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In 1991, the Soviet Union imploded and a ‘third wave’ of liberal democracy was supposedly advancing. (The first wave was the expansion of the franchise in the nineteenth century, the second decolonisation after 1945). Not just in the former communist world, but amongst former client states of the Cold War, where autocrats could no longer rely on being propped up by Moscow or Washington. Academic fashion shifted from defining the preconditions of democracy, and setting a pretty high barrier, to an analysis of decision-making. With the right moves, any country could become a democracy. Thirty years later, not only was democracy long dead in Russia; its previously unthinkable demise was feared in the United States and elsewhere.

What did these erosions of democracy in places as disparate as Russia, the United States, Hungary and India have in common? This book is about a different type of decision-making: not round-tables to introduce democracy, but political manipulation to dismantle or undermine democracy. And it is about political manipulation under an unfamiliar name – political technology. The term originates in Russia, where it is ubiquitous and readily understood. Political technology is how elections are fixed; it is about how propaganda is organised; it is how neighbouring states are undermined. The ubiquity of political technology has created a system where everything political is totally controlled, and all politicians are actors. Its efficacy has made political technology the leading edge of Russian foreign policy, infecting neighbours and rival powers alike. But the argument of this book is that political technology is also shaping politics throughout the world. Others may not use the term in the same way as in Russia, but it is there without being named. Moreover, there are many common types of political manipulation – many of the same plays, if not necessarily the same complete playbook – and this book aims to provide a typology. What Russians call the use of ‘administrative resources’ to control the vote, is ‘voter suppression’ in the West. Manipulating the news agenda to change the story is ‘switching the tracks’ (*perevod strelki*) in Russian, and ‘wagging the dog’ or ‘dead cat’ in the West. The spin

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doctor in the West is the *stsenarist* in Russia, meaning scene-writer or scene-setter. *Vbrosy*, ‘toss-in’ stories, fake drama or arresting emotional attention-grabbers, are now *wrzutki* in Poland, or in America, well, that would be Donald Trump’s one-time Twitter account.

What Is Political Technology?

I asked some Russian acquaintances for their definition of political technology. According to analyst Valery Solovey, it is ‘the methods, means and techniques of realising politics’.¹ ‘In essence, politics as the art of power cannot be separated from the means and methods of achieving the goal. Means and ends become practically one and the same’.² The definition of the leading Ukrainian expert Georgiy Pocheptsov, who might have been expected to be more critical, is that political technology is any ‘way of organising information, semantic and human resources to achieve political goals’.³ For Russian political scientist Vladimir Gelman, ‘political technology is a complex set of actions, aimed at achievement of certain political goals through making an effect on changing behaviour of some political actors (elites, leaders, parties, etc.) and/or of mass public, who would behave otherwise without the use of political technology’.⁴

All of these definitions include and instrumentalise almost everything political. In Russian, the two words in ‘political technology’ are without nuance, and imply an obvious pair. Politics is technology. The two words are practically synonyms. All politics is manipulation. This is not true; not all politics is manipulation. But there are words missing in English, elements that are not clear from the literal translation. And defining all politics as political technology doesn’t get us very far. It doesn’t define a new subject for study. However, it does tell us that Russians are cynical if they view all politics as manipulation. This is also often the world-view of political technologists themselves – but, again, that is circular.

There are academic definitions, if not of political technology, then of political manipulation. Geoffrey Whitfield, for example, posits two political subjects. Then ‘an act of manipulation is any intentional attempt by an agent (A) to cause another agent (B) to will/prefer/intend/act other than what A takes B’s will, preference or intention to be, where A does so utilizing methods that obscure and render deniable A’s intentions vis

¹ Message on Facebook, 5 October 2020.

² Message on Facebook, 12 October 2020.

³ Interview with Georgiy Pocheptsov, via Facebook, 16 September 2018.

⁴ E-mail from Gel’man, 1 October 2020.

a vis B'.⁵ A might prevail over B in decision-making, in agenda-setting, or by manipulating what B actually wants.⁶ Political technology has this type of manipulation of political subjects at its core, but it is also the whole broader process of engineering the political environment to shape the decisions of B – the ordinary citizen or voter.

So my definition is that political technology is not the same thing as politics. Political technology is that part of politics which views politics as (mere) technology. It sees politics as artifice, manipulation, engineering or programming. Some forms of political programming might be neutral or broadly positive. The Arab Spring in 2011 initially promised online empowerment, which many saw again in the 'first social media war',⁷ Russia against Ukraine in 2022. Aleksey Navalny's 'smart voting' campaign in the 2021 Russian elections – if your party is banned, vote for the least bad Kremlin party – was a type of political engineering. So in this book, political technology is defined as malign: engineering the system in the service of partisan interests, narrow minorities, oligarchies or captured states. Political technology is political engineering that is dark and covert, non-transparent and often fraudulent.

The shortest definition of political technology would therefore be the supply-side engineering of the political system for partisan interests. Democracy is supposed to be all about demand. Direct or representative democracy is about the expression or articulation of popular demand. Political technology, on the other hand, aims to shape, control, channel or fake popular demand. Political technology creates artificial structures. In Russia and many other post-Soviet states, it means that the entire party and political system is engineered and scripted. In the United States, it means that parties and politicians are not the primary political actors they should be; that role is increasingly taken over by an artificial universe of Political Action Committees, dark money and astroturfing or artificial grass-roots campaigns. Politicians knowingly dive into that world for the services they need, but they are increasingly just frontmen and women.

Political technology is not an organic part of politics or a natural offshoot. Its biological metaphor is a virus. Political technology enters the body politic from the outside. Its mechanical metaphor is leverage. Political technology is a post-modern adaption of the traditional Trotskyist

⁵ Geoffrey Whitfield, 'On the concept of political manipulation', *European Journal of Political Theory*, June 2020.

⁶ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, (London: Macmillan, 1974).

⁷ Peter Suci, 'Is Russia's Invasion of Ukraine the First Social Media War?', *Forbes*, 1 March 2022; www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2022/03/01/is-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-the-first-social-media-war/

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tactic of entryism – the infiltration of a party or institution by outsiders seeking to take over a weakened host or subvert its purpose for their own. Political technology is the engineering version of Gramsci’s ‘long march through the institutions’ – but no longer a gradual process of infiltration by individuals, but the applications of jump leads.

Political technology is professional. It is organised. Political technologists work as individuals, in companies and for the state. Brexit and Trump triumphed in 2016 because they exploited conspiracy theories: but many attributed their success to actual conspirators, like Cambridge Analytica, Steve Bannon or Russia. Certainly, there are dangers in accepting the myth of all-powerful covert actors like Cambridge Analytica at face value – not its public face, but the face it was all too happy to present to clients in private, of a master manipulator company for hire. Individuals and individual companies are not all-powerful; they will come and go or sell snake oil. The idea that Cambridge Analytica was solely responsible for Brexit or Trump’s election is a comfort blanket for many liberals. But there is truth in the broader point: there are companies like Cambridge Analytica proliferating everywhere. And they are political technology operations. According to former employee turned whistle-blower Christopher Wylie, ‘it’s incorrect to call Cambridge Analytica a purely sort of data science company, or an algorithm, you know, company; it is a full-service propaganda machine’.⁸ In this book, we will hear about the Foundation for Effective Politics in Russia, Silver Touch in India, Webegg and Casaleggio Associates in Italy and Black Cube in Israel. There are hundreds of companies throughout the world that meet the above definitions of political technology. There are huge numbers of more shadowy operations, not necessarily organised under a single company roof. The Oxford Internet Institute, looking just at ‘formal organisations ... using social media algorithms to distribute disinformation’, and not at my broader definition of political technology companies, found them in 28 countries in 2017, 48 in 2018, 70 in 2019⁹ and 81 in 2020.¹⁰ This book will examine the myth and reality of powerful political

⁸ From Wylie’s interview in Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, ‘Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach’, *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018; www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election

⁹ Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 139.

¹⁰ Samantha Bradshaw, Hannah Bailey and Philip N. Howard, ‘Industrialized Disinformation 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation’, *OII*, 2020; <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/01/CyberTroop-Report-2020-v.2.pdf>

technologists, notorious individual fixers in many countries: Gleb Pavlovsky and Vladislav Surkov in Russia, Steve Bannon and Roger Stone in the United States, Gábor Kubatov and Árpád Habony in Hungary. Collectively, there is a growing market for manipulation services that politicians and private interests are prepared to pay for, and which, crudely enough, work.

But the globalisation of political technology is more important than particular notorious companies or individuals. It would also be a mistake to focus too much on pure technology. We have got used to hearing about trolls, bots, micro-targeting and AI, but these are all just tools of the trade. The trade is what matters – and there is a booming trade out there, a whole political culture of manipulating political culture, that has been developing since long before Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, before the fake news tsunami over Ukraine in 2014 and before the introduction of the smartphone in 2007. Russia has had what it calls political technology since at least the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. America has had ‘political consulting’ since the 1970s – but ‘consulting’ is a woefully out-of-date label for the range of manipulation services available in the free market wholesale bazaar of American politics. There are many studies of political consulting, but none that look systematically at those parts of the political consulting business that fit the definition of political technology given above. Political ‘technologists’ and political ‘consultants’ are often doing the same things. They do more than just play a role in politics; they seek to shape the architecture, the tectonics, and the toolkit of politics. They mould the narratives that drive politics. A political technologist is everything: according to Russian political technologist Aleksey Sitnikov, they are ‘campaign manager + political consultant + PR’.¹¹ Political technology is more than ‘spin’. ‘Spin-doctor’ was pretty accurate in the bygone era when the aim was to influence how the media writes about politics, rather than create political realities themselves. ‘Spin’ was only a precursor to political technology. But we don’t have a good definition in the West for what came after spin.

Political technology in Russia and political consulting in the West increasingly interact. American political consultants have been working abroad since the 1970s and 1980s. There was blowback: winning elections and reputation laundering for disreputable clients in the developing world changed the nature of politics back home. As did interacting with the post-communist world from the 1990s onwards. In the words of one observer of both worlds the journalist Vladislav Davidzon, ‘in the post-Cold War context, American capitalist consultants and political

¹¹ Aleksey Sitnikov, 9 February 2021.

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operatives began to both teach and learn new skill sets from their post-Soviet patrons and it morphed into a mutually clientelistic relationship'.¹²

One thesis of this book is that what is called political consultancy increasingly uses the techniques of political technology; both at home and abroad. Not everything is political technology. Political technology is not why everything happens. Political technology is only one part of the world of normal politics. But in that world, the amount of artifice and engineering is on the increase. At different rates in different places: Russia and (almost) Hungary are countries completely taken over by political technology. America went to the brink with the Capitol insurrection in January 2021.

Not every political consultant in the West would meet my definition of engaging political technology. The normal business of politics, such as campaigning, building and marketing political parties, is not political technology. Organising astroturfing or voter suppression is. Conversely, because the Russian definition is too broad, not everything political in Russia is political technology. Building a normal political party is not political technology. In fact, political technology often competes with real politics and seeks to displace it.

Three Types of Virtual Politics

Political technology involves three types of engineering, creating three types of virtual politics. First, political subjectivity can be engineered. Political technology in Russia in the 1990s began by creating virtual subjects to compete with the real, fake and manipulated parties and politicians.¹³ Next those virtual subjects were placed and moved in virtual political geometry. Political technologists increasingly controlled the rules of interaction and the overall script. The virtual defeated the real. So that finally all key political subjects – the left, the right and centre, government supporters and opposition – were artificial. Some such fakes existed only on TV, online or in social media. Other mediated proxies and surrogates had some life of their own, but it was the mediated reality that led the real-world performance.

If the Russian model is 'theatre politics', the US model can be called proxy politics. The core of the political system is real, but a lot of the moving parts around it are artificial. Real politics is not replaced by theatre but is surrounded by an alternative world of proxies, surrogates and

¹² Interview with Vladislav Davidzon, 22 April 2021.

¹³ Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, (London: Yale University Press, 2005).

fakes, astroturfing or artificial grass-roots, (im)personation and masquerade. The two main political parties, Republicans and Democrats, coexist with the world created by political consultants and outside interests, that both serve and direct the parties. Many of the moving parts in this system are real, but many are artificial. There are two types of artifice. One is the power of money acting through Political Action Committees and other dark money channels. The other is the surrogate universe: since the 1990s the Republican Party has created an outrage machine that combines real groups like the National Rifle Association and Christian fundamentalists alongside astroturf organisations designed to whip up grassroots grievance and anger. This type of political technology is an instrument of partisan or state power, though it can still have feedback loops. The real world can participate in the production of the fake. If an artificial party is successful, people will join it. The #StopTheSteal campaign in America in 2020 has been described as elites ‘inspiring the rank and file to produce false narratives’ of election fraud, ‘and then echo that frame back to them’.¹⁴

The third type of engineering is shaping the narratives that political subjects use and are guided by. Politics has always been about narrative, but because its traditional forms, like ideology, religion or other meta-narratives, are in decline, political technologists have more freedom to shape how people think about politics. In so far as our definition of political technology includes manipulation, this does not include all narrative politics, but narratives that are false, and/or create an impression of popularity of belief or credibility. Political technology, therefore, includes misinformation and disinformation, for which I follow the definitions of Philip Howard of the Oxford Internet Institute (OII). Misinformation is ‘contested information that reflects political disagreement and deviation from expert consensus, scientific knowledge or lived experience’. Disinformation ‘is purposely crafted and strategically placed information that deceives someone – tricks them – into believing a lie or taking action that serves someone else’s political interests’. The OII also talks of junk news, which they define as ‘political news and information that is sensational, extremist, conspiratorial, severely biased, or commentary masked as news’.¹⁵ What makes misinformation or disinformation take off, however, is creating the impression of widespread support or credibility of a particular narrative. This requires delivery systems created by political technology that first launch the narrative, followed by white

¹⁴ From the report ‘The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election’, available inter alia at the *Atlantic Council*, 2 March 2021; www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/the-long-fuse-eip-report-read/

¹⁵ Howard, *Lie Machines*, pp. 14–15.

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streaming, moving narratives into cleaner sources, grey streaming, moving them into ambiguous sources, and mainstreaming, moving narratives into mainstream mass media. Political technology is therefore about lies, but also about ‘lie machines’, which the OII defines as ‘a system of people and technologies that delivers false messages in the service of a political agenda’.¹⁶ Ukrainian practitioner Taras Berezovets’s definition of political technology concentrates on media: ‘a complex of tools to shape public opinion, meddling in the election, often election fraud in order to win campaigns; but especially in media, with half-truth or significant part of lies and manipulation with facts and quotes’.¹⁷

Narratives need boundaries. The third type of virtual politics can be called ‘Matrix politics’. A majority of the population, or a large segment of it, is trapped in a narrative it does not want to or cannot leave. This is not totalitarianism, where all are required to believe. The boundaries of the Matrix are soft; more often derived from the logic of the sect and in-group solidarity than from coercing the ability to leave. The most effective type of narrative capture is structured around one trope that creates an emotionalised us-them narrative: like Fortress Russia, Brexit, or the survival of ‘white America’.

Political technology makes extensive use of media, but it is about more than media. This is why ‘spin’ is only partly political technology (see Chapter 4). Spin is narrative control, one of the three forms of engineering listed above. So spin only scores one out of three. However, if political operators who happen to be called spin doctors also set up artificial structures or subjects, they are more like political technologists. Someone like Roger Stone in America, a self-confessed ‘dirty trickster’, is a political technologist. He has spun opposition research and conspiracy theories. He helped organise the fake ‘Brooks Brothers riot’ in 2000, a bunch of Republican operatives posing as ordinary citizens trying to stop the vote recount in Florida during the Al Gore versus George Bush election. That said, spin is a precursor of political technology, especially in the high age of spin in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Chapter 4). It created an ‘audience democracy’:¹⁸ voters consumed their prepared diet, politics became a solipsistic world where spin doctors chose the subjects and terms of the debate. Other issues were forced off-stage – at least until the populists whom this empowered brought said issues back.

¹⁶ Howard, *Lie Machines*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Message on Facebook, 2 October 2020.

¹⁸ Jos de Beus, ‘Audience Democracy: An Emerging Pattern in Postmodern Political Communication’, in Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer (eds.), *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy*, (London: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 19–38.

Is Political Technology New?

Some would claim that political technology is just a new term for an old phenomenon. The black arts are universal. Power, corruption and lies are an eternal trinity. This book argues that five factors make it new. First, a political service class has grown up alongside conventional politicians and increasingly pulls their strings. The political consulting industry in the United States dates back to the 1930s but mushroomed from the 1970s and in the UK in the 1980s. The political technology industry in Russia developed in the 1990s. All have globalised since. The second factor was the decline of traditional mass politics – of which the rise of the political service class was both cause and effect – creating areas of vacuum for political manipulators to exploit. The third factor was the consequent global cross-fertilisation of techniques and personnel. Not a globalisation of ideologies, but one in service of the twin *raison d'être* of money and victory. Fourth, by the 1990s, political technology was using new technologies that increased reach and effect. A lone propagandist is almost an oxymoron (though individuals can have quite an impact by gaming social media algorithms). Propaganda needs what the OII calls ‘Lie Machines’, which are built by political technology.¹⁹ Fifth is the deep mediatisation of societies that enables this narrative reach, which in the West was largely a post-war phenomenon and in the developing world more often post-millennium.

These five factors in combination have created new potentialities for political manipulation. Many individual technologies discussed in this book have a history. But the use of so much manipulation in combination – the Russian term is *kombinatsiya* – creates something qualitatively different and more pernicious. *Kombinatsiya* creates synergies and is itself one reason why political technology is effective.

The Spread of Political Technology

This book argues that common patterns of political technology can be found throughout the world. Not just troll farms or fake websites, although these are important tools; but whole industries of political manipulation. I suggest four reasons why this is the case. First, political technology can be found in all types of political regimes: authoritarian states, democracies and hybrid regimes. Each type has a different pallet of techniques, but those techniques overlap. Political technologists

¹⁹ Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

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appear in all countries. Some are native and some cross borders. Logically, their number should be fewer in ‘pure’ democratic or authoritarian states and concentrated in the grey zone of deteriorating democracy and imaginative authoritarianism. The two are therefore perhaps becoming more alike, in so far as democracies are increasingly using some of the techniques of autocracy and vice versa. ‘Convergence’ would be the wrong word, however. There is no actual meeting point. So-called ‘smart authoritarian’ states want to stay authoritarian. In deteriorating democracies such techniques are used to win elections and to keep elites in power, but without much thought about the consequences or about where democracy might be headed in the long run.

Second, there are the many channels of globalisation, that determine how given practices emerge in parallel throughout the world or are exported or imported. The globalisation of political technology takes many forms. One possibility is common inspiration, often intellectual. According to the leading Russian political technologist Gleb Pavlovsky: ‘in the ’80s and even in the ’70s, I read translations of American special-ists in propaganda, early ones such as Lippman, Bernays. And I had a very, very vivid interest in how they applied the findings to politics’.²⁰ Pavlovsky also liked to cite the work of James Burnham (1905–87), the elitist American prophet of a society of managers and planners.²¹

A related case would be distance learning; there are many cases of political operators in the West who have studied or admired Russian techniques and imported or adapted them. This type of learning does not have to involve personal contact, although it might; and the learning process could be selective or adaptive. It can also happen in the opposite direction. Russia can learn from the West. Autocracies can copy one another. Democracies can copy from autocracies. Autocracies can copy from democracies. Deteriorating democracies can learn from each other. The Russian government flew in Michal Kosinski, an expert in the ‘psychometrics’ used by Cambridge Analytica, in 2017.²² Cambridge Analytica data was accessed from Russia.²³ When the UK House of

²⁰ ‘Provocateur, Genius, Scoundrel: A Frank Discussion With the Inimitable Gleb Pavlovsky’, *Open Society Institute*, 14 September 2015; www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/provocateur-genius-scoundrel-frank-discussion-inimitable-gleb-pavlovsky-20150914.pdf; edit tidied up by the author.

²¹ Interview with Gleb Pavlovskii, 18 December 2007.

²² Paul Lewis, ‘I was shocked it was so easy’: meet the professor who says facial recognition can tell if you’re gay’, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2018; www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/07/artificial-intelligence-can-tell-your-sexuality-politics-surveillance-paul-lewis

²³ ‘Facebook data gathered by Cambridge Analytica accessed from Russia, says MP’, *The Guardian*, 18 July 2018; www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/18/facebook-data-gathered-by-cambridge-analytica-accessed-from-russia-says-mp-damian-collins