

“SAPERE AUDE” VS “SOFIA”: THE EPISTEMIC GAP BETWEEN WESTERN AND RUSSIAN CONCEPTS OF TRUTH AS INFORMATION WARFARE FOUNDATION

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Abstract: Western-centric and Russian-centric views of Truth exist in fundamentally different epistemological universes: a cognitive division that stems from the rationalism of the Enlightenment, compared to the Byzantine-Orthodox concept of “Sophia”. The article examines how a clash between the Western concept of Truth as an objective, empirically verifiable search for knowledge through reason

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(Kant, 1784/1996) and Russian epistemology, which places a strong focus on holistic wisdom, spiritual insight, and ideological coherence (Florensky, 1914/1997), causes conflict.

The epistemic gap itself creates structurally open conditions for disinformation tactics and information operations. While rational discourse in the West assumes a commitment to truth-seeking, Russian strategic communication thrives in a paradigm, where Truth is instrumental, subordinated to power, and ultimately pluralistic in Nietzschean terms (Nietzsche, 1873/1979). In part inspired by philosophy (Kant, Heidegger, Foucault), theology (Florensky, Lossky), and security studies (Giles, 2016; Pomerantsev, 2014), the article details the friction between Enlightenment rationality and Slavophile-Eurasianist holism and its impact for the current information threats. In particular, the analysis illustrates how this bifurcation facilitates the adoption of both disinformation tactics and reflexive control techniques (Thomas, 2004) that exploit Western epistemological presuppositions. And familiarity with this gap is crucial for constructing effective response models and enhancing democratic resilience in the face of hybrid threats and interferences.

Keywords: epistemology, information warfare, hybrid threats, disinformation, Sapere Aude, strategic communications.

Introduction

In an era of "post-truth" politics and global information warfare, the very concept of truth has evolved from philosophical abstraction to a geopolitical weapon (Hannan, 2018; McIntyre, 2018). Nowhere is this weaponization more visceral than in the epistemic

collision between Western and Russian strategic cultures, where a clash not merely of narratives, but of fundamentally incommensurable ways of knowing.

The phrase "Sapere aude!" (Dare to know!) famously deployed by Immanuel Kant (1784/1996) and proclaimed as the motto of the Enlightenment, encapsulates the Western exhortation to intellectual courage, beckoning individuals to cast off dogma through critical inquiry, empirical evidence, and autonomous rationality. This is truth conceived as correspondence (Aristotle's *adaequatio*), as progressive revelation through the scientific method, as a universal destination accessible to all reasoning beings. In the Kantian cosmos, truth is emancipatory, it liberates from superstition, from tyranny, from the "self-imposed immaturity" of intellectual dependence (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 17).

Contra this stands "Sofia" (Σοφία) – the symbolic phenomena for the Wisdom in the Russian (and broader Eastern Orthodox) tradition - not as individual conquest but as communal revelation, not as empirical fact-checking and reasoning but as spiritual illumination, not as objective correspondence but as participation in a transcendent reality that encompasses and exceeds mere propositional knowledge (Florensky, 1914/1997; Lossky, 1957). "Sofia" represents a holistic, intuitive, and ultimately ideological truth, one that resists fragmentation, privileges collective memory over individual critique, and subordinates "facts" to higher axiological coherence.

Thus, this semiotic dichotomy of "Sapere Aude" versus "Sofia" symbolises a fundamental epistemic gap, a

civilizational fracture in how truth is understood, pursued, and weaponised. It is not hyperbole to suggest that contemporary information warfare is, at its deepest stratum, an epistemological conflict turned into geopolitics tension. This divergence is not merely an academic curiosity; it has concrete implications for strategic communication, propaganda, and disinformation (Giles, 2016; Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

Analyses of Russia's information operations - from the annexation of Crimea (2014) to interference in Western elections (2016-2024), consistently reveal a strategic culture that treats truth as malleable, pluralistic, and instrumental (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016; Snegovaya, 2015). As Peter Pomerantsev (2014) memorably observed in his seminal work on Russian media manipulation, the Kremlin's approach is encapsulated in the maxim: "Nothing is true and everything is possible" (p. 1).

Russian disinformation and information operations functions not by asserting a counter-truth, but by flooding the information environment (as Steve Bannon also successfully implemented during Donald Trump's first campaign), by proliferating contradictory narratives, sowing radical epistemic uncertainty, and ultimately inducing cognitive exhaustion in target audiences (Rid, 2020). This goes fundamentally against Enlightenment tradition. While the Western approach seeks to persuade through better arguments the opposing concept tends to paralyse critical inquiry through confusion.

Meanwhile, Western strategic communication continues to operate primarily within an Enlightenment paradigm, assuming that truth will prevail if properly communicated, that facts matter, and that audiences are fundamentally rational actors who, when presented with evidence, will adjudicate claims accordingly (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

This article addresses three interrelated Research questions:

RQ 1. What are the philosophical-theological roots of the Western ("Sapere Aude") and Russian ("Sofia") approaches to truth? We trace these lineages through Kant, Heidegger, and Foucault (West) and Florensky, Lossky, and Slavophile-Eurasianist thought.

RQ 2. How do these divergent epistemologies manifest in contemporary strategic communication and information warfare? For answering this question we analyse the operational logic of disinformation and reflexive control (Thomas, 2004), as well as Russia's "new generation warfare" (Gerasimov, 2013), as expressions of a Sofia-inflected instrumentalism that exploits vulnerabilities in the Western Enlightenment.

RQ 3. What are the implications for Western resilience and counter-disinformation strategy? We identify critical blind spots in current Western approaches, particularly the assumption of shared truth commitment, and propose epistemically informed frameworks for enhancing cognitive security.

The central argument is twofold. Firstly, the “Sapere Aude”-“Sofia” divide is not merely descriptive but generative: it actively produces the conditions of possibility for information warfare as we experience it. Russian disinformation succeeds not despite, but because of, its rejection of Enlightenment truth epistemology. Secondly, Western vulnerabilities in the information battlespace are substantially epistemological in nature. Current counter-disinformation efforts (fact-checking, media literacy, algorithmic detection) are necessary but insufficient because they fail to account for the deeper cognitive-cultural assumptions that adversaries exploit (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

This analysis contributes to three bodies of knowledge, expanding philosophy of the information warfare (Floridi, 2014; Fallis, 2015), strategic studies of hybrid conflicts (building on Giles, 2016; Renz & Smith, 2016) and comparative epistemology and its geopolitical implications (synthesizing work by Berlin, 1978; Greenfeld, 1992; Snyder, 2018).

The article in its analysis employs epistemic genealogy - tracing the historical and philosophical emergence of distinct truth regimes and their contemporary political and military consequences (Foucault, 1969/1972), touching continental philosophical traditions (hermeneutics, phenomenology, post-structuralism), theological-cultural analysis (Orthodox thought, Slavophilia, Eurasianism) and strategic studies (in particular information warfare doctrine, hybrid conflict analysis etc.).

The article also proceeds to excavate the philosophical roots of "Sapere Aude", examining Kant's Enlightenment epistemology, its evolution through German idealism and analytic philosophy, and its institutionalization in Western scientific culture. Through this, it identifies core principles: empiricism, falsifiability, correspondence theory, and the democratic assumption. Further analysis explores "Sofia" as a counter-epistemology, analysing Florovsky's (1937) distinction between Western rationalism and Eastern wholeness, the Slavophile rejection of Latin scholasticism, Solovyov's (1874/1996) concept of integral knowledge ("цельное знание" – in Russian), as well as the Eurasianist synthesis.

The analysis argues that Russian intellectual history is characterised not by an anti-truth sentiment, but by a different truth ontology, one where coherence, intuition, and spiritual insight supersede correspondence and verification. The article's conclusions expand operational applications in information warfare, analysing how Enlightenment vulnerabilities (assumption of good-faith discourse, reliance on factual correction, transparency as value etc.) become exploitable via disinformation, reflexive control, and the "firehose of falsehood" model (Paul & Matthews, 2016), as well as synthesizes the strategic implications and vulnerabilities.

"Sapere Aude": the Enlightenment epistemology and Its Truth architecture

The clarion call "Sapere aude!" which is literally translated as "Dare to know!" but idiomatically "Dare to use your own understanding!" firstly appears in Kant's

1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" (Kant, 1784/1996). For Kant, this phrase crystallizes the Enlightenment project and the idea of the emancipation of human reason from imposed authority. Through this perspective, the Enlightenment appears as the "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity," where immaturity is "the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another" (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 17). Kant posits that rational capacity is universal, and according to this principle, all humans possess the innate ability to reason, critique, and discern Truth from falsehood (Kant, 1781/1998). This is not an empirical claim but a transcendental one, understanding reason as the condition of possibility for knowledge itself.

This assumption has a democratic outcome, in particular, when Truth is understood as accessible to all. There is no epistemically privileged class (contrary to the medieval clergy), nor is there a mystical gnosis available only to the initiated. Public use of reason - free, open and critical discourse becomes the mechanism of collective enlightenment (Kant, 1784/1996). This universalism creates a blind spot for the actual divergence in understanding of what constitutes the Truth. Western strategists often fail to anticipate that adversaries might fundamentally reject the shared rules of rational discourse, treating "debate" not as a means of seeking Truth, but as a battlefield (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

Kant inherits (with modifications) the correspondence theory of Truth from Aristotle, suggesting that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to reality (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*). While Kant's Copernican revolution complicates this (Truth as conformity of intuition to understanding), the basic structure remains:

there is a fact of the matter, and truthful statements mirror it (Kant, 1781/1998). Correspondence theory assumes good faith, that interlocutors are jointly committed to tracking reality. When this assumption fails under modern conditions (when "truth" becomes purely instrumental), fact-checking becomes an arms race where falsity mutates faster than correction (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Modern science radicalizes this through falsifiability (Popper, 1959/2002), claiming that trust must be vulnerable to empirical refutation. Truth advances through a Darwinian process - hypotheses compete, failures are discarded, survivors constitute our best approximation of reality.

Kantian enlightenment requires public use of reason: "the freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters" (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 18). Secrecy, obscurantism, and censorship are enemies of Truth. Democratic societies institutionalise this through the freedoms of speech, press, and academic inquiry. Transparency becomes an asymmetric weakness when adversaries operate in a state of opacity. Russia's disinformation apparatus thrives precisely because it exploits Western openness (Lucas & Pomerantsev, 2016): social media platforms, democratic debate, free press - all become transmission vectors for malign content, while Russian society remains informationally sealed.

Post-Kantian Western thought, despite profound internal debates, essentially maintains core commitments (Cassirer, 1951): firstly, this is empiricism, relying on the idea that knowledge derives from observation,

experiment, and replicable evidence (Hume, 1748/2007; Locke, 1689/1997). The principles of critical rationality must withstand scrutiny; authority is provisional, always subject to challenge (Popper, 1959/2002). Secondly, the idea of Truth progressed to the principle that Truth is cumulative and the reality is approached asymptotically through collective effort (Kuhn, 1962, despite his paradigm-shift critique, ultimately affirms the concept of progress).

These positions finally became a part of the institutionalisation process. Western universities, courts, and media (ideally) embody these principles in adversarial testing, peer review, and investigative journalism and other forms, ensuring a truth-producing mechanism (Fuller, 1988). As a result, Western political philosophy enshrines this epistemology in governance. Democracy presumes that informed citizens, exposed to free debate and factual information, will make reasonably sound collective decisions (Mill, 1859/1974). As Jefferson (1787) famously wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter" (p. 356). Even post-modern challenges (Lyotard, 1979/1984; Derrida, 1967/1978) primarily operate within this framework, critique naive realism but rarely abandon the commitment to rigorous argument, evidential standards, and the possibility of better/worse interpretations (Habermas, 1985).

On the other hand, an assumed shared commitment to truth-seeking produces a critical vulnerability within the Enlightenment epistemology approach, which assumes that interlocutors value Truth over victory and that

evidence can, in principle, adjudicate disputes. That rational persuasion is possible and normatively primary (Williams, 2002).

When these assumptions fail and when one party treats discourse as pure strategy, untethered from truth-constraints, the Enlightenment framework short-circuits. Worse, its very norms (free speech, open debate, fact-checking) become weaponizable: free speech protects disinformation dissemination (Bollinger & Stone, 2018), open debate provides legitimacy (false balance, "both-sides-ism") (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004) and fact-checking often amplifies falsehoods (the "backfire effect") (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). As Hannah Arendt (1967) presciently observed in her analysis of lying in politics, the traditional safeguards (public opinion, press scrutiny) "lose their force when the liar has achieved the position where he decides what the facts are" (p. 257).

"Sofia" as the Russian-Orthodox counter-epistemology of integral wisdom

To understand "Sofia", we must first excavate the Slavophile rejection of the Enlightenment in 19th century Russian thought (Walicki, 1975). Figures like Ivan Kireyevsky (1804-1856), Alexei Khomyakov (1804-1860), and later Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) did not reject "truth" but rather Western rationalism's fragmentation of Truth into specialised, compartmentalised, purely logical-empirical knowledge.

Kireyevsky (1852/1998) articulated his core critique as the following: Western philosophy, since Aristotle and especially since Descartes, has pursued Truth through analytical reason - dissection, categorisation, and

abstraction. This produces technical mastery but at catastrophic cost: the loss of wholeness (“цельность” – in Russian). "Western man," Kireyevsky lamented, "has cut his consciousness into separate faculties: reason, will, feeling, faith, imagination. He has lost the inner core of his spiritual life" (p. 215).

In Russian-Orthodox epistemology, “Sofia” appears as not a knowledge (“знание” – in Russian) but wisdom (“премудрость” – in Russian), not facts but truth-as-living-reality (“истина” – in Russian), accessible not through cold logic but through spiritual intuition, communal experience, and participation in the divine (Lossky, 1957).

A key Slavophile concept under this approach is sobornost' (“соборность” – in Russian), often (inadequately) translated as "collegiality" or "catholicity" but better understood as organic unity-in-multiplicity, the idea that Truth emerges not from individual critique but from communal spiritual synthesis (Khomyakov, 1895/2002). Khomyakov (1895/2002) argued that the Western Church (originally Catholic, then Protestant) erred by institutionalising Truth in the Pope or fragmenting it into individual conscience. While Orthodoxy, claimed Khomyakov, preserves Truth through “sobornost’”, through the collective consciousness of the faithful, guided by the “Holy Spirit” (p. 23). Therefore, Truth is not demonstrated but testified to, not proven but lived.

This epistemological shift outlines Truth from correspondence (statement-to-world) to coherence (internal consistency) and ultimately to performative participation (embodied witness). An Orthodox believer

does not "prove" God's existence; they experience his divine presence in communal experience.

Another prominent Russian thinker, Vladimir Solovyov (1874/1996), arguably Russia's greatest philosopher, attempted to synthesize Western philosophy with Orthodox theology through his concept of integral knowledge ("цельное знание" – in Russian) - a reunification of what Western modernity had sundered: empirical science, rational philosophy, and mystical theology. Solovyov (1874/1996) argued that Western epistemology commits a fatal error by absolutizing rational-empirical knowledge ("знание" – in Russian) while denigrating faith ("вера" – in Russian) and contemplation ("созерцание" – in Russian) as "subjective" or "unscientific" (pp. 12-15). True wisdom ("Sophia") requires integration: empiricism grasps the material world (what is), rationalism discerns logical necessity (what must be), mystical intuition apprehends ultimate reality (what truly is beyond appearance). Without this synthesis, in accordance with Solovyov, it produces science "without soul" (positivism, materialism), philosophy without grounding (abstract speculation), and theology without rigour (superstition, obscurantism). Ultimately, Solovyov's theology philosophy, and mysticism form a trinity that finds its unity in Sophia (Solovyov, 1898/2009), stratifying the Truth itself.

Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), a mathematician, electrical engineer, Orthodox priest, and philosopher, embodied the "Sofia" ideal while paradoxically engaging deeply with Western modernity (Pyman, 2010). His magnum opus, "The Pillar and Ground of the Truth" (1914/1997), is simultaneously a systematic

theology and an epistemological manifesto. Florensky (1914/1997) argues that ultimate truths manifest as antinomies - rationally irreconcilable contradictions that nonetheless both hold (pp. 102-121).

While for Western logic (Aristotelian law of non-contradiction), antinomy signals error - something must be false, for Florensky, antinomy signals mystery - reality exceeds the grasp of logic. In accordance to him, Truth is suprarational, not irrational. "Truth is a living, synthetic unity of contradictions" (Florensky, 1914/1997, p. 114). Rational critique is necessary but insufficient, it is not sufficient in itself. At the highest registers, Truth requires a leap of faith, an intuitive grasp, and spiritual perception that transcends discursive reasoning. This directly challenges Kant's Enlightenment: the courage to know must be supplemented by humility in the face of mystery.

The leap from Florensky's theology to Putin's "Russkiy Mir" ("Русский мир" – in Russian) ideology is non-linear but traceable (Laruelle, 2008; Suslov, 2014). Immigrated intellectuals like Nikolai Trubetskoy, Pyotr Savitsky, and Lev Gumilev developed Eurasianism, which poses Russia as a distinct civilisation, neither European nor Asian, with a unique spiritual and cultural mission (Bassin, 2016). They argued that geography determines consciousness, and Russia's Eurasian expanse creates a syncretic mentality; they rejected Western universalism and synthesised Russia's Byzantine-Mongol holistic, collectivist, spiritually grounded worldview. Truth, within this framework, is civilizationaly relative but internally absolute. There is no universal rationality (contrary to Kant), and each civilisation has its own epistemic criteria.

The modern implementation of this framework is primarily delivered by Russian thinker Aleksandr Dugin (2012), known as the "Putin Whisperer," who explicitly frames geopolitics as a civilizational-epistemological war.

His "Fourth Political Theory" synthesises Eurasianism, Heidegger, and Traditionalism (Guenon, Evola), positioning Russia as the champion of anti-liberal modernity, by rejecting not just Western policies but Western ontology, including individualism, secularism, and rationalist epistemology (pp. 54–78). For Dugin, information warfare is a metaphysical form of combat. Another prominent figure in pushing this epistemology in practice is Vladislav Surkov (2019), Putin's ideological architect, who transferred these ideas into practice, into Russia's system as "sovereign democracy" - a democracy in form but with "Russian characteristics": managed, vertical, and spiritually grounded. Truth, in his schema, serves sovereign power, not abstract universal criteria. Vladimir Putin, himself a pragmatic leader, employs Sofia-inflected rhetoric, defending "traditional values," Orthodox Christianity as a civilizational anchor, and Russia as a guardian against Western moral decay (Putin, 2013). His 2007 Munich speech (Putin, 2007) and 2021 essay on Ukraine frame geopolitics as a civilizational existential struggle (Putin, 2021).

How the "Sapere aude" – "Sofia" gap enables information warfare

Russian military and intelligence doctrine explicitly theorizes information as a domain of warfare coequal with land, sea, air, space, and cyber (Giles, 2016; Gerasimov, 2013). The 2013 "Gerasimov Doctrine",

though contested as a term (Bartles, 2016), captures a fundamental shift: modern war is non-kinetic to kinetic, where information operations precede, enable, and often substitute for military force.

Critical here is Russia's instrumental approach to truth: information is not judged by its accuracy, but by its strategic effectiveness (Thomas, 2004). This contrasts starkly with Western norms, where, at least rhetorically, strategic communication should be truthful (even if it is "selective truth"). Russia's disinformation heritage, rooted in Soviet KGB active measures (“активные мероприятия” – in Russian) and earlier philosophy and theology, has no such constraint (Rid, 2020).

The RAND Corporation's analysis (Paul & Matthews, 2016) of Russian propaganda identifies a distinctive model of firehose: high volume, multi-channel, rapid, continuous, and repetitive dissemination of messages, regardless of their veracity. The model operates through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: volume (contradictory narratives saturate the information space), shamelessness (exposed lies are never retracted, only supplemented), and velocity (new fabrications outpace the correction capacity). Pomerantsev's (2014) ethnography of Russian media reveals a sophisticated strategic nihilism that transcends mere propaganda. Russian state television (RT, Channel One, and their affiliates) does not simply lie; instead, they perform the absurdity of truth itself. Programming features mutually contradictory narratives broadcast within hours of each other: MH17 was shot down by Ukraine, or the CIA, or aliens - all theories asserted with equal conviction, none retracted when disproven.

This exploits a fundamental Enlightenment vulnerability: Western audiences assume truth is scarce (thus protected), lies are costly (reputation suffers when exposed), and correction works (showing error produces adjustment). The firehose model inverts each assumption: truth is drowned in noise, overwhelming cognitive capacity (Kahneman, 2011); lies are cheap when delivered shamelessly, and correction becomes futile, by the time fact-checkers debunk a story, it has propagated unchecked. The result is the strategic cognitive exhaustion where audiences, unable to adjudicate truth, either disengage or retreat to tribal epistemic bubbles (Sunstein, 2017).

Another strategy for weaponising the epistemological gap is Reflexive control ("рефлексивное управление" – in Russian), pioneered by Soviet cyberneticist Vladimir Lefebvre (1984). This approach involves influencing an adversary's decision-making by shaping their perception of the situation, thereby encouraging them to "voluntarily" choose outcomes favourable to you (Thomas, 2004). Unlike direct coercion, reflexive control respects enemy agency – not by forcing, but rather engineering the informational environment so their rational choice serves programmed outcomes.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 exemplifies reflexive control at its most sophisticated (Giles, 2016). The operation exploited Western epistemological assumptions through four interlocking mechanisms. First, strategic ambiguity, foreseeing the deployment of "little green men" (unmarked soldiers without insignia), created deliberate uncertainty about whether forces were Russian regulars or local militia, paralyzing NATO's threat assessment process. Second, temporal

compression in which Russia achieved a *fait accompli* before Western institutions could complete their deliberative procedures. Third, narrative plausibility delivering the framing of "protecting Russian-speakers from a fascist coup in Kyiv" provided both domestic legitimation and international cover. Fourth, predictive exploitation of Western rationality.

Conclusions

The antagonism between Western-centred epistemology and the Russian Orthodox framework in philosophical tradition shows a profound structural asymmetry. The philosophical guides that underpin liberal societies built on democratic values rooted in the Enlightenment perform as systematic weaknesses when confronted by actors who undermine the basis of collaborative truth-seeking. Under these conditions, normative strengths become operational weaknesses. This phenomenon is no longer just a tactical challenge but an essential problem that exposes the epistemological gap in the foundation of information warfare.

Russian information operations do more than challenge Western accounts. These activities not only confront Western discourse and its narratives, but also seize the foundations of liberal epistemology, utilizing them to generate self-reinforcing cycles of confusion, erosion of institutional credibility, and paralysis of collective response mechanisms. Realizing this exploitation, however, is all about understanding how each core Enlightenment principle becomes weaponizable when it is extracted from its intended community of practice and set in adversarial situations.

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Author's Disclaimer: This article represents ongoing research as part of a PhD dissertation examining strategic narratives in Russian foreign policy toward Eastern Europe,

with particular focus on Rossotrudnichestvo's operations in Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine. The author welcomes correspondence at prysiazhniukmpress@gmail.com and feedback on this theoretical framework.