



Article

Biopolitical Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Russia, France, Germany, and the UK: The “Post-Truth” Coverage by RT

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the COVID-19 crisis in Russia, France, Germany, and the UK, as covered by the Russian state media outlet RT (formerly Russia Today). I view the RT coverage through the prism of biopolitics and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to demonstrate multiple discrepancies in its “post-truth” knowledge production strategies. I argue that these strategies aim to expose the hybrid and controversial nature of biopolitical governance in Western democracies during the COVID-19 pandemic as they struggle to strike a balance between imposing social restrictions and safeguarding public health. I also show how the (post)liberal biopolitical debate on personal responsibility and state resilience in times of emergency could be applied by authoritarian regimes for self-description.

Keywords: biopolitics; COVID-19; responsibility; post-truth; RT



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all levels of human activity, dramatically changing our daily routines, attitudes, perceptions, and values. In social sciences, this crisis has reanimated a biopolitical debate on sovereignty, securitization, borders, social responsibility, state resilience, health diplomacy, knowledge production, etc., revealing multiple deficiencies in modern population management.

This paper addressed two of these issues.

The first one stems from the idea of the social contract and its core dilemma of limiting individual liberties for the sake of society's survival. As the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated, especially during the initial, pre-vaccine phase of the pandemic, the majority of democratic governments found themselves in a trap of liberal governance, as they were forced to impose painful social restrictions for the sake of public health. Thus, some central questions have emerged: how much personal freedom should be sacrificed in this situation, by who and for whom, and should this be under the rule of a democratic government? What are the limits of social responsibility and who are the “new others” of the pandemic world?

The second controversy concerns the banalization and politicization of expert knowledge that occurred throughout the pandemic, reflecting mounting social anxiety. Rationality and freedom are the basic principles on which a liberal government is based (Dean 2009); however, should the freedom of expression be restricted in times of public health emergency? The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated not only the versatility of consensual scientific knowledge, but also the growing influence of “post-fact” speculations and conspiracy theories (de Souza Júnior 2021; Malcolm 2021; Kwok et al. 2021) that fueled the anti-vax movement and social unrest across the globe.

This paper approaches these issues from the perspectives of biopolitics and the elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA), taking as empirical data the coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in Russia, France, Germany, and the UK by the media outlet RT.

RT, formerly known as Russia Today, until recently was the largest multilingual Russian state-owned news channel. It broadcast globally and self-admittedly billed itself as an “information weapon” against the West (DFRLab 2018).

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, RT, Sputnik, and their Kremlin-supported satellites were completely blocked by tech companies and telecom providers in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the US. On 27 February 2022, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, tweeted that RT, Sputnik, and disinformation channels related to them were blocked in Europe and “will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war” (against Ukraine) (Twitter 2022).

To be sure, long before these punitive steps were taken, the Western mainstream media in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France (Barrett and Filipov 2017; Faulconbridge and Sandle 2018; DW 2021a; Pose and Dyomkin 2017; Le Monde 2017; Zavadski 2017) viewed RT more as the Kremlin’s disinformation tool rather than as a genuine and influential newsmaker.

Indeed, in sharp repudiation of RT Director Margarita Simonyan’s false claims regarding RT’s purportedly growing popularity across the globe (Twitter 2021a, 2021b), a number of independent investigations have revealed that RT’s web traffic was artificially inflated, while the news channel was sustained by the significant financial support it received from the Kremlin (Volchek 2021; Navalny 2020).

Both the European media and European Union (EU) officials consider RT’s COVID-19 coverage disinformation. On 28 September, and then on 16 December 2021, YouTube banned RT’s channels in German (RT DE and its satellites) for spreading false information about COVID-19 (DW 2021b, 2021d).

In this research paper, however, I analyze RT in the context of the complex post-truth media environment, which is replete with a wide range of information, both factually inaccurate and fact-based. RT reflects the Russian government’s geopolitical attitudes. This becomes particularly evident in the difference between how it interprets the Western governments’ policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and how it reports on the steps taken by the Russian authorities to contain the pandemic. The former can be further understood as the mirror-world interpretations of a democracy paradigm writ large.

The present paper examines RT’s main narratives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying strategies of knowledge production as they relate to the origins of the virus, the ways it is transmitted, and its treatment methods.

I have applied the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013), understanding RT’s narratives on COVID-19 as “an integral aspect of power and control” (Bloor and Bloor 2007, p. 4). This approach differs from a qualitative textual analysis that focuses more on intra-textual interpretations while paying less attention to the conditions of their production. CDA therefore goes “beyond a focus on individual sentences and words to consider . . . the broader contexts of usage” (O’Keefe and Papadopoulos 2021, p. 457). In this sense, CDA as a theoretical approach is not only “fully functional, but also much more encompassing and complex” (Şorcaru 2021, p. 222).

Following this principle, at the first stage of analysis I applied the method of continuous sampling to identify all articles on COVID-19 published on Russian, English, French, and German versions of the RT website from March 2020 to October 2021 and containing such basic tag words as #COVID-19, #corona, #pandemic (and the derivative word combinations such as “coronavirus”, “SARS-CoV-2”, etc.). After the initial screening, only analytical articles, interviews, and op-eds related to the four countries under consideration were included in the research sample. Then, each article was analyzed from the point of view of describing anti-COVID-19 measures in the domestic and foreign political contexts of Russia, France, Germany, and the UK. As a result, the semantical hubs consisting of “chains of equivalences” of interpretations of democracy, freedom, human rights, illiberalism, lockdown, vaccination, health pass, were revealed. I paid special attention to the political and social positions of the authors of the articles, aiming to uncover any hidden contexts (Şorcaru 2021; Sowden et al. 2021).

The paper is structured as follows: the introductory part outlines the principal research puzzle, which is followed by an in-depth analysis of biopolitical concepts of government, responsibility, and resilience as applied to the COVID-19 crisis, including methodological concepts related to modern knowledge production. I then address RT's COVID-19 narratives "at home" and "abroad" to reveal the variety of biopolitical responses and strategies in its post-truth representations.

2. Biopolitical Government and Post-Truth Production in Times of the COVID-19 Crisis

According to a biopolitical perspective, the concept of government, or—using the Foucauldian term "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 2009)—is "more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors" (Dean 2009, p. 18).

Government is a form of power that explores the idea that those who are governed have some freedom in acting and thinking, and thus are capable of self-government (Dean 2009, p. 21). The ways we are "governed and through which we govern ourselves" (Dean 2009, p. 28) are the "regimes of practices", and the more they are (post)liberalist-oriented, the more they are "distinguished by trying to work through the freedom or capacities of the governed" and "often conceive the freedom of the governed as a technical means of securing the ends of government" (Dean 2009, p. 23). Rationality lies at the root of the liberal government, and its ultimate biopolitical objective is to optimize the population (and its health, wealth, demography, etc.) (Dean 2009, pp. 28–30). To put it differently, biopolitics is a "set of technologies, of power aimed at governing populations by installing security mechanisms fostering life" (Mavelli 2017, p. 499).

Under force majeure circumstances, caused by pandemics, wars, or natural disasters governments tend to suspend social and personal freedoms. Pandemics are a "biopolitical nightmare", as "governments face the exclusive responsibility of securing biological life (zoe), revealing the non-biological life (bios), reduced to economy, politics, culture, as a secondary priority" (Serban 2021, p. 73). In other words, when a deadly virus is spread by people through social interaction, an individual human body becomes the main threat to public health and should be controlled by sovereign power.

This is what Giorgio Agamben and scholars who follow him (Hage 2020; Walby 2020; Martin et al. 2019) mean by the totalitarian potential of biopower, which uses the emergency state for its extension and "articulates sovereignty by maximising mechanisms of control and surveillance" (Serban 2021, p. 74). This line of argumentation refers to a "dark" side of biopolitical government while appealing to a neoliberal understanding of a resilient and responsible subject.

According to Foucault, biopolitics aims to create a neoliberal subject whose personal resilience to competition and inequality guarantees a reproduction of collective order (Mavelli 2017, p. 496). Seen from this perspective, a personal capacity to adapt to the neoliberal market stems from one's responsibility to manage life's challenges and be self-reliant (Siltaoja et al. 2014; Pyysiäinen et al. 2017).

As the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated, the idea of a responsible subject has been widely applied both by liberal and illiberal regimes, as they varied their COVID-19 scenarios from protectionism to exploring the ideology of "sink or swim" (Antal 2021; Giritli Nygren and Olofsson 2020; Gjerde 2021).

Therefore, some suggest that a classical Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics should not be reduced to the "dimension of neoliberalism" (Mavelli 2017, p. 495); instead, we could rather observe the post-liberal technologies of shared responsibility between individuals, governments, and non-governmental actors (Makarychev and Romashko 2021).

Here, one could see the "light" side of the modern biopolitics in times of crisis as bringing social development due to "raising resilient societies in the name of life" and safety (Serban 2021, p. 75). Lorenzini supposes it should be "a politics of differential

vulnerability” that “structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing and multiplying vulnerability as a means of governing people” (Lorenzini 2020, pp. 73–74). A “positive” biopolitics conceives individuals in the necessity of political measures from a pragmatic perspective as a reasonable compromise and the “justificatory thought” (Serban 2021, pp. 77–78).

The idea of the convincing action brings us back to the issue of (post)liberal rationality and knowledge production.

On the one hand, rationalities define our way of thinking, reasoning, and responding to problems, and might be guided by expert knowledge. On the other hand, the regimes of government produce knowledge that we could consider the “truth” “about our existence and nature as human beings” (Dean 2009, p. 27). Along with rationality, our “mentality of rule” could include irrational “truth” and draw upon fears, emotions, and mythology (Dean 2009, p. 25).

As far as our information environment has been progressively transforming towards what could be described as the “post-truth” condition, the influence of irrationality on knowledge production continues to grow.

According to Malcolm (2021), Lockie (2017), and Blackburn (2018), the post-truth mode of knowledge is characterized by four key features, including (1) expressing preference for emotions over facts in shaping personal beliefs and public debates; (2) making truth relative, meaning that the political statements and scientific positions are manipulated by the knowledge producers (Lockie 2017); (3) issuing contradictory political statements without incurring reputational damage in the case of exposing factually wrong statements (Blackburn 2018); and (4) the polarization of views, which fuels “conspiracy theories” (Malcolm 2021, pp. 1063–64).

In times of crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, growing the uncertainty of scientific knowledge leads directly to increasing social anxiety, “fear of the loss of control and security intrinsic to neoliberal governance”, and a biopolitization of responsabilization—the latter can take multiple forms. In terms of knowledge production, this entails a redistribution of power and control over the production and interpretation of COVID-19 knowledge (Kwok et al. 2021).

This might also indicate a collapse and erosion of the (post)liberal discourse on responsibility and resilience, which creates an opportunity for its resignification by political opponents. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Russian state post-truth media outlets use this tactic to display the biopolitics of COVID-19 to criticize democracy and project self-description.

3. COVID-19 Responses in Russia and Europe

France, Germany, the UK, and Russia each had to grapple with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including nationwide lockdowns, mass vaccination campaigns, the introduction of a “health pass”, and protests by anti-vax movements.

According to Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, as of 28 January 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic had claimed 131,008 lives in France, 177,488 in Germany, and 155,561 in the UK (Coronavirus Resource Center 2022). Russian authorities officially registered 329,443 deaths from COVID-19 as of 26 January 2022 (StopKoronavirus.rf 2022); however, Russian independent agency Mediazona reported an anomalously high excess mortality from COVID-19, which by the beginning of January reached 1,020,791 deaths (Frenkel and Kheifets 2022)¹.

Notwithstanding these numbers, Russia’s anti-COVID-19 measures could be characterized as relatively “soft” in the early stage of pandemic, especially in comparison with those of France, Germany, and the UK, where several nationwide lockdowns were introduced with varying degrees of restrictions over the past two years. In contrast, in Russia, since the outset of COVID-19, the authorities imposed only one one-month nationwide lockdown in spring 2020.

Despite being the first to register a COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, in August 2020, Russia has been lagging behind Europe with regard to mass vaccination ([Euronews 2020](#)). As of 26 January 2022, only 52.06% of Russia's population had received their first jab ([Minfin 2022](#)). By 27 January, 78.4% of France's population had received a complete schedule of vaccinations ([Gouvernement.fr 2022](#)). As of 28 January 2022, Germany and the UK had 73.8% ([Impfdashboard.de 2022](#)) and 84% ([Coronavirus.data.gov.uk 2022](#)) of their populations fully vaccinated, respectively.

The widespread public mistrust in government and skepticism towards Sputnik V could be pointed to as two significant factors behind the unwillingness of many Russians to get vaccinated ([Dettmer 2021](#)). Another factor was President Vladimir Putin's insistence on a hands-off approach, as he delegated authority for managing COVID-19 to the regional authorities in each of the 85 subjects that comprise the Russian Federation ([Stronski 2021](#)). This has led to instances when local authorities sometimes underreport COVID-19 statistics to avoid angering the federal government ([Cordell 2020](#)). After spreading disinformation to discredit Western vaccines through its propaganda channels, the Russian government now finds itself in a bind, as it has to contend with the vigorous anti-vaxxer movement at home ([Stolyarov 2021](#)).

France also witnessed a series of large-scale protests throughout the summer of 2021, with the turnout at rallies against the mandatory vaccination and introduction of the "health pass" consistently reaching 200 thousand across the country ([BFMTV 2021](#)). However, as the mass vaccination picked up pace in France throughout 2021, the turnout at these rallies steadily declined ([Le Point 2021](#)).

Like France, Germany also experienced a large-scale anti-COVID-19 protests that sometimes even turned violent ([Reuters 2021a](#)). Having Europe's biggest economy with correspondingly vast financial reserves allowed the German authorities to mitigate the social tensions stemming from COVID-19 by launching a number of assistance programs targeting those whose livelihoods were affected by the pandemic the most. However, another spike in new coronavirus cases in late 2021 prompted the authorities to increase restrictions for unvaccinated people by denying them access to most public venues as well as a re-articulated governmental discussion on compulsory vaccination, which further fueled mounting the dissatisfaction of anti-vaxxers ([BBC News 2021](#)).

The UK was the first Western country to commence a mass vaccination campaign in December 2020 ([NPR 2020](#)). However, Boris Johnson's cabinet has been reluctant to introduce compulsory vaccination as it fears public backlash, which already followed the introduction of the National Health Service (NHS) COVID Pass in May 2021. The anger of the anti-vaxxer community in the UK grew after the authorities put in place restrictions that deny access to certain venues, including nightclubs, to those who do not have the proof of vaccination. The spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant in late 2021 worsened the situation, which was also compounded by the lack of coordination between the NHS authorities in the constituent parts of UK—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Unlike Germany, Russia has never formally proposed mandatory mass vaccination, as stated by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his interview on 21 October 2021 ([Interfax.ru 2021](#)). Anti-COVID-19 vaccination is mandatory in Russia only for certain professional occupations and age groups (such as medical workers, policemen, military forces), which is similar to the situation in France, Germany, and the UK. Russian regional authorities, however, can apply their own "no jab, no job" policy, including mandatory vaccination for students ([RG.ru 2021](#)).

From January 2021, vaccinated Russian citizens can obtain the so-called "vaccination passport", which is available in a QR-code format and which, until November 2021, was used only for international travel. Starting from 12 November 2021, due to spikes in new COVID-19 cases, QR-codes were required in a number of Russian regions for visiting cultural and sport venues, for using shopping malls, and for traveling on public transport ([RBC.ru 2022](#)). Similar requirements for a "health pass" were introduced by France, the

UK, and Germany during summer–fall 2021, but they did not entail the use of a “health pass” on public transport ([Government.fr 2021](#); [France24 2021](#); [NHS 2022](#)).

Thus, despite a number of important differences among them, Russia, France, Germany, and the UK generally followed the anti-COVID-19 guidelines issued by the World Health Organization, including the most important one—mass vaccination.

To put it differently, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that three Western democratic states and authoritarian Russia surprisingly shared basic attitudes typically exhibited by neo-liberal governments and grounded in scientific knowledge, rationality, and responsibility. Some scholars have indeed suggested that Russia is a hybrid regime, one that combines a technocratic and largely depoliticized neoliberal model of governance with a strong emphasis on exercising sovereignty ([Makarychev et al. 2020](#)).

As I demonstrate in the next section, RT’s narratives concerning the COVID-19 crisis in Russia explicitly illustrate this argument when interpreting the neoliberal concept of (self)responsibility through a biopolitical vocabulary.

4. Responsibilization a-la Russe: Be a Patriot and Get Vaccinated

There are two main themes in RT’s Russian-language discourse on COVID-19.

The first one focuses on COVID-19 vaccination in Russia and is semantically built around the (neo)liberal concept of responsibility. The second one refers to the geopolitical endeavors of the Russian vaccination policy. This section addresses the first issue, seen as a part of the Kremlin’s biopolitical project, which defines the Russian nation in terms of family, blood bonds, love, and patriotism and which is grounded in the feeling of personal loyalty to the sovereign power ([Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018](#)).

From this vantage point, patriotism implies an individual’s readiness to use his or her body for the protection of the collective whole: hence, being a Russian patriot entails bearing responsibility for the nation’s survival. Here, the liberal concept of self-responsibility receives (neo)liberal resignification, since it is not a sovereign but an individual actor who should take care of herself and the population.

In its coverage of COVID-19 in Russia, RT builds the “chain of equivalence” ([Laclau 2007](#)) between the meanings of patriotism, responsibility, rationality, and vaccination.

According to RT:

“Vaccination from coronavirus is indeed patriotism, as it represents healthy and wise position. Without these pathetic requirements to change and improve one’s life at the expense of happiness of others (for instance, bureaucrats’). If you do not vaccinate, then at least have courage to admit that you are doing this out of fear, unrestrained fear in front of the unknown, so don’t hide behind noble causes and feigned rationalized approach” ([Ryabtseva 2021d](#)).

RT normalizes anti-COVID-19 vaccination ([Ryabtseva 2020](#)), pointing out that this is how “all civilized countries” (both United States and Israel are mentioned in this context for added emphasis) act and that the vaccine will not only protect one’s own health, but also provide one with the freedom to travel and live ([Ryabtseva 2021b](#)). An argument that RT uses when appealing to the self-consciousness of its audience could be understood as an example of neoliberal biopolitical discourse.

“Conscientious person does not blow his or her nose on the pavement, does not kick a dog, does not shout profanities at children and does not throw trash on the road, but sorts it, such a person does not think that his or her duties are limited to taking care of himself or herself, his or her family and home” ([Ryabtseva 2021c](#)).

Moreover, an educated (that is, self-governed) member of society, according to RT, is able to approach the necessity of limitation of her freedom due to a state of emergency with understanding and take social responsibility for her own conduct in fighting the pandemic ([Ryabtseva 2021c](#)). Following this logic, Russian sovereign power neither suppresses human rights nor forces the population to respect anti-COVID-19 restrictions; instead, it allows those who abide by them (and thus self-discipline their bodies) to live a full-fledged

life (Ryabtseva 2021c). Hence, the anti-COVID-19 measures are permissive rather than restrictive according to RT (Ryabtseva 2021e).

A neoliberal biopolitical discourse generates illiberal implications in RT's definition of the "others", including vaccine deniers and COVID-19 dissidents in Russia. To label these groups, RT employs de-humanizing (they are "zombies") (Ryabtseva 2021e) and criminalizing (they are "fascists" (Ryabtseva 2021g), "terrorists" (Ryabtseva 2021a), and "murderers of children" (Ryabtseva 2021f) terminology that refers to a "dark" side of biopolitical government.

This vocabulary makes Russia's discourse on "biopolitical others" remarkably similar to the populist rhetoric embedded in the far-right conspiracy theories, since the latter paradoxically apply identical arguments to oppose the anti-COVID-19 measures. Moreover, biopolitical hate speech characterizes the Kremlin's discursive regime (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018), and it noticeably colors RT's criticism of anti-vaxxers.

In contrast with the government's neoliberal narrative of COVID-19, which is rooted in rationality and scientific knowledge, a biopolitical populist discourse draws its strength from appealing to emotions, fears, and feelings of anxiety. All of these elements can be found in the RT's narratives on COVID-19 in Europe, in which the key concept is not responsibility but resilience.

5. Biopolitical Scenarios "Abroad": "Threatening" Democracy Resilience

If in Russian RT's COVID-19 stories anti-vaxxers and COVID-19 dissidents were exemplified as social enemies and deviants, RT's coverage of responses to the pandemic by French, German, and British governments feature them as heroes and human rights defenders. This approach can be explained by RT's overall critical position vis à vis Western democracies writ large. As Audinet (2017) points out, "The RT team have mastered the art of turning propaganda accusations to their advantage. They allow it to strengthen its identity as an 'anti-system' media and to channel contested audiences by playing the 'one against all' card" (Audinet 2017, p. 7).

This makes RT popular among those who consistently oppose the government policies of European countries from both left and right, including radical movements and marginal public figures. RT as a news media channel not only increases the public visibility of these groups but contributes to their identity-building, thus making them more politically substantial.

In terms of post-truth approach, RT portrays the COVID-19 crisis in Europe as fostering chaos and uncertainty while exposing state mismanagement. In so doing, it aims to undermine the neoliberal discourse centered on self-responsibility through evoking irrationality and negative emotions. In this context, RT accuses democratic governments of abusing power, lacking responsibility, and suppressing human rights. Should not we fight for our rights and democratic resilience, which means opposing the policies of the current governments, asks RT rhetorically.

The biopolitical response to COVID-19 that RT displays in its French, English, and German versions could be described as a biopolitical scenario based on coercion, which RT juxtaposes against a biopolitical scenario based on conviction—which, according to RT, the Russian state applies domestically.

For instance, RT Français reproduced this technique in covering the anti-vax protests that engulfed France in 2021. The key message conveyed by RT Français to its French audience was the relentless criticism of the French authorities for coercing people to vaccinate *en masse*. Even though the anti-vaxxers in France represent a tiny but vocal minority, RT Français falsely portrayed them as being a sizeable segment of the population.

This effect was created through (a) in-depth coverage of all anti-vaxxer protests (RT Français 2021i); (b) personal accounts provided by seemingly "ordinary people", including "experts" and "professionals" (such as doctors (RT Français 2021a, 2021o), scientists, lawyers (RT Français 2021r), journalists, politicians (RT Français 2021q), and civil activists (RT Français 2021s, 2021g)), most of who, in fact, come from the political fringes of French

society; and (c) human interest stories about individual entrepreneurs (RT Français 2021d, 2021w), municipal workers (RT Français 2021v), artists, or NGO representatives and trade union activists (RT Français 2021c, 2021t, 2021j, 2021x, 2021k, 2021z).

To present France as a country in crisis caused by corrupt and incompetent government, RT Français has employed negative word combinations such as “Macron—dictatorship” (RT Français 2021a), “Macron—health coup,” (RT Français 2021e) “abuse of power—health pass,” (RT Français 2021f, 2021m), “Macron—country—fire and blood,” (RT Français 2021b), “health pass- alert—defender of rights” (RT Français 2021u), “Castex—killing France”(RT Français 2021h), etc.

The picture of social crisis in France was colored by reporting on incidents of vandalism targeting vaccination centers (RT Français 2021ab), examples of hate speech in banners carried during anti-vaxxer protests (such as racist and anti-Semitic symbols (RT Français 2021p), including the use of a yellow star (RT Français 2021y) and a billboard depicting Macron as Hitler (RT.com 2021c)).

As compared with RT Français, RT DE criticized mass vaccination in a different manner. This discussion was mostly presented by the Querdenken (Lateral Thinking) group, a heterogeneous German grass-rooted anti-COVID-19 restrictions movement that consists of far-right radicals; conspiracy theorists (DW 2021c; Connor 2020; Frei and Nachtwey 2021; Perrone 2021); left-wing activists; and self-proclaimed “experts” in medicine, law, and politics (RT DE 2021f).

With this purpose, RT DE gave the floor to politicians from both the left and right who refused to vaccinate and justified doing so by their “personal right to freedom,” such as, for instance, the Deputy Minister-President of Bavaria Hubert Aiwanger. According to him, it is more about “a personal right to freedom” rather than a discussion between vaccinated and unvaccinated people, which could quickly descend into a debate about the apartheid (RT DE 2021f).

Other examples of “self-explanatory” combinations of keywords that RT DE used in its COVID-19 coverage included “lockdown abolishes fundamental rights to the inviolability of home and body (RT DE 2021b), “pseudo-pandemic” (RT DE 2020a, 2020b), “an incredibly great crime” (RT DE 2021c), “brainwashing” (RT DE 2021g), “covidiot”, “abuse of power” (RT DE 2021e), etc.

According to the British version of RT, COVID-19 lockdowns, mandatory vaccination and the “vaccine passport” (or the “health pass”) are parts of a global plot by politicians and IT, health, and media organizations to normalize the public health emergency in order to establish closer control over the population (Clark 2020, 2021; RT.com 2021a).

This conspiracy theory is championed by Piers Corbyn, a brother of Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of the UK Labor party, who was one of the faces of British anti-lockdown and anti-vax protests (RT UK 2020; RT.com 2021e, 2021f, 2021g) in 2020–2021. Piers Corbyn, who participated in the London mayoral election, is widely known for his statement on the negative impacts of compulsory vaccination on women’s fertility (Lott-Lavigna 2020). Despite the fact that RT UK mentions Corbyn as a “conspiracy theorist”, “sceptic”, and “controversial campaigner,” (RT.com 2020), it consistently emphasizes the peaceful nature of his protest, as well as the peacefulness of the anti-COVID protests in the UK in general. At the same time, RT UK accuses the British government of violating fundamental human rights (RT.com 2021d) and warning of a “COVID apartheid” targeting those who refuse to get vaccinated (Allan 2021).

Another post-truth strategy that RT uses in its narration on COVID-19 in Europe concerns knowledge production. In times of extraordinary public health emergency, population demands trustworthy scientific knowledge, and its deficit and uncertainty lead to social anxiety and destabilization. RT exploits this vulnerability by disseminating many controversial and often pseudo-scientific views on COVID-19.

The most eloquent examples of this can be found in the RT Français coverage of the controversial French physician and microbiologist, Dr. Didier Raoult (RT Français 2021aa, 2021l, 2021n). In RT DE’s case, the same can be said about the statements of Dr. Matthias

Schrappe and Sucharit Bhakdi. Both are well known for their virulent opposition to the anti-COVID-19 measures: Schrappe accused the German authorities of manipulating the medical data (RT DE 2021i, 2021j, 2021f, 2021d), while Bhakdi, a retired Thai–German microbiologist and prominent QAnon conspiracy theorist espousing anti-Semitic views (Cohen 2021), stated that vaccination was a “huge experiment” and that the pandemic was fake (RT DE 2021a). Interestingly, his interview posted by RT DE on its YouTube channel became RT DE’s most-watched COVID-19-related video, garnering more than two million views before YouTube deleted RT DE’s channel on 28 September 2021 for spreading disinformation about COVID-19 (Reuters 2021b).

Yet, not all medical information circulated by RT and focused on the criticism of authorities is necessarily inaccurate. There are instances when medical professionals express personal opinions such as the case of a doctor worked for the UK’s National Health Service who complained that Facebook censored his posts on the COVID-19 mortality rate (RT.com 2021b).

What makes this discourse socially subversive is that it is scientifically omnivorous and, in addition, RT cloaks it in the argument of being in support of “freedom of expression”. In the words of RT DE, it provides the visibility to those who “come up” with conspiracy theories and then “gives people the chance to decide for themselves” (RT DE 2021h).

This rhetoric is a good illustration of RT’s post-truth strategies as not necessarily producing exclusively fake news but rather filling the familiar concepts such as “human rights”, “freedom”, or “conspiracy theories” with hybrid meanings. This process can be further understood through “empty signifiers”, or language games, as they relate to Putin’s discourse (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017).

6. Conclusions

This paper uncovers the explanatory potential of the post-truth theory and a biopolitical approach to COVID-19. It demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, authoritarian regimes such as Putin’s Russia can successfully utilize a (neo)liberal mode of governance both as a policy tool and as a system of conduct. As the analysis of COVID-19 management in Russia, France, the UK, and Germany has shown, despite considerable differences in the anti-pandemic measures applied by each of these countries, all four have prioritized mass vaccination.

This attitude was reflected in RT’s domestic coverage of COVID-19 for the Russian audience, as it referred to the neoliberal concepts of self-responsibility, rationality, and knowledge. What made this discourse different from the Western one, however, was its biopolitical language of “others”—vaccine deniers and COVID-19 dissidents—who were described by RT in de-humanizing and criminalizing terms.

The latter brings together the Kremlin discourse on COVID-19 dissidents and the Western COVID-19 rhetoric of far-right forces. The paper unveils their semantic kinship in RT’s narratives on COVID-19 in Europe, which targeted democratic governments for suspending human rights and questioned the future resilience of democracies.

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Note

¹ When mentioning the number of COVID-19 deaths, I refer to data accumulated by the reliable sources using transparent methods of data collection (such as Johns Hopkins University’s Coronavirus Resource Center). However, taking into account the inaccuracy of Russia’s official reports on COVID-19-related deaths, I cross-referenced Russia’s official data with those provided by a reputed non-state-supported media outlet (Mediazona).

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