded as "others" frequently referred to various incidents accompanying his conventions (*Chicago Trump rally cancelled... 2016*).

To summarize, one can notice interesting tendencies in the agenda of RT.com on Donald Trump's presidential campaign. It was obviously interested in the political dimension of his activities, including his frequent arguments with both Republican and Democratic politicians and his views on the foreign policy of the United States. His criticism of American external activity in the past was raised numerous times. This was followed by a number of texts which discussed his controversial views on immigration, Islam and terrorism. Obviously, the "Russian dimension" of this campaign was also heavily exploited. The website was also more interested in discussing his

private life and business affairs than in his economic program. Finally, it concentrated on domestic and external reactions to his controversial agenda, including all kinds of incidents during his conventions, protests and Internet trolling.

PROMOTION OR MOCKERY? IMAGE OF DONALD TRUMP IN RT.COM NEWS

Based on the aforementioned considerations, we attempted to measure how his candidacy was framed by this website. The results proved to be surprising, as from 197 pieces analysed as many as 76 were coded as negative and only 27 as positive towards the Republican candidate. The rest, i.e. 92, were assessed as neutral. Texts categorized as negative usually associated him, his opinions and agenda with various negative, stigmatizing notions, such as Islamophobia, racism or even fascism. His alleged crimes or illegal activities were also frequently mentioned (12 articles). All these pieces of news were usually accompanied with references to harsh criticism of his actions by the public. These articles framed Donald Trump as a controversial candidate who sparked massive protests and acts of opposition. Neutral news usually consisted of balanced, two-way argumentation, presenting both the pros and cons of Trump's agenda and actions. RT.com discussed his viewpoint and reasoning, but also presented criticism, from fellow Republican politicians and from Democrats. Many of them referred to various events corresponding to his presidential campaign, but they were presented in a way which did not manifest the editors' opposition or support towards this politician. Finally, many pieces coded as positive framed him as an independent candidate who stands in opposition to the U.S. political establishment and is unjustly blamed by his rivals and American media. These reports frequently referred to accusations concerning the "Russian" factor.

The above tendencies are even more interesting if considered from the viewpoint of chronology. Initially, from the 24 news items published by RT in 2015 only 5 were neutral. These concerned among others: Trump's attack on McCain where he questioned his war heroism (*No war hero, a loser...* 2015), criticism of the TPP agreement (*Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump slam...* 2015), clashes between his followers and protesters during campaign event (*Virginia isn't for Trump lovers...* 2015), or his criticism of U.S. foreign policy (*World would be a better place...* 2015). News of similar, balanced content, including reportages on his statements, interviews, or debates, were also predominant in releases published in 2016. In contrast only 4 pieces of news published in 2015 were coded as positive, and they included: an article admitting that McCain is really not a hero, in effect supporting Trump's viewpoint (Wight 2015), and reports on mutual compliments between Trump and Putin (*Trump on Putin's compliment...* 2015, *Putin best Q&A...* 2015). The remaining 14 news items referring to the Republican candidate were categorized as negative. As mentioned above, even the first report on him published in June 2015 referred to negative reactions, including mockery and trolling, to his statement that he will run for president (*Trump trumped by...* 2015). Others associated him with Nazism, due to an alleged mistake of his

intern using images of 3rd Reich soldiers in his poster (*Donald Trump Nazi fiasco...* 2015) or reported humiliating memes ridiculing the candidate by comparing him to, for example “butt plugs” (*Trump goes meme...* 2015). His “controversial” business initiatives and behaviour were also featured (*Trump invested...* 2015). These tendencies suggest that in 2015 RT.com remained critical towards this presidential candidate. Most of its reports framed him as an object of mockery or criticism, and a person with a controversial agenda.

111 articles on Donald Trump were published between January 1st 2016 and July 31st 2016, which is a reflection of the rising interest in this candidate in the agenda of RT.com. From a quantitative viewpoint there is a noticeable increase in pieces of news referring to the Republican candidate in a neutral manner. However, reports connecting him to controversies or crime were still much more numerous than pieces in favour of this politician. 45 articles were coded as negative, while only 10 as positive. The rest were categorized as neutral. Among the 10 reports which depicted Trump in a beneficial manner a number of issues were raised. He was presented as an anti-establishment politician who was unlike the other representatives of the American political elite and straightforward in his statements which frequently contained exactly what the people wanted to hear (Gerrans 2016, Bridge 2016). The website also highlighted anti-Trump actions of other politicians and groups, including George Soros and Ted Cruz, which were presented as unfair (*Fury at GOP...* 2016, *Democracy Spring...* 2016). RT.com also featured ex-Mexican president Vicente Fox apologising to Trump (*Ex-Mexican President Vicente Fox apologies...* 2016) and Russian (Federation's MP Aleksey Puskov's) compliments towards him (*Top Russian MP...* 2016).

In contrast, reports coded as negative continued to feature news depicting the Republican candidate as a publicly hated figure, controversial and involved in alleged crimes or unethical business endeavours. For instance, RT reported on a satirical series ridiculing Trump (*Trump Unhinged...* 2016), his ancestral hometown attempting to downplay links with the businessman due to his radical views (*German hometown...* 2016), or the Marvel company reportedly turning him into supervillain in one of its releases (*Marvel transform Trump...* 2016). It also featured voices mocking Melania Trump's infamous speech (*Proof: Melania Trump...* 2016), or incidents concerning his star in Hollywood, being a symbol of public hostility towards this Republican politician (*Trump's Wall of Fame...* 2016). The webpage was generally interested in highlighting all kinds of scandals surrounding the candidate's campaign, even including the huge popularity of urinals with the candidate's face in Dublin (*A Donald Trump urinal...* 2016).

Finally, between August 1st 2016 and November 7th 2016 RT.com released 62 articles which referred to Donald Trump. From this group, the study identified 17 articles presenting him in a negative manner, while 13 were in favour of his agenda. The rest consisted of neutral releases. These statistics suggest that the attitude of RT towards Trump's campaign changed even more in the months preceding the elections, as the amount of articles critical towards him decreased, while the share of positive news increased. Among the pieces of news, which connected “The Donald” with scandals,

one can mention news on the *National Enquirer* allegedly attempting to cover his “playmate affair” (*National Enquirer... 2016*), thus suggesting that the candidate was unfaithful to his wife, or reports on the torching of a black church, defaced with slogans supporting the Republican candidate (*Black church... 2016*), which fuelled accusations that his agenda is racist in nature. RT also cited opinions comparing Trump to ISIS (*Populists & political fantasists... 2016*).

In contrast, positive news continued to frame Trump as a politician who was frequently unjustly attacked by the American establishment and media. RT, for instance, highlighted CNN hypocrisy in its fact-checking of Trump’s criticism of Obama’s policy (*CNN called out... 2016*), and mocked the Clinton camp’s suggestions that Russia was responsible for DNC hacks. In this context, RT’s agenda supported the Republican candidate’s viewpoint, who downplayed the “Kremlin factor” during his campaign. RT, for instance, described a debate between Trump and Clinton concerning this issue, the website accused the Democrat politician of providing no proof of Russian involvement (*This could be Russia... 2016*).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate that the RT.com agenda on Donald Trump’s candidature was not as one-sided as some reports suggested.² During the U.S. presidential campaign in 2015 and 2016, the attitude of RT.com towards this Republican candidate evolved. Initially, he was predominantly associated with scandals or laughter, which manifested a rather frigid stance towards this politician. The Republican candidate was usually framed as overly controversial, linked to the far-right, labelled as racist and Islamophobic, and involved in shady business initiatives. RT was also surprisingly focused on presenting various acts of protest against his candidacy and agenda, including the aforementioned attacks against his star in Hollywood, incidents during his conventions, or even various online initiatives mocking his statements. The website even featured materials which ridiculed him because of his hairstyle.

Since the turn of 2015 and 2016, this attitude started to shift slightly, as more and more neutral reports emerged. In the first half of 2016, while the website was still very interested in exploiting the controversies surrounding his campaign, many articles became much more balanced in presenting both voices supporting this politician and criticizing him. This attitude was even more visible in the second half of 2016, when the ratio of positive to negative articles on “The Donald” proved to be almost equal, which indicated that the earlier criticism of this politician ceased to be a central point of the RT.com agenda.

While the overall results indicate that the image of Trump in the RT.com news evolved from strong criticism and mockery to relatively balanced and sometimes even favourable reporting on his candidacy prior to the election, RT was not overly and

² As mentioned above, the agenda of the RT television may have been different than the website’s.

openly supportive of Trump as a candidate.³ In this context, it has to be emphasized that there were two significant exceptions from this tendency, which are consistent with the conclusions of the report of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, mentioned in the introduction. On the one hand, RT.com was very interested in all debates concerning the Russian factor in the presidential campaign. Its agenda on this topic proved to be strictly one-sided and visibly biased, as it frequently rejected or ridiculed Democrat accusations. In effect, its way of framing the DNC hack and Russian involvement in the presidential election, supported the stance of the Republican candidate who effectively held similar views on the matter. Moreover, it highlighted mutual compliments issued by Donald Trump and the Russian political elite. From the 27 pieces of news which were coded as in favour of his agenda, as many as 13 made at least one reference to Russia or to Vladimir Putin, which clearly indicates how important this matter was to RT.com. In other words, it remained much more sympathetic to Donald Trump when the Russian factor was at play.

On the other hand, it can be confirmed that the website was heavily focused on presenting the instability and dysfunctionality of the American political system. It was due to this fact that, while its stance towards Trump changed over time, RT was very determined to feature news about scandals, protests or even battles and brawls accompanying the presidential campaign. Democratic processes in the United States were indirectly presented as permeated with violence, radicalism, illegal actions and disagreements. In this context, the image of the near-perfect cradle of democracy was regularly undermined by reports focusing on controversies.

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Słowa kluczowe: RT.com, Russia Today, wojna informacyjna, Rosja, Donald Trump, wybory prezydenckie 2016

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to understand how the Russia-funded RT television website (RT.com) framed the candidacy of Donald Trump during the U.S. presidential campaign in 2015 and 2016. It aims to find out whether it was really involved in creating an artificial pro-Trump image and supported his cause against Hillary Clinton, as some reports suggest. Its secondary objective is to understand what kind of agenda (including the topics and issues discussed) was adopted by this webpage when referring to this Republican candidate. In order to reach these goals, the study was founded on the concept of agenda-setting and exploited content analysis of the textual layer of RT.com.

This manuscript argues that while the attitude of this website evolved in time, it cannot be confirmed that it was overly biased in favour of Donald Trump. At the same time, however, RT.com was heavily interested in defending his argumentation on the inexistence of the Trump-Putin “bro-mance” and the lack of the “Russian factor” in the American elections. Moreover, it featured multiple pieces of news which provided a negative image of the U.S. democratic processes through the association of the 2016 presidential campaign with scandals, violence, extremism and crimes.



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Challenges for the Application of Rule of Law in European States

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Publikacja zawiera rozważania naukowców z Niemiec, Austrii, Hiszpanii i Polski nt. stosowania zasady państwa prawa, jak i deficytów poznawczych i naukowych występujących w toczącej się europejskiej debacie dotyczącej treści i roli zasady państwa prawa w systemie prawa krajowego i prawa UE w państwach członkowskich Unii. Tematyka ta, aktualna w związku z prowadzoną reformą wymiaru sprawiedliwości w Polsce, nabrała wymiaru ogólnoeuropejskiego ze względu na wyrok TS UE z maja 2019 r. wskazujący na brak niezawisłości prokuratury w RFN i jej mocne powiązanie z ministerstwem sprawiedliwości oraz pytanie prejudycjalne wniesione przez sąd w Wiesbaden w sprawie oceny, czy sąd niemiecki można kwalifikować jako niezawisły i bezstronny. Publikacja pomaga zrozumieć tocząca się debatę europejską, która w najbliższych latach stanowić będzie jeden z najbardziej intensywnie dyskusowanych problemów polityczno-prawnych w UE.