

Spain accuses Russia of interference in the Catalan crisis

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Spain's political establishment is the latest to blame a systemic crisis of rule on Russian meddling—this time in the Catalan independence referendum—and to use such accusations to attack democratic rights.

As elsewhere internationally, it is the erstwhile liberal media—in the shape of the traditionally pro-Socialist Party (PSOE) daily *El País* —that has instigated and led the campaign.

El País has carried out a frenzied and paranoid campaign claiming that the Catalan crisis was not sparked by the Popular Party (PP) government's violent repression of the secessionists, but the result of Moscow and its promotion of “fake news.”

In the space of just two months, the newspaper has published 47 articles linking Russia to the Catalan crisis, five of which are editorials. At the forefront of the campaign is managing editor David Alandete.

Alandete graduated from George Washington University in 2006 with a Masters in International Policy and Practice, thanks to a Fulbright fellowship. He became an accredited journalist in the State Department, the Pentagon and Congress, and covered the court case of whistleblower Chelsea Manning as well as the tenth anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan, while becoming one of the few non-US journalists allowed to visit the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

El País and Alandete began their “fake news” campaign with a September 25 article, “How Russian news networks are using Catalonia to destabilize Europe.”

Just one week before the October 1 independence referendum, the newspaper trumpeted, “In a bid to sow division within the European Union, Russia's online disruption machinery is working at full speed to equate the Catalan crisis to the Crimean or Kurdish conflicts in the eyes of public opinion.”

The evidence it proffered was pro-Kremlin news organisations such as RT, Sputnik and Vzglyad and alleged pro-Russian Twitter accounts that dared to question the crackdown being prepared against the referendum—something *El País* and the other mainstream media in Madrid were fervently demanding the PP government launch, regardless of the consequences.

The following day another article appeared claiming a “detailed analysis of pro-Kremlin websites and social media profiles” had been carried out. In an all-encompassing rogues’ gallery amalgam it decried various Twitter accounts, RT news reports, an army of pro-Russian bots, as well as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, who had all supposedly been working against Spain’s “constitutional legality” in the Catalan crisis.

Since then, *El País* has again and again claimed there is incontrovertible evidence of Russian state interference in the Catalan crisis—a fiction that it hopes, if endlessly repeated, will be established in popular consciousness as a fact.

The fact is that there is no evidence.

El País’ main sources are the pro-US think tank, the Atlantic Council, the Spanish think tank, El Instituto Elcano, which relies on none other than *El País* for its information, and a study conducted by Javier Lesaca, visiting researcher at the School of Media and Public Affairs at Alandete’s alma mater George Washington University and ... also a columnist for *El País*! The study has not been published nor is it mentioned by the university, and the reader has to accept at face value the “advanced software program that makes use of Spanish technology to measure and analyze big data” Lesaca supposedly used in his study.

At first, the PP government ignored *El País*’ claims. At the time, it was hailing Moscow’s support for its clampdown, exemplified by Spanish Ambassador to Russia Ignacio Ibanez Rubio, who declared, “From the very beginning, Russia has recognized that this is an internal affair of our country ... So we are very pleased with Russia’s stand on the crisis in Catalonia.”

But the daily hit back. It published an editorial criticising the PP for ignoring the investigations of the intelligence committee of the US Senate and not displaying “at least publicly—any worry about what could be a direct foreign interference with the aim of destabilizing Spain” amid “the greatest institutional crisis that Spain has experienced in recent decades, a crisis that threatens its territorial integrity.”

Only on November 10, after 18 articles and three editorials from *El País*, did the Spanish government take the hint and itself raise the issue of alleged Russian interference—three days ahead of its attendance at a European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs Council meeting.

Brushing aside evidence from the National Cryptological Center saying it had not detected any foreign state involvement during the Catalan crisis, PP government spokesperson Íñigo Méndez de Vigo and Defense Minister María Dolores de Cospedal launched an attack on Russia.

Méndez declared: “We believe that Europe has to take this issue very seriously. It can’t be that foreign forces, outsiders, whom we don’t know who they are, want to change the constitutional order.”

Cospedal elaborated, “The government has corroborated the fact that many messages and operations that were seen via social networks come from Russian territory.”

The EU, in part using the false claims by Spain, then launched a High-Level Expert Group tasked with discussing “possible future actions to strengthen citizens’ access to reliable and verified information and prevent the spread of disinformation online.” In other words, the EU gave notice that it will now decide what people can read or say online across the continent.

The PSOE also weighed in, convening an urgent session of the National Security Commission in parliament to discuss Russian interference and inviting as guest of honor the Elcano Institute researcher and pro-PP think-tank FAES member, Mira Milosevich.

Milosevich, who is on record for her support of the 2003 Iraq War and the lies about weapons of mass destruction justifying it, concocted a presentation around—in her own words—a “hypothesis” based on Russia’s “previous behaviour” and “Russian official documents.”

Milosevich’s hypothesis amounted to vague and unsubstantiated claims, including: the assertions that “some media have transmitted erroneous information (intentionally or not) on Catalonia”; “The concept of information warfare is in the Russian military doctrine” and that Catalonia supposedly resembles “Previous events in the information warfare during the campaigns of the US presidential elections, the Brexit campaign, and the elections in France and Germany.”

Despite an admission that “There is no material evidence or computer evidence that it was ordered by President Vladimir Putin or by members of his cabinet,” Milosevich’s brazen conclusion was that “Russia is in an information war with Spain.”

Following Milosevich’s contribution, representatives of the PP, PSOE and the right-wing Citizens party stepped up to demand measures to censor critical commentary directed at the Spanish government. They called for Google and other social networks to hide web pages from Russian-influenced sites.

The only party to criticize the National Security Commission was the pseudo-left Podemos, but it did so from the right—attacking the PP for undermining Spain’s international prestige. Its organisation secretary, Pablo Echenique, lamented the telephone prank carried out by two Russian comedians who tricked the Spanish defence minister into believing that deposed Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont was a Russian spy. He called it a “national embarrassment ... a huge inability of our Government to carry out an international policy that does not provoke ridicule outside our borders.”

The Spanish “anti-Russian” campaign serves the same political purpose as that in the US, where what started as Democratic Party efforts to explain its defeat as the result of Russian interference and justify its attempts to overturn Donald Trump’s election as president has evolved into a full-blown clampdown on freedom of expression. Russian news outlets are being targeted for censorship, as part of an ever-wider campaign against any web sites exposing the ruling class narrative on domestic and foreign policy—above all the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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