

Soft Power, Sharp Power? Exploring *RT*'s Dual Role in Russia's Diplomatic Toolkit

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Abstract

This article examines the multilingual audiences of Russian outlet *RT* on Facebook. *RT* is a state media outlet known for spreading strategic Kremlin narratives and disinformation in support of Russia's domestic and foreign policy objectives to large and multilingual global audiences. *RT* serves as a central pillar of the Russian information influence apparatus, and an instrument of both "soft" and "sharp power", the latter describing the use of information manipulation to interfere with foreign public spheres. While many studies have concentrated on the English-language content of *RT* to understand its impact on Western democracies, in this article we examine the sharing of *RT* content across all six *RT* languages, and we investigate what audiences from the six language communities share *RT* content on Facebook. We find ideologically diverging patterns across these communities, with particular resonance for *RT* content targeting the political faultlines in different regions and countries and conclude that *RT*'s role as a tool for sharp power is now dominant.

Keywords: *Facebook, multilingual audiences, news sharing, Russia, sharp power, soft power*

1. Introduction

The Russian media outlet *RT* (previously *Russia Today*) is one of Russia's most prominent multilingual media channels, broadcasting to a weekly audience of 100 million viewers in 47 countries (*RT*, n.d.). Launched in 2005, *Russia Today* gained prominence in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, where Russia was believed to have lost the information war against Georgia and the West; in 2009, it was rebranded *RT*, and increasingly became a tool of Russian information influence abroad. *RT* has been described variously as a source of propaganda (National Intelligence

Council, 2017), and a tool for “soft power” (Rouvinski, 2020) or “sharp power” (International Forum for Democratic Studies 2017) in international politics. *RT* has been studied mainly in relation to its content, especially its English-language coverage; however, research has largely overlooked the multilingual audiences of *RT*, especially in the digital sphere. With a few exceptions, we still know very little about the audiences that engage with and amplify *RT* content by sharing it on leading digital platforms.

To address this gap, this article explores the digital audiences of *RT* on Facebook across six languages – German, Spanish, English, Russian, French, and Arabic – using social media analytics, network mapping, and manual content analysis. We document some widely diverging patterns that see international audiences from the far right to the far left share *RT* content, often to present and support views that oppose mainstream perspectives at the domestic and international level, while *RT*'s Russian-language audiences share *RT* content to offer their support and allegiance to Russia and Putin. We predominantly encounter groups that characterise themselves as anti-western, anti-mainstream news, anti-globalist, and sometimes conspiracist, across these six languages. We conclude with an explanation of these phenomena in the present geopolitical context.

While much current research approaches problematic news sources like *RT* through the lens of mis-, dis-, and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), the global resurgence of authoritarianism and the operationalisation of state-sponsored media outlets like *RT* in the struggle between liberal and illiberal regimes leads us to adopt a different perspective. We therefore frame our analysis around the distinction between “soft” and “sharp” power. Information actors from non-democratic environments such as Russia now frequently resort to the manipulation and distortion of information within and outside their national borders – this has been described as an exercise of “sharp power” in a report by International Forum for Democratic Studies (2017). The

report argues that the conventional, Cold War-inspired distinction between the terms “soft power” (“based on attraction, arising from the positive appeal of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies”) and “hard power” (“based on coercion, largely a function of military or economic might”), both coined by Joseph Nye (2008), no longer describes the complicated multipolar information environments of the digital era. In this new age of digital public diplomacy, autocracies are attempting to “penetrate” the political and information environments of liberal democracies and spread information that discredits their image by using their own media outlets as tools of “sharp power”. We explore whether such sharp power strategies appear to resonate with Facebook audiences across *RT*’s six languages, or whether soft power aspects continue to attract audiences.

2. *RT*’s role in international politics

While *Russia Today* began as an “ambitious public diplomacy project” with a focus on presenting a “positive image of Russia”, following the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, *RT* has since worked to “encourage doubts” about western media, governments, and values, as reflected by *RT*’s slogan “Question More” (Elswah and Howard, 2020, p. 625). This indicates a transition from a soft power to a sharp power agenda. The term “sharp” is used here in the sense that its activities “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries” (International Forum for Democratic Studies 2017, p. 13). In contrast to creating a positive image of a country through cultural, information and educational efforts, usually understood as soft power (Nye 1990), sharp power uses amongst other instruments media platforms to spread disinformation and conspiracy narratives to delegitimise and discredit western democracies and to emphasise and strengthen existing societal cleavages, in pursuit of broader geopolitical goals.

Several studies have already examined the prominent narratives that English-language *RT* content promotes around the world, including conspiracy theories (Yablokov, 2015), mis- and disinformation (Cull et al., 2017), antisemitism (Rosenberg, 2015), and Islamophobia (Lytvynenko & Silverman, 2019). Comparative studies found *RT Spanish* promotes far-left views in Latin America, whereas the French and German versions championed the far right (De-Pedro and Iriarte, 2017). Some studies of *RT Spanish* also suggest that in Latin America the outlet serves as a soft power (Nye, 2008) tool against US influence, making alliances with Argentinian and Venezuelan state television (Rouvinski, 2020), while in Spain *RT* sows discord by promoting pro-independent content on the Catalanian *procés* on Facebook (López-Olano and Fenoll, 2019).

Within this sharp power approach, problematic information is instrumentalised to achieve Russian strategic purposes: for example, conspiracy theories shared by *RT* serve to legitimise Russian domestic and foreign policies (Yablokov 2015). However, *RT*'s geopolitical tasks are far broader and more diverse than simply sharing conspiracy content to foreign audiences. It supports Russia's diplomatic efforts at a global level by targeting different audiences around the world, including diasporas, religious communities, alternative media, and other groups that place themselves in juxtaposition to western institutions. Such digital interactions arguably represent elements of both soft and sharp power and are becoming more tailored and targeted.

Therefore, *RT* is an instrument for spreading Russian information influence abroad, with an increasing focus on the digital sphere. While we do not look at *RT*'s content itself in this article, we can assume that to promote the country's domestic and foreign policies to appropriate constituencies and groups *RT* targets and is consumed by specific digital audiences that may fit sharp or soft power profiles. These publics can be defined by geographical, political, religious, ethnic, and other descriptors, depending on the language they speak and the national and regional

political contexts in which they are situated. Digital trace data and social media analytics approaches allow us to develop a more detailed picture of *RT*'s digital publics, and to assess whether their engagement resonates with the sharp or soft power aspects of *RT*'s coverage. However, to understand these audiences better, we must also examine *RT*'s positionality within the global mediasphere, and the audiences it attracts to its various platforms.

RT's Positionality and Audiences

RT consistently situates itself as an 'outsider' in the global public sphere, and this positionality is key to understanding both *RT*'s geopolitical goals and its appeal as a news source for diverse audiences. Research has also found that the outlet generally appeals to "audiences who have a natural anti-establishment, anti-corporation, and anti-western (anti-American) predisposition" (Miazhevich, 2018, p. 3), forming a so-called "counter-flow remit" (Carpentier 2021). These audience descriptions are consonant with "sharp power" efforts, described above. This self-styled outsider status is also partly confirmed by the efforts of western governments (Germany, Latvia, France, and others) to ban or limit *RT*'s ability to operate in their countries, citing the destructive impact of *RT* information on their citizens, especially since the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

Extant research tends to focus on the broadcast versions of *RT*, available via terrestrial or cable broadcast services. However, *RT* also attracts significant audiences to its multilingual online platforms, whose content is further disseminated widely via *RT*'s social media accounts, and through social media on-sharing. Studies of *RT* on social media have offered a mixed picture of its digital audiences, depending on the platform. Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019, p. 174) examined the YouTube users commenting on *RT* videos about the Syrian conflict. Audiences displayed strong "mistrust of global institutions (perceived within a conspiratorial framework); anger at US foreign policy; [and] pride and gratitude towards Russia." Crilley et al. (2020)

concluded that *RT* followers on Twitter rarely engaged with its content: they might be exposed to *RT*'s tweets, but rarely endorsed them (for instance by retweeting). The authors also found that *RT* followers on Twitter were far more likely to be bots, “slightly more likely to be older and male than average Twitter users” (2020, p. 1), and engaged *RT* content alongside that of other news providers.

In contrast, beyond simply following *RT*, our study focuses on the communities that actively *share* its content on Facebook. Kuempel et al. (2015: 9) points to a multi-faceted role news sharing plays in social media through news sharers, content, and sharing networks and calls to account for its “broader societal implications”. In addition, John (2022: 15) documents how Social Network Sites (SNS) stopped using the word “sharing” on their homepages over the years and its cultural meaning including the “positive potential of economic exchanges based on trust and mutuality” is being mostly neglected by SNS. Nevertheless, social media users frequently engage in “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2005, 2018): identifying news articles of interest and sharing them with their followers by proactively posting new article links or reactively on-sharing the news links posted by others in their network. Global surveys of news users suggest that more than half of all online news users now engage in such proactive or reactive sharing (e.g., Newman et al., 2016: 101), leading Bruns (2018) to suggest that news sharing has become habitual for social media users. However, such engagement through sharing remains unevenly distributed: in their study of engagement with the main *RT* account on Twitter, for instance, Crilley et al. (2020: 229-30) find that retweets – i.e., a direct and uncommented amplification of *RT* content – substantially outweigh engagement through replies or mentions, and that the ten most active users observed in the study generated more than 40% of all engagement with the account. Such long-tail distributions are common in social media metrics.

This direct sharing and on-sharing of news links, without further commentary or contextualisation, can be understood as a broadly supportive act of dissemination; in the absence of any contrary commentary, the sharer's followers must necessarily assume that the sharer endorses the news article's content as shareworthy (Trilling et al., 2016) and interesting, and is thus more or less consistently curating a flow of news for them (Thorson and Wells, 2016). Regular news sharers who manage to attract a substantial social media following can then emerge as influential news hubs and amplifiers in their own right, as Hermida et al. (2014) have shown. Especially on feature-rich platforms such as Facebook, where in addition to their personal profiles users may set up public pages and groups that enable multiple participants to curate a communal news flow and attract a community of like-minded others, such practices can thus result in the emergence of online publics of considerable size. Further, while interviews would be required to explore the motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) behind *individual* participants' specific acts of gatewatching, an analysis of the self-selected names and descriptions of the public pages and groups on Facebook that most prominently share news content from sources like *RT*, and of their patterns in presenting and contextualising such content in their posts, provides valuable insights into the explicit *collective* agendas of such communities.

Overall, then, while existing studies have mostly analysed Russia's geopolitical goals through examining *RT* content, far fewer have researched what audiences seek from and do with *RT* – that is, how this “outsider” appeal operates in practice, and what audience engagement it attracts. Only a limited number of studies have assessed *RT*'s digital publics, and leading platforms like Facebook have remained largely overlooked. This article therefore investigates this engagement with *RT* content on Facebook across the six key languages served by the outlet. Rather than assessing the *content* of *RT* to detect the presence of soft or sharp power narratives, we review

the outlet's most active *audiences* to explore the extent to which their characteristics align with soft or sharp power aims. We do so by assembling a multilingual research team that uses social media analytics, network mapping, and manual content analysis to investigate these sharing patterns across *RT*'s six content languages, and against the backdrop of the socio-political contexts that prevail in each of the language communities.

3. Methods

Data Collection and Social Media Analytics

For this research, we gathered data from CrowdTangle on all posts in public Facebook spaces (public pages, public groups, and verified profiles) that contained links to *rt.com* URLs, for the period of 1 January to 31 December 2020. This resulted in a dataset of 914,615 unique posts from 71,790 unique Facebook pages, groups, and profiles, containing 226,071 unique *rt.com* URLs. Fig. 1 breaks down this dataset across the six *RT* language versions we examine; it shows, in the first place, that *RT Spanish* URLs circulate at well over twice the volume of the next largest language version, *RT English*, but that the number of unique public spaces on Facebook that share such content is broadly similar for the English and Spanish editions. The spaces posting links to *RT Spanish* are thus posting such links considerably more frequently than their English-language counterparts. Meanwhile, *RT*'s Russian- and German-language content circulates far less widely, and only within a comparatively small set of public groups rather than pages. These diverging patterns already point to substantial differences in the sharing practices for *RT* content across these different language communities – differences that cannot be explained simply with reference to the respective sizes of the global communities that speak these languages.

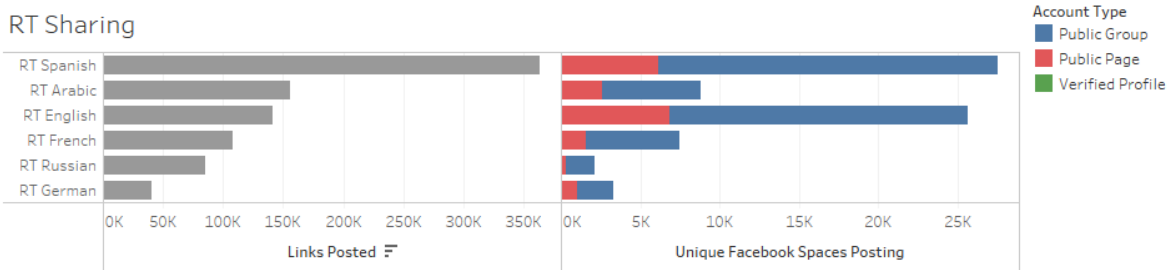


Fig. 1: Volume of links posted per RT language edition, and number of spaces posting them.

From this dataset, we extracted the *RT* URLs that Facebook posts linked to, and reduced these URLs to their canonical forms in order to avoid separate or double counts for the same articles. For instance, a URL such as

actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/347800-muere-coronavirus-prima-rey-espana

may exist in multiple different versions if the article headline encoded in the URL was changed subsequent to publication. However, it can be reduced to the canonical URL

actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/347800-

without losing meaningful detail. This process also removed any generic links to the *RT* homepage, to the landing pages for specific content sections, or to other non-article content.

Network Analysis

From these canonical URLs, and the numerical public page, group, or verified profile identifiers used by Facebook, we constructed a hybrid (bipartite) network linking Facebook spaces and article URLs, which we describe in greater detail in the Findings section below (Fig. 2), using the network analysis software Gephi (Bastian et al., 2008). To focus on the most prominent sharing activities,

we filtered this network for Facebook spaces that shared at least five *RT* articles, and articles that were shared at least five times, over the course of 2020.

As this network showed clear tendencies towards the formation of distinct clusters, we applied the Louvain modularity detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008), as implemented in Gephi, to assign the Facebook spaces and *RT* articles to these network clusters. Preliminary analysis showed that the cluster structure is strongly determined by shared language; each cluster corresponds strongly to (and predominantly shares articles from) one of the *RT* language editions, even if further subdivisions within clusters (e.g., between different national communities) may exist in each language cluster. Connections across clusters also exist: Facebook spaces in one language cluster sometimes shared content from another, with English-language articles serving as a common target of such cross-cluster sharing activities. However, such cross-language sharing is considerably less common than in-language sharing. Based on these observations, we drew on our multilingual research team to conduct a detailed analysis of the Facebook space identities and article themes that are dominant in each cluster.

Manual Content Analysis

We then proceeded with a manual content analysis of the names and descriptions of the top 100 public Facebook spaces in each of the six clusters that shared *RT* links most actively. The manual analysis was implemented by six coders, each one a native speaker of one of six selected languages (Russian, German, Spanish, Arabic, French, English), and all fluent in English. We evaluated 600 Facebook spaces on two dimensions. The first dimension is geographical and examine what

countries and regions these Facebook spaces target¹. We used an adapted version of the United Nations Statistics Division’s list of countries (2021). This resulted in a list of 250 country codes, as well as an “undefined” category for cases where coders could not determine the country that a Facebook space targeted, or where two or more countries were addressed in the name or description of the space.

The second dimension of the analysis was based on the positionality of the Facebook spaces, articulated in their names and descriptions. We conducted a preliminary analysis of the English-speaking cluster to develop our coding categories, finding that positionality was largely determined by either political, ethnic, or religious factors. We further subdivided the category “politics” into “international” or “domestic” politics, as we noticed in the preliminary analysis that there were groups discussing international politics in general, while some only concerned themselves with domestic political matters. The description of the categories can be found in Appendix 1.

Some spaces shared all different types of news including political, cultural, social economic and others; these spaces we dubbed as “general news”. We also included a “conspiracy” category, as we noticed a strong presence of Facebook spaces sharing different conspiracies theories; this addition was also informed by previous research that *RT* uses conspiracy theories as a diplomatic tool in exercising its “sharp power” (Yablokov, 2015). The category “other” included those spaces that did not fit any of these descriptions. Coders could also add further notes to outline the dominant themes of the Facebook spaces coded as “other”. One Facebook space could be coded

¹ This manual assessment is different from what CrowdTangle identifies computationally as the “Page Admin Country”: the administrators of a page can be located in a country that is different from the country or countries targeted by the page, and “Page Admin Country” is available only for Facebook pages, but not for groups or verified profiles.

under only one coding category, coders used their judgement and the codebook, and they looked for the most prevalent characteristics of the category.

One of the difficulties in this study was to reach an inter-coder agreement between coders who speak six different languages. To agree on the meaning of the categories we conducted a reliability test using 20 English-language public Facebook spaces from the dataset, a language that all the coders speak, to reach an agreement on the seven categories. We calculated Krippendorff’s alpha (2004) between the six coders using the ReCal OIR tool (Freelon, 2017). We aimed for α values of 0.75 or greater to draw meaningful conclusions. We reached agreement on all codes. The results for each category can be seen in Table 1.

International politics	Domestic politics	Religion	Ethnicity	Conspiracy	Other	General News
0.814	0.908	0.932	0.796	1	0.903	0.755

Table 1. Krippendorff’s alpha for a reliability test on 20 English groups sharing RT on Facebook

Limitations

Our research focuses only on Facebook; while RT has a presence on other major social media platforms, where patterns of audience engagement may well vary considerably. Further, CrowdTangle is limited to public Facebook spaces only, which means that we could not observe the sharing practices for posts containing RT links within semi-private and private environments on Facebook (closed groups, personal profiles, and direct messaging). CrowdTangle’s coverage is known to be limited for Facebook spaces with very small followings, meaning that our focus here is predominantly on more influential spaces with followers’ numbers in the thousands or more (Fraser, 2021). Our explicit focus on posts containing *rt.com* links also means that the data we collected do not cover Facebook posts discussing RT content without linking directly to its site,

for instance by sharing screenshots rather than links. In combination, however, these limitations strengthen our focus on the most influential Facebook spaces that consistently share direct links to content on the *RT* site, and thus on *RT*'s most engaged and visible Facebook audiences.

Further, our analysis implicitly assumes that the sharing of *RT* content in such spaces is generally supportive rather than critical. Previous research found examples of counter-attitudinal sharing (Wojcieszak et al., 2021), in our case, users are predominantly motivated to share *RT* content because they find it interesting and agree with its perspectives, rather than to critique it. We do so for several reasons: first, existing research suggests that, even though they are not actively avoiding counter-attitudinal sources, many news consumers “exhibit a confirmation bias, preferring attitude-consistent sources” (Garrett et al., 2013: 114); and that active news sharers in communal spaces are especially likely to pass on content that aligns with their personal views and the perceived attitudes of their community (e.g. Hampton et al., 2014: 3).

Second, we therefore expect that Facebook spaces where *RT* content is frequently shared with the intention to critique it will be identified by names and descriptions that express such antagonistic attitudes (e.g. ‘RT Watch’ or ‘Debunking Russian Propaganda’), and that our focus on space names and descriptions would have been able to identify them as a distinct category – but we encountered no such explicitly anti-*RT* or Russia-critical spaces in our coding. Finally, our regular sampling of the Facebook posts from such spaces that shared *RT* content similarly failed to identify posts criticising *RT*'s coverage; indeed, similar to the retweeting patterns observed by Crilley et al. (2020) on Twitter, a substantial proportion of the posts we encountered in these Facebook spaces simply shared *RT*'s own news posts without adding significant further commentary.

In the manual content analysis, we calculated Inter-coder reliability based on 20 English descriptions of the Facebook spaces (3 per cent of the sample). We also encountered a small number of Facebook spaces whose names and descriptions used languages other than those spoken by our team of coders. In these cases, we used Google Translate to identify the major themes and positionality of these spaces.

4. Findings

Network Analysis and Cluster Detection

We commenced our analysis by constructing a hybrid, bipartite network between the public Facebook spaces and the canonical *RT* article URLs they shared in their posts. Fig. 2 shows a visualisation of this network, using the Force Atlas 2 algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014) as implemented in Gephi (Bastian et al., 2008). Here, network nodes representing Facebook groups are shown in blue and Facebook pages are shown in red, while article nodes are coloured grey (verified public profiles were largely absent from the dataset). The node size indicates out-degree: that is, the number of times Facebook spaces shared *RT* articles; as a result, each cluster in the network contains at least one large red node that represents the official *RT* page for the cluster's country or language community.

We confirmed the validity of the visual clusters produced by Force Atlas 2 by also applying the Louvain modularity detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) to this network, which allocated the nodes in each cluster to different communities. Fig. 3 documents the results of this process, showing the number of *RT* links posted by the Facebook spaces allocated to each cluster, and the number of these spaces per cluster, divided into the different types of public spaces available on Facebook.

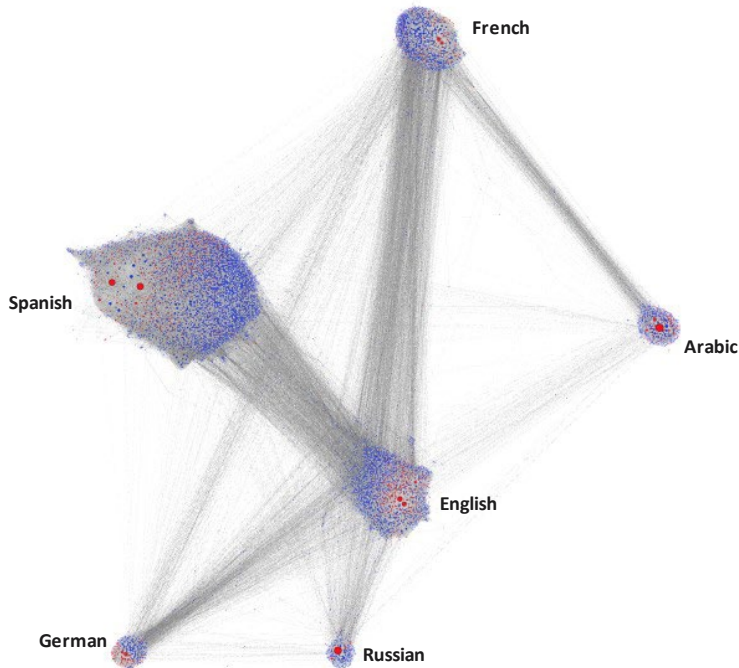


Fig. 2: Visualisation of the bipartite space-article network. Facebook groups shown in blue; pages in red; articles in grey. Network filtered for degree ≥ 5 .

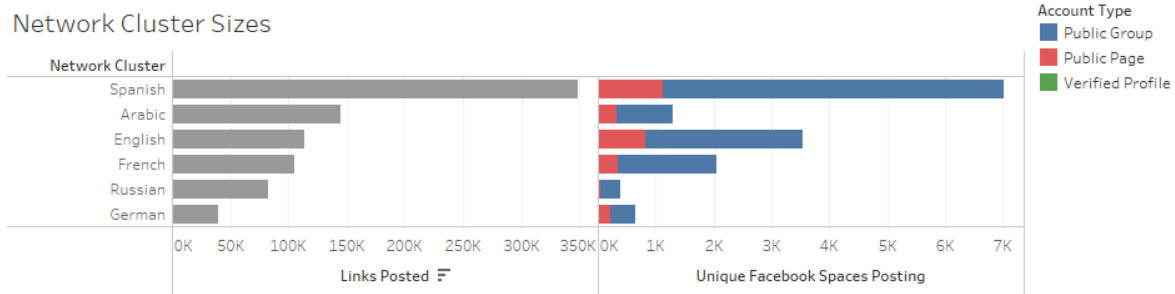


Fig. 3: Facebook spaces allocated to the network clusters by the Louvain algorithm, and their posting activity.

While the network and statistics shown in Figs. 2 and 3 show patterns after filtering the network for a degree of five or above (i.e., spaces that shared at least five *rt.com* links, and *RT* articles that were shared at least five times), this distribution nonetheless closely mirrors that shown in Fig. 1, demonstrating that linking to *RT* content largely remains in-language: spaces in

the Spanish cluster largely link to *RT Spanish* content, and so on. Notably, however, the balance between public groups and pages in each cluster varies considerably: for instance, while only eight percent of the Facebook spaces in the Russian cluster are pages, 23 percent of spaces in the English-language cluster are pages. This may point to different communicative practices on Facebook in these different language communities, potentially indicating these participants' willingness to establish more formal communication platforms (i.e., "official pages") within the Facebook ecosystem.

Having thus allocated the Facebook spaces in our dataset to the six major language clusters, we proceeded by identifying the spaces in each cluster that most actively shared *RT* links during the period of analysis from 1 January to 31 December 2020. For each cluster we selected and coded the 100 Facebook spaces that posted the largest number of links to *RT*. The results of this process indicate significant divergences in the audiences and on-sharers that *RT* can attract to its content across these different language communities.

General Patterns across the Language Clusters

Table 2 provides an overview of the geographic focus of the Facebook spaces that most actively shared *RT* content in each language cluster. This categorisation examined whether these spaces were explicitly concerned with any one country in particular. In this table, "Undefined / Unavailable" refers to spaces that either appeared to have no particular geographic focus (e.g., addressing news topics or conspiracy theories in general), or were no longer accessible at the time of coding (e.g., because they were no longer public, or had been suspended or deleted). We note considerable divergences between the language clusters here: while spaces in the French and German language clusters are largely centred on France and Germany, those in the English language cluster often fail to indicate any geographic focus (even though they are often concerned

especially with US matters at least implicitly). The same is true to a lesser extent for spaces in the Spanish and Russian clusters.

Table 3 presents an overview of the distribution of the thematic positioning we identified for the spaces in each language cluster; here, “Unavailable” identifies those spaces we could no longer access at the time of coding, while “Other” covers spaces without a clear alignment with any of the other six major categories we had defined. Again, some substantial differences between the language clusters are immediately obvious: in almost all language clusters, a plurality of the spaces are predominantly concerned with domestic politics in the countries they cover, while – reflecting its role as the dominant *lingua franca* – international politics emerges as the most prominent category for the English-language cluster. In the substantially transnational English, Spanish, and Arabic clusters, general news is also a major category, possibly pointing to an interest in sharing news reporting from a wider range of outlets. Other distinctions are more language cluster-specific: in the multi-ethnic and religiously diverse Arabic language cluster, ethnicity and religion are comparatively important topics; in the German and English clusters, conspiracy-centric spaces have a significant presence. We discuss these cluster-specific differences in the following section.

Language Cluster	Country Focus	Spaces	Language Cluster	Country Focus	Spaces	Language Cluster	Country Focus	Spaces	Language Cluster	Country Focus	Spaces		
Arabic	Egypt	34	English	<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>	56	Spanish	<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>	35	German	Germany	80		
	Libya	15		Russian Federation	10		Venezuela	13		<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>	14		
	<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>	12		United States of America	7		Peru	7		Austria	4		
	Syrian Arab Republic	12		United Kingdom	6		Colombia	7		Ukraine	1		
	Iraq	8		China	3		Nicaragua	6		Syrian Arab Republic	1		
	Algeria	5		Sweden	2		Mexico	5		Russian	Russian Federation	34	
	Morocco	4		Serbia	2		Argentina	5			<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>	26	
	Yemen	3		Ireland	2		Ecuador	4			Ukraine	11	
	Sudan	3		Yemen	1		United States of America	3			Bulgaria	8	
	Saudi Arabia	2		Thailand	1		Paraguay	2			Slovakia	4	
	Russian Federation	1		Syrian Arab Republic	1		Cuba	2			Italy	4	
	Lebanon	1		Philippines	1		Costa Rica	2			Czechia	3	
	French	France		74	Pakistan		1	Spain			1	Syrian Arab Republic	2
		<i>Undefined / Unavailable</i>		21	Hungary		1	Russian Federation			1	Armenia	2
United States of America		1	Greece	1	Republic of Korea	1	Turkey	1					
Tunisia		1	Finland	1	Puerto Rico	1	Tajikistan	1					
Poland		1	Cambodia	1	Iceland	1	Romania	1					
Mali		1	Bulgaria	1	Honduras	1	Lithuania	1					
Burkina Faso		1	Brazil	1	Dominican Republic	1	Estonia	1					
			Armenia	1	Chile	1	Canada	1					
					Bolivia	1							

Table 2: Predominant geographic focus of the most active Facebook spaces in each language cluster.

Language Cluster	Category	Spaces	Language Cluster	Category	Spaces	Language Cluster	Category	Spaces
Arabic	Domestic politics	26	English	International politics	27	Spanish	Domestic politics	40
	General news	22		Domestic politics	24		General news	24
	Ethnicity	13		General news	19		International politics	19
	Religion	9		Conspiracy	11		Other	8
	International politics	9		Other	10		Religion	4
	<i>Unavailable</i>	8		Religion	5		<i>Unavailable</i>	3
	Conspiracy	8		<i>Unavailable</i>	3		Ethnicity	2
	Other	5		Ethnicity	1			
German	Domestic politics	43	French	Domestic politics	65	Russian	Domestic politics	34
	Conspiracy	33		International politics	19		Other	28
	<i>Unavailable</i>	14		<i>Unavailable</i>	8		International politics	19
	International politics	9		General news	5		General news	9
	Other	1		Conspiracy	3		<i>Unavailable</i>	5
						Ethnicity	4	
						Conspiracy	1	

Table 3: Thematic positioning of the most active Facebook spaces in each language cluster

Descriptions of the Clusters

Arabic cluster. The Arabic cluster is spread across countries within the Middle East, coded in our data as Western Asian and Northern African geographical regions. Except for a few spaces for Iraq (8), virtually all countries relating to this cluster are situated on the coasts of the Mediterranean and Red Seas and include Egypt (34), Libya (15), the Syrian Arab Republic (12), Algeria (5), Morocco (4), Yemen (3), Sudan (3), Saudi Arabia (2), and Lebanon (1). There are almost as many spaces that focus on the general dissemination of news (22) as those that are interested in domestic politics (26). Some pages focus on ethnicity (13), religion (9), international politics (9), and conspiracy theories (8), as well as unrelated miscellaneous topics (5). Discourses within this cluster tend toward geo-political tensions, anti-establishment, and anti-corruption themes in countries with military regimes, coronavirus updates in countries that lack sufficient resources to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, and commentaries on international politics. A recurrent theme among spaces within this cluster is the relationship between religion and politics: numerous pages and groups such as “Syrians in Canada Support Secular Syria” and “The Egyptian Campaign for the Conservation of Swimwear” promote secular policies, and freedoms over religious doctrines, education, and clothing choices. Another recurrent theme is the glorification of Middle Eastern political leaders (past and present) that have enjoyed strong ties with Russia. This is seen in numerous pages that exist to promote the public image of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt, and the late Chairman Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya.

A typical excerpt reads:

*From Desert to Desert Led by Leader Muammar Gaddafi: “We have not surrendered yet, and we will not, God willing, we will be victorious, the rebel leader Muammar Bominyar Gaddafi.”*²

Representations of sentiment within this Arabic cluster may be skewed to underrepresent communities that are adversely affected by war. For example, while actors from Egypt account for more than a third of the 100 spaces, the Syrian Arab Republic only accounts for 12% of the total. This may be due to the economic stability enjoyed in the former and strained in latter.

English cluster. The Facebook spaces sharing English-language *RT* content are diverse. Not all these spaces are posting in English themselves: for instance, the cluster contains spaces whose titles and descriptions are in Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Czech, Russian, and other languages. This may be because English is functioning in these spaces as an international language, or the language of international news. Many of these Facebook spaces tend to be pro-Russia, pro-Putin, pro-China, and anti-western. Such spaces fit both the domestic and international politics categories: for example, some spaces celebrated Putin’s domestic leadership as well as Russian

² All translations except the English-language cluster are made by coders.

culture and heritage, whereas others promoted Russia or China as geopolitical counterweights to the “West”. This is the description of one such international politics space:

Stop America's & NATO's War Against the World: “This group is dedicated to opposing the spread of the American Empire and its military/corporate fascism around the globe regardless of whether it is dressed in a neo-Con or neo-liberal attire.”

In total, there are 27 spaces about international politics and 24 spaces about domestic politics. In addition, there are 11 conspiracist and five religious spaces. These spaces tend to be entirely in English. Among these are pro-Trump and evangelist spaces, as well as spaces with a more general conspiracist outlook (e.g., encouraging users to share news that the “mainstream media” are hiding from them). Lastly, there are also many other spaces dedicated simply to sharing general news (19) without a conspiratorial outlook.

In these respects, while some of these spaces can be clearly classified as right-wing – for instance, the evangelical and pro-Trump spaces – other spaces promoted politics critical of US “hegemony” and NATO, views which are typically associated with leftist positions.

German cluster. The German cluster is largely focused on domestic politics in Germany; of the 100 Facebook spaces, only four addressed Austrian political themes, and two represented German supporters of political groups in Ukraine and Syria, respectively. Nearly one half (43) of the 100 spaces had an explicit focus on domestic politics, while another third (33) mixed an interest in conspiracy theories – especially around COVID-19, vaccines, lockdowns, and masks – with domestic political debate. A large number of these spaces positioned themselves on the far right of the German political spectrum: more than one quarter (27) implicitly or explicitly declared their

sympathies for the neo-fascist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)³ party, or even presented as official pages or groups for the members and supporters of local AfD branches; additionally, one supported the earlier far-right Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands⁴ (NPD) party, and three of the four Austrian pages described themselves as local branches of the Islamophobic Pegida⁵ movement. Conversely, however, five of the German groups represented far-left perspectives – some criticising the left-wing Die Linke⁶ party for its lack of ideological orthodoxy. Both this large number of far right spaces and the much smaller contingent of far left groups showed considerable affinity with the same conspiracy theories; as the timeframe of the analysis covered the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is perhaps unsurprising, and echoes a phenomenon that has been observed in other national contexts, too: the interweaving, by both fringes of the political spectrum, of conspiracist views with a rejection of mainstream politics, media, science, and consensus. A typical example of this sentiment is:

German Angry Pensioners and Angry Citizens: “I am angry at people who put up with everything without resistance! Angry and disappointed about the loss of values that were once important for a social, functioning coexistence!! Angry at lying politicians! Angry; at the stupidity of so many people here, at the phlegmatic noddors and yes-sayers!!! I am Angry, at the intolerance of the tolerant!!”

French cluster. In the French cluster, Facebook spaces with various interests co-exist. However, most of these spaces (74) are based in France, addressing its domestic politics (65). Members of

³ In Eng.: Alternative for Germany

⁴ In Eng.: National Democratic Party of Germany

⁵ In Eng.: Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicisation of the Occident

⁶ In Eng.: The Left

the “Yellow Vests” movement, who had been protesting in France since November 2018, dominate the cluster. They are people from the working and middle classes who have been demanding improvements to their working and living conditions. Other Facebook spaces protested the health finance crisis and restrictions on individual freedoms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These spaces are used as platforms where demonstrations are scheduled, reported, and discussed by members. They also supported left-wing political parties, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* (Eng. “Unbowed France”), which is close to working-class and socialist movements. They self-present as against the establishment, and especially against President Macron and his government, whose policies remain unpopular among members. Besides domestic politics, the French cluster mainly addresses international political topics (19), including pro-Russia, pro-Putin, and pro-Chinese groups that stand against a West dominated by US imperialism. In that category, there are calls on France to “FREXIT” and break away from the European Union. Finally, other spaces address undefined countries, sharing general news (5) and some conspiracy theories (3), including COVID-19 conspiracies. A typical description of a group in this cluster is:

Citizen Revofight: “Hello everyone! Small message for the group. As you know, the movement started thanks to the ‘yellow vests’, but over time the movement has evolved into a more general anger, a citizen anger! Our group has also grown; it has grown in terms of members and assets, and we thank you for it!!! We decided to change the title of the group to reflect the evolution of the movement, and the various current struggles.”

Spanish cluster. The Spanish language cluster is formed by groups and pages distributed across several Latin American countries, located mainly in Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Nicaragua, Argentina, and Mexico. Most of these spaces (40) are dedicated to discussing domestic politics in

their respective countries. This category includes a substantial presence of Venezuelan spaces that describe themselves as socialists, supporters of the current regime of Nicolás Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez, or militants combating the coup attempts against the Venezuelan president. Several other spaces articulate themselves as supporters of leftist, progressive, local, and national political parties in their national contexts, or address national struggles against neoliberalism and in support of environmental causes. A typical description of one domestic politics space is:

The Troop with Maduro: “Group created for the debate between Chavistas because it is necessary to be informed and alert to the media dirty trick that tries to end the Revolution. Refrain the intelligent ones from the opposition because we do not want your opinion.”

The second significant number of spaces belongs to the general news category (24), formed by alternative local and national news outlets, news agencies, or news discussants and curators sharing breaking news, news content in Spanish, or groups of fans commenting on popular television networks such as *Telesur*, and on prominent journalists and television opinion leaders (e.g., in Argentina and Venezuela). Another large number of spaces relates to international politics (19). These spaces typically define themselves as friends and supporters of specific leaders (e.g., “Vladimir Putin, the best president ever”). Other groups support China and Syria, connect with the regional Latin American ideas of Che Guevara, or criticise the US. The remaining spaces are classified under categories other (8), religion (4) and ethnicity (2).

Russian cluster. This cluster is represented by Russophile, pro-Putin, patriotic, and pro-military groups. 34 Facebook spaces explored are dedicated to domestic political issues: they glorify

Russia, its policies, and the country's leader Vladimir Putin. A smaller number of Facebook spaces in this group are dedicated to the domestic politics of the countries of the post-Soviet space, such as Armenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine, where people might also speak Russian. One space in this group supports pro-Russian politicians in Eastern Europe (e.g., Edgar Savisar in Estonia), another attacks anti-Russian European politicians (e.g., former President Andrej Kiska in Slovakia). 28 spaces were classified as other: these mostly were pro-military groups discussing the army, weapons, and wars (7); or groups favouring multi-culturalism between Russia and other countries (8). 16 Facebook spaces discussed international politics, targeting regions of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, and Western Asia. Some spaces posted in languages other than Russian, and mostly in Eastern European languages (e.g., Bulgarian, Slovakian). There were nine general news and one conspiracy-driven spaces. Four spaces shared ethnic news and information targeting diasporas in the Baltic countries, in Canada, and other countries. There are no religious Facebook spaces in this cluster, five groups were deleted or became private after our data collection. A typical description of a pro-Putin group reads as follows:

The Team Putin: "The Team Putin group supports the socio-political, socio-economic, and foreign policy course of Russian President Vladimir Putin, unites the patriotic and conservative forces of the Russian people, based on Russian civilisation, national identity and cultural and historical code for the development of civil society and the strengthening of democracy in Russia."

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, then, our analysis across the six major language clusters shows distinct patterns. The spaces engaging with Russian-language *RT* content largely constitute an outlier: here, the otherwise secondary soft power function of *RT*'s brand of news content – promoting the image of a strong and confident Russia under the firm leadership of Vladimir Putin – is foregrounded by its Russian-speaking domestic and diasporic audiences, and ethnic Russian identity, conservative Russian values, and Russian history are celebrated.

Some aspects of this positioning of Russia, and Putin, as alternatives to “Western” and specifically US leadership and values can also be found in the other language clusters; as we have seen, some of these clusters do also contain a small number of prominent spaces that celebrate Russia and Putin. However, references to them in these clusters are more often relational and instrumental: links with Russia (or China) are highlighted more often to claim independence from and opposition to western liberal-democratic values, rather than to signal a wholesale allegiance to Russian hegemony as a replacement for US leadership.

More often, however, the implied “Russian” perspective in *RT*'s content is backgrounded, in much the same way that the name change from *Russia Today* to *RT* has directed audience attention away from the outlet's links with the Kremlin. Except for those in the Russian-language cluster, the majority of the most active Facebook spaces across the other language clusters appear to share *RT* content not because it presents a particularly *Russian* view of the world, but because it serves, in a variety of ways, as a distinct alternative to the mainstream news coverage that is available to these audiences at a domestic or international level, in their local languages or in English. How this takes place at the level of each language, regional, or national community varies

widely across these clusters, but we argue that in such contexts *RT* content often realises its sharp power potential.

RT's Arabic content for Middle Eastern audiences, for example, resonates especially with Facebook spaces that criticise ineffective, corrupt, and theocratic leaders, and the state media that support them; its German news attracts audiences from the far left and, especially, the AfD-aligned far right of Germany's political spectrum, who oppose the broad political consensus on matters from COVID-19 policy through immigration to climate change mitigation that exists across much of the centre of the country's political system; in France, conversely, the Facebook groups sharing *RT* content align more with the disillusioned left of French domestic politics, and harness traditional scepticism towards the US as well as more recent anti-EU sentiment.

Due to their status as major world languages, meanwhile, the situation in the Spanish- and English-language clusters is more complex, and often varies with the underlying domestic political situation in each country. Across these clusters we find spaces from far right Trumpists in the US to far left Chavistas in Venezuela that share *RT* content which resonates with their perspectives; common to these otherwise diametrically opposed groups is often a distrust in mainstream media outlets and, therefore, an appreciation for the alternative perspectives offered by *RT*. While the Spanish-language cluster is dominated by spaces that represent Latin American nations, the audience for English-language *RT* content is truly global, demonstrating the adoption of *RT* as an alternative news source worldwide.

These divergent patterns of adoption by its most loyal Facebook audiences demonstrate the dual role that *RT* continues to play in the Russian regime's communicative arsenal, combining aspects of both soft and sharp power. If *RT* were predominantly positioned to serve as an instrument of soft power, we would expect the majority of Facebook spaces that share links to its

articles to focus on content that praises Russian heritage and culture, proclaims the greatness of its political system and leadership, and otherwise glorifies the Russian model as a superior alternative to liberal democracy. Some such spaces are present in our dataset, but are mainly found only in the Russian-language cluster: in other words, *RT*'s soft power function mainly addresses domestic Russian audiences, ethnic Russian groups within the wider international diaspora (and here especially in post-Soviet countries with substantial Russian minorities), and other pro-Russian groups in countries with historical ties to Russia or the Soviet Union (e.g. in Libya, Egypt, and some Latin American countries). Evidently, these groups find enough soft power content in *RT*'s coverage to maintain their allegiance with and admiration for Russia.

For the majority of the 600 Facebook spaces, however, such pro-Russian, soft power attributes appear secondary at best. The *RT* content they share does not explicitly promote Russia or Putin, nor represent a consistent and orthodox “Kremlin ideology”; instead, *RT* specialises in providing an ideologically malleable stream of content that can appeal to disenfranchised and oppositional groups on the left or on the right in their various national contexts; that both criticises the weakness of mainstream liberal-democratic leadership and the oppressive nature of global western hegemony; and that denounces the untrustworthiness of mainstream media while proffering its own brand of mis- and disinformation. We suggest that this take-up of *RT* content by such a broad and diverse set range of audiences on Facebook demonstrates its role as a tool for Russia's sharp power – a role which our analysis suggests has now become *RT*'s primary purpose. As with other instruments of Russia's sharp power, the immediate aim of these activities does not appear to be the glorification of the Putin regime, or even in a more general sense the positioning of illiberal autocracy as an alternative to liberal democracy, but primarily the deepening of societal and ideological conflicts and divisions. In this, it takes an opportunistic approach that sows discord

wherever the specific political faultlines may be found in each of the countries and regions it targets.

Such a shift in emphasis from a soft to a sharp power role, and from presenting an idealised picture of Russian society to inflaming societal conflicts elsewhere seems in line with the Kremlin's increasingly aggressive and belligerent geopolitical stance, even well before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (which occurred after our analysis period). Soft power is valuable to governments that seek to gain an advantage within the existing rules-based international world order, as it enables them to gain support from other countries both at the political and at the popular level; by contrast, the Putin regime, which is now openly rejecting the rules of global cooperation, can no longer hope to attract broad international and especially western sympathy and support, and instead stands to gain more from destabilising domestic consensus in the countries it opposes. Sharp power, exercised in the current context especially through online and social media, is a central tool for this purpose.

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