DEADLY DISINFORMATION: VIRAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS A RADICALIZATION MECHANISM

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Abstract

Viral online disinformation is misleading content that is generated to manipulate public opinion and to circulate rapidly in the digital space. Although viral disinformation has become an instrument for radicalization, the specific psychological mechanisms by which disinformation can be weaponized—wielded as mobilizing and radicalizing political tools—are not yet well-understood.

In this paper, we establish the potential of concerted disinformation efforts to impact mass radicalization and political violence, first through historical precedents of deadly disinformation campaigns, then in modern-day examples from the USA and Russia. Comparing and contrasting political effects of two recent disinformation campaigns, QAnon's #SaveTheChildren campaign in the USA, and anti-LGBTQ disinformation campaign in Russia, this paper highlights the significance of LGBTQ contagion threat—a notion that people can be "turned" into LGBTQ through deliberate outside influence. The psychological and political consequences of such messaging, its main target audience, and vulnerability factors rendering individuals especially susceptible to its radicalizing effects are discussed.

In the past few years, with an increasing role of social media in people's lives, viral online disinformation has become an instrument for radicalization: support for violent or illegal political action (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020). Researchers and analytics highlight that authoritarian leaders now see disinformation campaigns as a successful tool in their political influence arsenal (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021; Lukito, 2020; Pomerantsev, 2015). Information warfare seems to be moving online (DiResta & Morgan, 2018).

One of the first disinformation campaigns widely covered by global media was the use of personal data collected by Facebook and leveraged by Cambridge Analytica to influence the Brexit vote and the 2016 U.S. elections (Meredith, 2018). In the same year, Kremlin-sponsored Russian trolls were identified as disseminating disinformation from fake social media accounts in support of the Republican party and Donald Trump (Lukito, 2020). This disinformation aimed to polarize the American public and to lower their trust in U.S. institutions (Legucka, 2020).

At the end of 2021, China also unleashed a disinformation campaign, mainly on Facebook and Twitter (blocked in China) to improve the country's image overseas (Xiao et al., 2021). As in the Russian 2016 disinformation campaign, Chinese authorities engaged private businesses to create fake accounts that can attract followers and target critics of Chinese leaders. In particular, they spread disinformation about how the U.S. interfered with the World Health Organization (WHO) research on tracking the origins of COVID-19 (Xiao et al., 2021). More sophisticated than bots, Chinese fake accounts were supposed to attract organic traffic and tag official Chinese accounts (Xiao et al., 2021).

The U.S. intelligence also issued a warning about the Iranian state spreading disinformation and antisemitic tropes inside the U.S. through a number of social media accounts that were trackable back to the Iranian government (Bennett, 2021). According to U.S. intelligence analysis, Russia "wrote the playbook" (Bennett, 2021, para. 5) on political disinformation to undermine the public's trust in democracy, and other authoritarian states now use it with different levels of success.

The answers from representatives of authoritarian states implicated in disinformation spread have been similar as well—a total denial of any involvement. Thus, when asked directly in an interview by Bloomberg News, Vladimir Putin denied Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections

(Roth, 2016). Likewise, a spokesperson for the Permanent Mission of Iran to the U.N. called the accusations of cybercrimes "entirely baseless" (Bennett, 2021, para. 4). The documents revealing details on Chinese online campaigns, which *The New York Times* discovered, were taken offline after the Chinese government was contacted for more information (Xiao et al., 2021).

Although research on political and psychological effects of disinformation is burgeoning (e.g. Enders et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Uscinski & Parent, 2014) the specific psychological mechanisms by which disinformation can be weaponized—wielded as mobilizing and radicalizing political tools—are not yet well-understood. A related question is whether there are vulnerability factors that render particular individuals or groups especially susceptible to disinformation. This paper aims to address both of these questions.

Disinformation campaigns can be used to deceive the public by spreading fake news whose emotional and social impacts can be leveraged and exploited by authoritarian rulers (Legucka, 2020). Authoritarian states conduct their disinformation campaigns to destabilize targeted communities and to radicalize mass public for political violence (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020). In this context, conspiracy theories can be a suitable go-to material that easily spreads because it triggers emotions, drawing the attention of online users.

Disinformation campaigns have become a global trend. Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea spread disinformation to target the EU and other democratic nations (Legucka, 2020). Russia backed disinformation campaigns leading up to Brexit in the UK in 2016; protests in Catalonia, Spain in 2017; and the Yellow Vests protests in France in 2018-2019 (Legucka, 2020). From the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia spread disinformation that targeted EU public institutions, undermining public trust in them.

Interestingly, although Russian disinformation targeted different countries and communities, it was about nine times more effective in English (in terms of reaching and engaging the audience rather than their content) in than it was in Russian and other languages (Poulsen, 2018). Just on Twitter, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the Saint Peterburg troll factory affiliated with the Kremlin, earned an average of 1.73 reactions for each tweet in Russian or any language other than English (Poulsen, 2018). In contrast, tweets created in English earned an average of 15-25 engagements (Poulsen, 2018). The analyzed data covered a period of four years. One explanation for this disparity is that post-Soviet countries have had experiences with Soviet disinformation and thus are

more suspicious of Russia's informational tactics. Poland, Estonia, Ukraine, and Georgia have been historically "trained" (Poulsen, 2018, para. 5) to recognize Russia as a threat and thus process content in Russian with a higher level of skepticism. Another reason for the Europeans' relative insulation from Russian disinformation is that European authorities have been actively investing in teaching media literacy skills (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). A variety of educational initiatives have been implemented around Europe; for example, media literacy lessons paid off in putting Finland in a leadership position in terms of disinformation resilience (Mackintosh, 2019).

To tackle the questions of how disinformation campaigns can radicalize wide publics, as well as which sectors of the society might be especially vulnerable to these efforts, we will first briefly present popular disinformation campaigns that have led to political violence generations ago and, at times, still gain traction in modern informational space. Then we will summarize some documented adverse effects of modern viral disinformation—misleading content generated to manipulate public opinion and to spread rapidly in the digital space— in the U.S. context. Finally, we will investigate two disinformation campaigns that appear to have targeted particular vulnerabilities in order to achieve specific political goals.

One such disinformation campaign was driven by QAnon—a set online conspiracy theory with millions of followers—to mobilize U.S. White women through narratives of kidnapped, tortured, and sexually abused children (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). The second disinformation campaign was driven by the Russian government, using an LGBTQ contagion threat, which suggests that sexual orientation can spread like a "disease" through deliberate outside influences such as contact with LGBTQ individuals; exposure to "LGBTQ propaganda", including printed materials, videos, and images of LGBTQ symbols; legalization of gay marriage, etc. (Cushman, 2020). We hypothesize that LGBTQ contagion threat narratives were aimed to radicalize Russian men who were insecure about their masculinity.

Historical use of viral disinformation for mobilizing violence

Conspiracy theories about space lasers or lizard people may seem laughable or so marginalized as to be irrelevant to any real-life consequences. However, this assessment ignores historical precedent rich with examples of disinformation campaigns culminating in deadly and widespread violence. The three examples below represent such deadly disinformation campaigns—against Roma in Europe, Puritan settlers in colonial Massachusetts, and Jews in Russia—that

resulted in deadly violence, demonstrating the radicalizing potential of disinformation.

Child-snatching Roma

After migrating to Europe from India in the 1400s, many Roma people adopted a nomadic way of life to escape being enslaved by dominating groups. Their nomadic lifestyle, coupled with their dark skin and *otherness* have likely contributed to the development of rumors that blamed Romani for snatching children (Walker, 2013). In 15th century Germany, local Romani were accused not only of stealing children but also of witchcraft and espionage (Fontanella-Khan & Eddy, 2014). To this day, Romani are often openly attacked and marginalized (Fontanella-Khan & Eddy, 2014).

Stereotypes of Roma kidnapping children that have circulated in Europe for centuries found their way into folklore (Walker, 2013). Generations of European parents have been telling their children scary stories about *Gypsies* who would get them—a culture that normalized negative stereotyping and receptiveness to disinformation about the Roma people. In contrast, real-life stories about Roma children violently taken from their families in order to assimilate them in gentile families are rarely told (Walker, 2013). As a result of long-standing disinformation that maligned Romani people, they became an easy target for the Nazis during WWII, with an estimated 500,000 killed in the *Roma Holocaust* (Radu, 2009).

Salem witch trials

Another infamous example of deadly conspiracy theories is the Salem witch trials that occurred in the colonial Massachusetts between 1692-1693 (Butter, 2014, p. 84). The Puritan settlers of Salem believed that God would punish them for not being strong in their faith, but they still considered themselves to be God's chosen people. These views were challenged by the brutal war between the Puritan community and Native Americans. When the Salem community was on the losing side of the war, Salem citizens could not fully comprehend the reality that clashed with their beliefs. To resolve this incongruence, Salem citizens concluded that they were being attacked by the devil through witches (Butter, 2014).

Explaining their losses through witchcraft gave the settlers an opportunity not only to find a scapegoat, but also do something within their control to address

their troubles—and to affirm their faith. The idea that the enemy was no longer outside but had instead infiltrated the community became widespread, with over 200 accused of witchcraft (Blumberg, 2007). Violence against this perceived enemy also became widespread: as a result of the Salem witch trials, 20 people were executed, and five more died in prison (Butter, 2014).

Protocols of the Elders of Zion

Perhaps the most notorious disinformation campaign depicted Jews as conspiring to dominate the world while killing gentile children. Originating in folklore and church sermons, it became formalized in an authoritative document, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, first published in Russia in 1903. It was proven to be a forgery that the Russian secret police created and disseminated to control the disgruntled Russian population by scapegoating a defenseless Jewish minority. Nonetheless, the document has been translated into multiple languages, and to this day, it remains a powerful tool of mass manipulation and one of the main postulates of conspiratorial reasoning (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Broschowitz, 2022).

Antisemitic narratives are not endemic to any specific political ideology but rather are blended and implemented to mobilize state violence against the specific group upon which main grievances and fears are projected (Broschowitz, 2022). A convenient target for public wrath, Jews were historically blamed for ideologies, that at times, diametrically opposed one another: they were blamed for capitalism in Communist Russia, while being blamed for Communist ideology in Western Europe, at the same time (Broschowitz, 2022). The long-standing conspiratorial narratives spreading antisemitic hate contributed to mass violence against Jews in Europe, culminating in the Nazi-led Holocaust that killed over six million Jews (Broschowitz, 2022).

Adverse effects of modern viral disinformation in the U.S.

Unfortunately, deadly disinformation is not just a historical artifact. In the past several years, the U.S. has seen a number of disinformation campaigns driving political polarization and resulting in loss of life, including COVID vaccine hesitance, and a "stolen" presidential election.

Covid vaccine hesitance

Whether to get a vaccine is a personal choice, but individuals who refuse to get vaccinated or to vaccinate their children affect not just themselves but the entire community. One study modeled the consequences of COVID vaccine hesitance (Olivera Mesa et al., 2022) and found that the mortality rate over a two-year period could get as much as eight times higher in countries with high COVID vaccine hesitancy than in countries with low vaccine hesitancy. This finding makes clear the potentially devastating costs of disinformation that leads to vaccine hesitancy.

Vaccine hesitancy is not a new concept for the global society (Porter & Porter, 1988). However, while anti-vax attitudes used to be primarily predicted by religious beliefs or conservative ideologies, now the best predictor of anti-vax attitudes in both left and right ideological spectrums are conspiratorial beliefs (Sorell & Butler, 2022). For example, vaccine hesitance is now related to beliefs in antisemitic conspiracies, beliefs in 5G conspiracy theories falsely claiming that vaccines implant microchips capable to control people, and to beliefs about "deep state" (Sorell & Butler, 2022).

The ill effects of such disinformation have rippled out, eroding public trust in the medical science and in government institutions in general. Researchers have found that COVID vaccine hesitancy decreased general immunization coverage across the U.S. For example, in Michigan, required immunization rates among children dropped from 66% to 50% (Bliss et al., 2020).

"Stolen election"

Online disinformation about the "rigged" 2020 U.S. Presidential elections contributed to the storming of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. on January 6th. The attack on the Capitol was meant to overturn the results of the election that Donald Trump lost—an unwelcome result for his supporters which they refused to accept, coming up with a variety of conspiracy theories about how the election was stolen to justify their denial (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Right-wing extremists and mobilized Trump supporters had organized on social media platforms to "stop the steal" (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 39) of the presidency from Trump.

The breach of the Capitol resulted in two QAnon followers losing their lives that day, a large number of rioters injured, and approximately $1.5 million worth of

damage to the government property, as well as more than 140 police officers injured and several dying in the aftermath (United States Department of Justice, 2021). The same report highlighted that over 725 arrests were made in connection with the January 6th attack on the Capitol, and 225 people have been charged with assault, resisting, and using deadly weapons. The insurrection left a mark on the American democracy, weakening public trust in democratic institutions, and increasing political polarization (Walsh, 2022).

Mechanisms of political radicalization in modern-day disinformation campaigns

QAnon

Modern conspiracy theories did not invent completely new narratives. Instead, familiar tropes of *child-snatching monsters among us* were dusted off and recast with a fresh set of villains. A secret cabal of powerful pedophiles and satanists torturing and killing children is one of the main narratives of QAnon. QAnon supporters have been advancing the (false) idea of adrenochrome, a chemical compound that can be harvested from children's blood when they are tortured (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). In the modern retelling, the evil cabal responsible for harming children is not a marginalized minority group but instead a group of individuals perceived to have money, power, and who oppose Donald Trump— liberals and Hollywood elites. QAnon followers claim the cabal members use adrenochrome to maintain youth and vitality. In reality, adrenochrome is a chemical substance more commonly known as epinephrine, widely available to allergy sufferers in EpiPens, with no torture required to produce it nor magical powers granted to its users (Schwarcz, 2022). This QAnon narrative borrowed generously from antiquated conspiracy theories, including Middle Ages' blood libels that blamed Jews for stealing Christian children to harvest their blood for baking matzah for Passover, as well as from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

The #PizzaGate conspiracy theory pre-dated QAnon but became part of its repertoire. It originated when one of the 4chan users linked the abbreviation "c.p.", used on chat boards to indicate child pornography, with "cheese pizza" (Aisch et al., 2016, para. 5). QAnon "theorists" focused on the Washington pizza parlor, Comet Ping Pong, whose management allegedly had a connection with Democrats. Rumors about "kill rooms," (Aisch et al., 2016, para. 8) satanic sacrifices, and even cannibalism at the pizza parlor arose on social media. In 2016, #PizzaGate hysteria on the Internet inspired Edgar M. Welch to arm to the teeth

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and drive six hours to Washington, D.C. with a mission to free the children he believed were kept hostage in the pizzeria's basement (Fisher, et al., 2016). He fired a military-style assault rifle into the pizzeria building and surrendered after finding no evidence for enslaved children nor, indeed, a basement.

Russian government's LGBTQ contagion threat narratives

From the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian government has backed several outlandish conspiracy theories, which have been transmitted through official government-affiliated news media. Thus, one story reported that in occupied Mariupol, Ukraine, Russian soldiers discovered a NATO- and U.S.-sponsored center for LGBTQ conversion (Channel 1, 2022). A Russian reporter stated that various artifacts, ranging from instructions on 'converting' children into LGBTQ to Satanic artifacts, had been discovered at the "conversion center." He then added that the organization was sponsored by USAID. Notably, the idea of evil "others" (Americans, NATO, Ukrainians) trying to corrupt the children was an integral part of this report, just as it featured in disinformation campaigns of the past and is still featured in QAnon conspiracy theories.

On Georgian social media, Russian affiliated sources have been spreading a fake video that used fragments of Ukrainian army's footage as well as a UK-produced video that advocated for gay marriage (Creedon, 2022). The Russian-produced fake news story strategically reshuffled real videos to concoct a narrative that the Ukrainian army recruits LGBTQ soldiers, portraying the Ukrainian military as weak.

Another story that was spread by Kremlin-linked news media was how COVID vaccines were able to turn people into LGBTQ (Maiboroda, 2021). The story originated in the Middle East where, first, an orthodox rabbi warned his followers against taking a vaccine because it can "make them gay" (Batchelor, 2021, para. 1). Then, an Iranian cleric wrote on his Telegram channel not to come close to those vaccinated since they "have become homosexuals" (Weinthal, 2021, para. 2). The Russian content-makers might have been *inspired* by these ideas to produce their own conspiracy theories about LGBTQ conversion via COVID vaccines.

The threat of LGBTQ contagion appears to be a consistent theme in the Russian government's propaganda (Edenborg, 2022). Considering the centralized and intentional nature of Russian propaganda, this pattern invites some questions:

what does the Russian government aim to achieve through the LGBTQ contagion stories? What is the potential political gain of this widely broadcast threat?

By contrast to the Kremlin's focus on LGBTQ in its Ukraine War propaganda, the QAnon content that the Kremlin amplified in the U.S. did not feature LGBTQ contagion narratives. Instead, it peddled child sexual trafficking narratives that crystallized in QAnon's #SaveTheChildren campaign (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Election data and representative national polls suggest that this QAnon content has been successful in increasing voter turn-out among White, suburban, Republican women who ended up voting for Trump in 2020 in greater numbers than they did in 2016, before QAnon (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). This may not be surprising, given that QAnon-generated memes for #SaveTheChildren campaign mostly featured White children who looked bruised and terrified, often with black or brown man's hands roughly muzzling or restraining them (Buntain, et al, 2022). The imagery seems an intent to stoke White mothers' fears about their children being abducted and abused by evil minority men.

There is no evidence of Russia's involvement with QAnon in its early days; however, as soon as the QAnon movement took off, engaging more and more people, the Russian state joined in to amplify this content (Menn, 2020). Aside from fake social media accounts masked as American, Russian state-controlled media such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik coordinated efforts to reinforce QAnon theories that circulated on social media. The narratives that Russian accounts promoted helped sow chaos and polarization of U.S. society (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021).

The disparity between the Kremlin-supported content that targets Russian-speaking audience with LGBTQ contagion threat and that which targets English-speaking audiences with child kidnapping and abuse threat introduces the possibility of different goals of these two disinformation campaigns. Conspiracy theories appeal to people through eliciting strong emotional responses (van Prooijen et al., 2022). By manipulating people's emotions, different conspiracy narratives can achieve different reactions. If individuals are more vulnerable to a particular threat, amplifying it via a conspiracy narrative or a disinformation campaign can make it easier to leverage emotional reactions to mobilize radical political actions.

Russian disinformation's focus on two different narratives suggests that each narrative might serve to mobilize a particular demographic. Child trafficking narratives evidently appealed to White women in the U.S., moving them to

support political candidates who acknowledge this audience's concerns and promise to address them. Donald Trump's campaign slogan "lock her up!" integrated seamlessly with QAnon stories about Hillary Clinton committing atrocities against kidnapped children and assuaged the audiences' fears stirred by the #SaveTheChildren campaign through promises to put "the villain" behind bars.

Incidentally, the U.S. political figures who flirted with QAnon content also supported Russia. For example, QAnon's champion, Donald Trump, complemented Vladimir Putin on his chosen wartime strategy the day before Russia invaded Ukraine by calling it "pretty smart" (Alba & Thompson, 2022, para. 1). Likewise, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, known for endorsing many QAnon ideas including "Jewish space lasers" (Beauchamp, 2021, para. 7), made comments that seemed to mirror the Kremlin's talking points, saying that Ukraine "kept poking the bear" (Reimann, 2022, para. 2), which is Russia.

It seems that the Russian government's support for QAnon narratives killed two birds with one stone: it destabilized the U.S. from within by nurturing a contingent of conspiracy theory supporters who demanded a violent takeover of government, and at the same time, it built up support for the political candidates that advanced Kremlin-approved political and economic agenda.

On the other hand, Russia did not seem to have invested in spreading LGBTQ conspiracies in the U.S. Instead, the Kremlin propagandists seem to reserve these narratives for their domestic audience. What could be the reason behind promoting content about LGBTQ contagion threat? We postulate that Russian propaganda specialists are leveraging the propensity of some men to respond to masculinity threats by throwing support behind authoritarian leadership, violence, and war.

Psychology of fragile masculinity

Traditional masculinity is associated with toughness, heterosexism, stoicism, and lack of emotional sensitivity (Reimann, 2022). Following traditional social norms, many adult men feel pressured to "prove" that they are "real men" by displaying typically masculine behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2018). Men insecure about their masculinity are more likely to resort to aggression if they feel they are falling short of masculine ideals to re-affirm their manly status (Berke & Zeichner, 2016). Indeed, men who hold traditional masculine ideas, in particular emotional restrictions and a reverence and need for

dominance, are more likely to be involved in violent acts, including assault, bullying, or verbal and even physical aggression (Feder et al., 2010).

Researchers termed the anxiety that arises when men feel that they are failing to meet cultural standards of masculinity "fragile masculinity" or "precarious manhood" (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020, 2021; Vandello et al., 2008). In the U.S., men high on fragile masculinity were more likely to support the statement that the American society became too soft and feminine, which in turn predicted more support for Donald Trump (Deckman & Cassese, 2021). Another study showed that men high on fragile masculinity were more likely to support the use of military force (McDermott et al., 2007). O'Connor et al. (2017) highlighted that men high on precarious manhood beliefs expressed more amusement toward sexist and anti-gay humour. Willer et al. (2013) found that men high on fragile masculinity whose manhood had been threatened reported greater support for war, more negative views of homosexuality, stronger beliefs in male superiority, and stronger dominance tendencies; the same effects were not observed among women or among men low on fragile masculinity.

Current research on fragile masculinity finds a correlation between men's concerns about failing to meet masculine ideals and political aggression (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2021), including support for policies and politicians that represent toughness and strength. The effects of fragile masculinity were also captured in analyses of Google Trends data on Google searches grouped by U.S. county. The results showed that search terms popular among those concerned with their masculinity (i.e., "penis enlargement", "Viagra", "how to get girls", etc.) were more prevalent in U.S. counties that voted in greater numbers for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential campaign, as well as in counties that supported pro-Trump candidates in the 2020 midterm elections (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2021). The authors explained this finding by suggesting that men who feel uncertain in their masculinity *outsource* it to an ultra-domineering and authoritarian leader, vicariously gaining status when their candidate wins (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2021).

Taken together, empirical research on fragile masculinity or precarious manhood indicates that men high on these traits tend to be especially reactive to threats of emasculation. Defending against threats to masculinity, men high on fragile masculinity/precarious manhood resort to endorsing authoritarian leaders, supporting violence and war, and expressing negative attitudes toward LGBTQ. As a result, content that presents a threat to masculinity, as do narratives about LGBTQ contagion that suggests a person can turn gay or trans through a vaccine

or a pamphlet, are likely to motivate men high on precarious manhood to support violence, war, and authoritarian leadership.

Existing cross-cultural research suggests that Russian men might be especially susceptible to emasculation threats presented by LGBTQ contagion narratives. Thus, cross-cultural data on 62 different countries (Bosson et al., 2021) found that Russian men's scores on precarious manhood beliefs scale were among the top 10-scoring countries. Consistent with this, another study that surveyed 23 countries (Bettinsoli et al., 2020) found that Russians' attitudes toward sexual minorities were the most negative of the 23, with Russian men's scores driving the country's average. In other words, relative to other countries surveyed, Russian men seem especially high on both precarious manhood beliefs and on negative attitudes toward LGBTQ. This constellation may add up to a psychological vulnerability, rendering Russian men a particularly receptive audience for disinformation campaigns that emphasize the threat to their masculinity, mobilizing them to defend against this threat by supporting President Putin and the war in Ukraine and elevating the odds of them personally engaging in violence.

Russian government's exploitation of fragile masculinity via disinformation

In this context, Putin's words that teaching "that a boy can become a girl and vice versa" is "on the verge of a crime against humanity" (Cheng, 2021, para. 4) may be especially stirring for those Russian men who perceive their masculinity as unstable, and thus feel threatened by a possibility of an emasculating outside influence. Emphasizing the Russian government's overt rhetoric on LGBTQ contagion threat, in 2013, the Russian Duma passed a law that prohibits "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors" (Grekov, 2013, para. 1). Notably, the law failed to define either "propaganda" or "nontraditional sexual relations", enabling a broad application.

Campaigning for the new anti-LGBTQ amendments in the Russian constitution in 2020, the Russian state created a video that was spread through social media in Russia and in the EU (Bacchi, 2020). In the video depicting Russia in 2035, a man comes to an orphanage to adopt a young boy. However, when the boy goes outside hoping to see his mother, instead he sees another man in flamboyant make-up and then receives a girl's dress as a gift from his new family. The voice-over then asks, "Is this the Russia you choose? Decide the future of the country. Vote for the Constitutional Amendments."

In light of public discussions of the dangers of gay propaganda for minors, a Russian ice cream company was accused of promoting LGBTQ by using rainbow colours in its products (News from Elsewhere, 2020). The head of Russia's Union of Women said that the company was quietly promoting *nice* rainbow colours that could potentially make children more accepting of the rainbow flag used by the LGBTQ community (News from Elsewhere, 2020). The implication is that by accepting rainbow colours the children would also be more likely to turn gay. In July of 2022, the Russian Duma moved to expand the *anti-gay* law of 2013 to include "any event or act regarded as an attempt to promote homosexuality" (Reuters, 2022, para. 4) as a criminal offense.

The Kremlin has been exploiting an aggressive anti-LGBTQ rhetoric as part of the country's self-identification (Strand & Svensson, 2021). The anti-LGBTQ narrative helps the Russian government to portray Russia as a savior of traditional values against the onslaught of the West's depravity (Strand & Svensson, 2021). This messaging echoes one of the central ideas of Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden's influence campaigns that repeatedly painted the West as "depraved" and themselves as fighting a righteous battle to stop the depravity from corrupting the Muslim world (Lyons, 2013). In the same context, Western values of tolerance and multiculturalism are often referred to by the Russian media as "tolerasty," to rhyme it with "pederasty," a derogatory term used in Russia to identify LGBTQ people (Moss, 2017). One of the main narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns promotes the idea that a powerful gay lobby shapes the global agenda and has an enormous control over the West in general and specifically the U.S. (Merz, 2021).

Putting together existing social science on fragile masculinity and the apparent political goals of the Russian state, it seems that Russian-backed sources narrating LGBTQ contagion threat may serve three functions. First, LGBTQ conspiracy theories may motivate men high on precarious manhood or fragile masculinity to embrace Putin's authoritarian leadership and support Russia's war against Ukraine. Second, narratives that paint Ukrainians and their Western allies as actively converting into LGBTQ are likely to also give Russian soldiers a sense of superiority over their "emasculated" enemies (Froyum, 2007). Finally, LGBTQ conspiracy theories serve to inspire and justify violence toward Ukrainians as morally depraved and dangerous.

Although there is no feasible way to ascertain the intentions of the Russian government's propagandists, it seems that, either by serendipity or design, they leverage mass psychology for maximum political profit. To gain this

informational advantage, Russian investments into disinformation campaigns have been remarkable. The IRA, a troll factory that aimed to sow discord in political discussions during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reportedly had a $1.25 million monthly budget during the campaign (Ackerman et al., 2018; Weiss, 2018). The "factory" consisted of multiple departments—each dealing with different online sources or social media channels (Volchek, 2021). According to former employees, in addition to departments focusing on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, there were separate departments creating memes or compiling a list of "targets" (Volchek, 2021, para. 19) that represented political enemies.

Conclusion

Russia's support for QAnon in the U.S. had evidently worked to mobilize a particular demographic, White women, to vote for the Russia-preferred political candidate, as well as to mobilize QAnon supporters to anti-democratic rhetoric and radical action before and during the January 6th riot in Washington, D.C. Russian government's disinformation campaign that drums up LGBTQ contagion threat and paints Ukrainians and their Western allies as emasculated aimed to build up support among Russians for Putin's authoritarian rule—for the war and for violence against Ukrainians. These two disinformation campaigns, both of which the Russian government invested in, likely contributed to loss of innocent lives. As such, they join a long list of deadly disinformation campaigns throughout history and around the world.

They also point to a risk to the Western society. QAnon narratives had deeply dividing effects on the American public (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). They also inflicted psychological wounds on those Americans whose loved ones had become QAnon followers, causing anxiety and PTSD and chipping away at their quality of life (Moskalenko et al., 2022). The growing drumbeat of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric from some U.S. politicians (Bloom & Moskalenko, in press) and judiciary (Weisman, 2022) raises concerns about the potential impacts that masculinity threat may have on vulnerable individuals in the U.S. (Edelman, 2022). Children say, "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." However, the social science of weaponized disinformation suggests that some words can do profound and lasting damage not only to individual victims but also to the society at large. Narratives of LGBTQ contagion threat may be an important and prescient case of deadly disinformation.

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