

## **REPORT**

**By Member of the Dissertation Committee on the Dissertation of**

**Yuriy Y. KOLOTAEV on the theme:**

**“Post-truth and Digital Information Influence in International Relations:**

**Theoretical Conceptualisation of Threats and Countermeasures”**

**Submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Candidate Degree of  
in Political Science**

**Specialisation 5.5.4 –International Relations, Global and Regional Studies**

Having read the doctoral dissertation of Yury Y. Kolotaev in the English-language version, I am ready to offer a series of observations and draw conclusions concerning the academic quality of the work. The thesis concerns the analysis of the theoretical and practical approaches and effects of post-truth and digital information influence on contemporary international relations. The topic is at the intersection of several different academic disciplines, which includes among others international relations, geopolitics, national and international politics, national and transnational policymaking and law, audience perception and reaction, manipulative and deceptive communication. This thesis is highly informative, the text written in an easy to digest and yet engaging format. A very rich set of data from academic, mass media and other sources are used to illustrate the logic and nature of the digital cyber threats to aspects of national security and the quality of international relations.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and appendixes. The format and order of these various parts of the thesis is conducted in a clear, consistent and logical order. In the flow of the appearance of topics and subjects, knowledge and information are appearing in a progressive manner that is conducive for the reader in digesting the evaluations, observations and conclusions of the work in a gradual manner. The articulated academic and practical relevance of the topic are clear as are the purpose and objectives of the thesis and its originality. First and foremost, the academic and practical subject of the thesis is at the very leading edge of academic, policymaker and practitioner experience and knowledge, and is very rapidly evolving in terms of technology and practice. This is not only a very fresh and relevant topic, but one that is rapidly changing and evolving within the context of an evolving

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global geopolitical order. Therefore, the theoretical, policymaker and practitioner information and knowledge is in great demand and with significant potential consequences of building beyond the existing state of the art knowledge on the subject.

There is also evident, a highly consistent and systematic approach to ordering and presenting data, which facilitates enables tracking of the development of the digital threats and a comparability of the various national policy responses in terms of the perspective consistency or the lack of it for the reader. An impressive array of various kinds of literature has been consulted and worked into the framework of the thesis, which has been carefully selected and applied. The thesis work is very well researched, written and argued. Observations, interpretations, evaluations and conclusions are well justified and convincing. The selection, motivation and justification of the constituent parts of the scientific design (namely theory, method and approach) are appropriate and suited to the named aims and objectives of the research. A most commendable aspect and element of this thesis's research is the creation of the candidate's own academic theoretical/conceptual framework for interpreting and analysing the problem at hand. It is a very bold move, but one that I believe has been successful in this instance, which may be further developed in research after the doctoral thesis. A viable and useful future research agenda is proposed by the candidate, which is something often overlooked.

There are numerous obvious noted strengths and many merits of this thesis research and its conclusions, there are several academic points that should have been considered for inclusion in the work to further strengthen the work in terms of its academic and scientific robustness. These points are relatively minor and should be understood as being friendly advice on strengthening an already excellent example of academic work in addition to something to consider in your future research. The various points to be raised fall into the following categories: inclusion of empirical data into the theoretical/conceptual framework; missing literature; additional clarifications; missing perspectives and assumptions.

On the first point, the issue of the necessity for inclusion of empirical data into the theoretical/conceptual framework. The creation of the candidate's own unique and innovative theoretical and conceptual framework to interpret and analyse the material and data is a magnificent achievement. However, this framework sorely requires some rigorous testing for scientific validity and reliability. Therefore, the inclusion of some more extensive real-world examples would have greatly benefited the thesis by simultaneously visualising, illustrating and testing this new academic framework construct.



There were some noticeable gaps in the literature used and, in the subjects/themes that were engaged in. For example, the co-written article from Andrey V. Manoilo on an evaluation of the how and why of fake news. Further, there are other very helpful texts from other academic journals, including Russian ones (International Analytics, Russia in Global Affairs ... etc.). which are missing that would have aided and supported the analysis and conclusions of this thesis. Material on the role, practice and effects of labelling and defining on constructing 'reality' could have extracted some further and deeper insights as well.

In places throughout the thesis, further contextualisation of the situation and circumstances would have aided in clarifying the point being made to the reader. A first point to perhaps consider is the general degenerative direction of Western liberal democracies, which now is much more concerned with forcing the ideological dimensions of liberalism at the expense of actual democracy, which is creating a centralised form of authoritarian bureaucracy. Consequently, the levels of politicisation and weaponisation of policy, justice, law and science is currently at very high levels. This has created a highly zealous and messianic, ideologically driven West. Within the context of the thesis, there are two different targets of attack – where information is used to create technical threats (DDOS attacks etc.) versus cognitive attacks and threats (to persuade, misdirect or incapacitate target audience thinking). This can create a need to understand the logic and reasoning for post-truth and digital information influence intent and goals along the lines of tracking the motivation and opportunity for their use in contemporary international relations. That is to uncover the intended aims and goals of the chosen policy and desired political end states stemming from the operationalisation of the post-truth framework via the fifth dimension of strategy. There is no accident or coincidence in the timing or nature of post-truth programmes.

Censorship and gatekeeping have become rampant in the West owing to the crisis of Western politics and geopolitics. Combatting hate speech in the West has become highly politicised and especially in the wake of the Special Military Operation. This has given rise to an attempt to create an uneven digital playing field, where to state that Nazis are in Ukraine earns sanctions as hate speech, but to call for the actual physical death of Russian citizens is not. This creates a 'specific' environment for gatekeepers in the process of attempting information domain dominance, hence the rise of 'fact-checkers' such as Snopes or the EU Disinfo Lab to distract or discredit competing messages and messengers.

In summary, the thesis covers a rapidly transforming field of academic study of 21<sup>st</sup> century of communicated international relations with an emphasis on the influence and effects of post-truth and digital information influence, and how this topic is perceived and acted upon theoretically as an object of study and practically through the influence of domestic political and foreign policy discussions in the wake of technological development and the refinement of manipulative and deceptive practice in the digital information realm. The strengths of the work far outweigh the few minor weaknesses uncovered in the thesis. One of the consistent themes concerning policy choices owing to threat recognition and understanding by academics and policymakers that require critical examination and interpretation as being the basis with which to develop and devise timely and effective countermeasures. This thesis work reveals and enables a deeper theoretical and conceptual understanding of the nature and practice of the risks and threats posed by post-truth and digital information (deception and manipulation) to potentially enable a more coherent and relevant academic and policy agenda on international relations threat recognition and response.

The dissertation meets the basic requirements established by Order No. 11181/1 of 19 November 2021, “On the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at Saint Petersburg State University,” the candidate Yury Y. Kolotaev deserves the award of the candidate degree of Political Science in the speciality 5.5.4. –International Relations, Global and Regional Studies. Clause 11 of the aforementioned Order by the author of the thesis is not broken.



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Member of the Dissertation Council

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