

# Assange and Russia: When Leaks Become Weapons

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Since the end of the Cold War, political debates are no longer framed by a strict opposition of economic systems capitalism vs socialism, democracy vs “popular democracy”, free market vs self-sufficiency. Instead, today’s struggles revolve around each country’s own “optimal path”, defined by its lawmakers.

In this context, the rise of globalization and new technologies has fueled more chauvinist and autocratic ways of redefining terms such as freedom, rights, nation, West, and sovereignty. These notions are frequently abused by leaders across the spectrum: left-leaning figures in Latin America such as Gustavo Petro in Colombia or López Obrador in Mexico; and right-wing movements in Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, from MAGA in the U.S. to Reform UK or Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary.

The narratives these groups amplify do not genuinely recognize political or economic systems. When they invoke them, it is in an ambiguous way, turning broad concepts into empty shells. As the Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau described, these are empty signifiers: words that appear all-encompassing yet end up meaning nothing concrete.

This phenomenon is better described by the philosopher Marlene Laruelle as illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022). It often merges with a call to restore national sovereignty in various spheres, including internationally, politically, economically, and culturally. It rejects supranational institutions, promotes direct communication, denounces neoliberal orthodoxy, and rejects multiculturalism and minority rights, favoring a majoritarianism that either advances an essentialist definition of the nation or accepts multiethnicity but often adopts assimilation policies. Nevertheless, it has variations both on its regional left and right variations.

With that in mind, it is indubitable that nowadays with these types of political movements there is fertile ground for more social cleavages to exploit, and with it, a vicious circle of disinformation that flows into social media to divide society even further. According to HybridCoE, “Malign actors engaged in disinformation campaigns use these existing conflicts in an attempt to stoke further polarization and political discord. Democratic states are easy to target as they generally allow for dialogue and debate regarding benefits and rights (political security), as well as freedom of speech”. (Hybrid CoE, s.f.)

Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has sought to exploit conflicts and tensions within liberal democracies and in states still consolidating their institutions. Unlike China, whose influence rests on economic and financial power, Russia relies heavily on information warfare, large-scale disinformation campaigns that spread propaganda, anti-American or anti-Western narratives, and fake news through influencers or bots (Research Collection ETH Library, s.f.; EUvsDisinfo, 2024).

This is a form of hybrid warfare rather than purely cyber warfare (Oidsalu, 2024). Such narratives often resonate with preexisting beliefs, gradually seeping into the political mainstream. As a result, Moscow finds emissaries across the ideological spectrum many of whom do not fully understand its strategy but unaware amplify it by liking, reposting, or sharing. In Europe and the U.S., these echoes are strongest in right-wing movements, while in Latin America they are more common among populist left-wing leaders and social democrats (Radin et al., 2020).

One of the most emblematic figures entangled in this ecosystem of disinformation and anti-Western narratives is Julian Assange, the founder and editor of the well-known website WikiLeaks (WL), dedicated to publishing leaked documents from various sources. Recently released after serving five years in prison in the UK, Assange has long been regarded by his supporters as a courageous whistleblower exposing U.S. misconduct in Iraq and Afghanistan through WL.

Yet, while WL claims neutrality in leaking files from all political actors, Assange and his inner circle have consistently revealed a deeper motivation, resentment toward Western institutions rather than a coherent reformist project. This orientation facilitated ties with authoritarian regimes and contributed to the whitewashing of movements aligned with anti-Western narratives (AP News, 2024).

Independent investigator Pekka Kallioniemi has documented many of Assange’s pro-Russian activities in his project *Vatnik Soup* (Vatnik Soup, s.f.), which remain largely underreported. His controversies trace back to 2011, when a rupture with *The Guardian* highlighted his refusal to accept editorial safeguards. While the paper sought to handle WL’s troves with context, redactions, and professional standards, Assange threatened legal action after it published diplomatic communications and files of political prisoners ironically demanding control over

material he had insisted should be freely available (Reilly, 2011; Ellison, 2011).

This stance marked the beginning of a paradox. On one hand, Assange championed transparency; on the other, he sought personal ownership of leaks. His rigid approach risked jeopardizing diplomatic relations and endangering lives. By then, WL's PayPal account had already been frozen for alleged violations (Haynes, 2010; CBS News, 2010), and *The Guardian* had secured access to documents through other channels, later sharing them with *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* (The Independent, 2011a). Subsequent conflict, such as with former ally Daniel Domscheit-Berg, culminated in the uncontrolled release of unredacted cables, further damaging WL's credibility and Assange's reputation (Ball, 2011; Stöcker, 2011).

This trajectory illustrates that when highly sensitive information is entrusted to individuals like Assange, personal conflicts and impulsive decisions can jeopardize the lives of opposition figures and informants in countries such as Iran, China (CNN Wire Staff, 2011), Afghanistan (NBC News, 2010), and Iraq and, most troublingly, in Russia and Belarus. According to Assange, they "deserved it" and had brought it upon themselves (The Independent, 2011b). The reckless nature of such disclosures was evident again in 2016 when, though unrelated to geopolitics, WL exposed private medical and legal records of Saudi citizens, including sick children and sexual assault victims an act Assange dismissed as "not even worth a headline" (AP News, 2016).

The contradictions deepened when David Leigh, one of Assange's early journalistic allies, denounced Russia as a "mafia state" and was expelled from the country for it (Sabbagh, 2011). Yet in his own book, Leigh revealed that WikiLeaks had simultaneously enabled the transfer of U.S. diplomatic cables to Moscow and Minsk through the figure of "Adam Ermash", better known as Israel Shamir (Leigh & Harding, 2011).

Shamir was no neutral intermediary. A Holocaust denier and antisemite (Jewish.ru, 2011), he positioned himself as WikiLeaks' representative in Russia (New York Magazine, 2010), spreading conspiracy theories and cultivating ties with Kremlin-linked media. Journalist Will Yakowicz, who interviewed him in Moscow in 2011, described him as a calm yet manipulative propagandist whose rhetoric blended radical hatred of the U.S., Jews, and Western institutions with a veneer of intellectual authority (Rosen, 2011).

In practice, Shamir's role was devastating. He provided Belarusian dictator Aleksander Lukashenko with unredacted U.S. diplomatic cables during the 2010 presidential elections, which detailed contacts with opposition figures such as Andrei

Sannikov, later forced into exile in London, and Vladimir Neklyayev, imprisoned and placed under house arrest (Komi-reddi, 2012). Shamir publicly portrayed Belarusians as "happy, fully employed, and satisfied with their government", (Leigh & Harding, 2011) while privately meeting senior regime officials like Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister Uladzimir Makei. Reports also surfaced that he attempted to sell cable articles for \$10,000 USD (The Daily Beast, 2013).

The fallout was immediate. NGOs such as Index on Censorship raised alarms for the safety of Belarusian opposition leaders, noting that WL's evasive responses ("We have no further reports on this rumour/issue") failed to address the evident risks (On Censorship, 2011). Meanwhile, *Russian Reporter* magazine distorted the leaked cables, mistranslating their content to align with Kremlin narratives, turning what should have been journalistic transparency into state-sponsored disinformation (Bigg, 2010; Latynina, 2010).

This should not be underestimated; outright lies and misleading information published by Kremlin-affiliated newspapers have infiltrated mainstream debates in many parts of the world (La Silla Vacía, 2022; La Silla Vacía, 2023).

Once again WL eventually became entangled in this environment, echoing or amplifying similar narratives. In 2011, Assange was accused of invoking a supposed "Jewish-led conspiracy" against his organization, a claim reportedly directed at journalists like Alan Rusbridger, David Leigh, and John Kampfner after their coverage of Israel Shamir's antisemitism (Business Insider, s.f.; Burns, 2011). Evidence also suggests that the WikiLeaks Twitter account was used to blame the "Jewish Lobby" (Feldman, 2016; The Forward, 2019).

These dynamics blurred the line between transparency activism and the propagation of conspiratorial or politically motivated narratives. Shamir, for instance, defended Assange by portraying the women who accused him of sexual assault as CIA agents (Moynihan, 2010a; Moynihan, 2010b), intertwining Assange's personal legal troubles with broader disinformation campaigns. His son, Johannes Wahlström, who acted as WikiLeaks' spokesman in Sweden, also promoted similar conspiracy theories through local media outlets (Baas, 2011).

Although Assange was confined inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London, his ties to Russia did not end there. By 2017, during the Catalan independence referendum, where he positioned himself as the movement's international spokesperson, Russia's cyber apparatus also aligned with the separatists. Spanish authorities later reported that Russian and Venezuelan accounts spread false claims, such as the EU backing Madrid's crackdown or that global powers were preparing to intervene in Catalonia (Grinberg et al., 2017). In 2024, a Spanish judge

extended the probe into Russian interference, framing it as part of the Kremlin's broader strategy to destabilize Europe and weaken trust in Western institutions (Iglesias, s.f.; Aylward, 2019).

Evidence shows that Carles Puigdemont, the leading figure of Catalonia's 2016 independence referendum, and his closest collaborators, Josep Lluís Alay and Víctor Terradellas, met repeatedly with Russian businessmen and envoys linked to the Kremlin and the FSB. Messages exchanged at the time revealed promises of large financial aid, military support, and favorable cryptocurrency legislation, though these offers were never credible (Schwartz, 2021; Baquero et al., s.f.). What mattered was the signal, Russia was willing to exploit Catalonia's political crisis to weaken Spain and the EU.

Assange actively contributed to this effort. He promoted narratives that compared the Catalan crackdown to Tiananmen or Nazi propaganda, amplifying Russian bot networks and media outlets like RT and Sputnik, which flooded social media with misleading content (Alandete, 2018; Mars, 2018). He also met with separatist figures such as Oriol Soler, discussing plans to finance a new Catalan Republic through cryptocurrency with potential Russian assistance (Fernández, 2017; Neal, s.f.).

This episode illustrates how easily disinformation ecosystems intertwine, a Western activist, a regional separatist movement, and Russian hybrid warfare converged to destabilize a European democracy. And it also highlights Moscow's double standard. If Russia truly respected the "right to self-determination" it invoked in Catalonia, it would not have punished Moldova by banning its wine exports in 2013 and fruit in 2022, or pressured Georgia with similar embargoes when those countries leaned toward the EU (The Economist, 2013; Reuters, 2022; Reuters, 2023).

This pattern of behavior is not limited to Europe. In 2024, when Ecuador agreed to trade its old Russian and Ukrainian military equipment for \$200 million in U.S. weapons, Moscow quickly retaliated by banning Ecuadorian banana imports, citing a supposed disease. Bananas are Ecuador's main export, and Russia is a key buyer, worth nearly \$800 million annually (The Kyiv Independent, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Within weeks, Ecuador withdrew from the deal under economic pressure (Voz de América, 2024).

The same coercive logic has been applied elsewhere, when Kyrgyzstan announced plans to switch its alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin, Russia suspended dairy imports overnight (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). Lithuania faced similar retaliation after building the Klaipėda LNG terminal to end its dependence on Russian gas, with Moscow targeting its exports once EU sanctions followed the annexation of Crimea

(Politico, 2022; Masiulis, 2014; Dirección General de Políticas Interiores, 2014).

To end this story, one of the boldest acts of foreign interference in a U.S. election occurred in 2016, when John Podesta's email, chairman of Hillary Clinton's campaign, was hacked using "spear phishing". Special Counsel Robert Mueller determined it was orchestrated by Russian GRU hackers, Units 26165 and 74455 (Zapotosky & Nakashima, 2018; OCCRP, s.f.). An AP investigation found that over 150,000 emails from more than a dozen Democrats were eventually made public by WikiLeaks (WL) and other hacktivists one of whom even wrote the Trump slogan, "Together with Assange, we'll make America great again". The leak had a significant impact on the Democratic Party and Clinton's candidacy (AP News, 2017).

A Politico analysis later revealed that WL coordinated with hackers to time the release of stolen documents just before the Democratic National Convention, aiming to spur "conflict between Bernie and Hillary", thereby fragmenting the party and indirectly aiding Trump's candidacy (Nelson, 2018). In July 2018, Mueller indicted 12 Russian officials for this interference (Gerstein, 2018). Among Trump's associates investigated, Roger Stone appeared in close contact with both Assange and the Russian hacker Guccifer 2.0, assuring Assange in messages later cited by the FBI, "If the U.S. government moves on you, I will bring down the entire house of cards" (Balsamo et al., 2020). Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., also followed WL's requests, even sharing tax documents to make the site appear impartial after *The New York Times* released fragments of his father's returns (Ioffe, 2017).

These interactions show how groups connected to WikiLeaks have functioned as de facto Russian assets, not through formal coordination or genuine alignment with the Kremlin's agenda, but by amplifying misleading narratives or half-truths that fuel fragmentation. For example, in 2013, while Assange was already confined in London, members of the WikiLeaks Party traveled to Syria to meet with former dictator Bashar al-Assad on a "peace and reconciliation" trip (Milman, 2013; Gray, 2013).

Just months earlier, Assad's forces carried out the Ghouta chemical attack, killing around 1,400 civilians with nerve agents (U.S. Department of State, s.f.; Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2024). Yet the WL delegation dismissed the evidence as "unsubstantiated", echoing rhetoric used to discredit reports of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Assange's father, John Shipton, accompanied the group and publicly supported remaining "neutral", while expressing satisfaction with the meeting (ABC News Australia, 2013; The WikiLeaks Party, 2014; Zamanalwsl, s.f.).

Shipton has remained politically active. On May 20, 2023, he attended the “Worldwide Freedom Rally”(The People’s Revolution, 2023) organized by The People’s Revolution and Australia Freedom Rally, delivering a speech in Sydney while wearing a Russian ushanka, surrounded by Russian flags and men displaying the Z symbol, today a mark of nationalist militarism (The People’s Revolution, 2023; Meduza, 2022).

Although he insisted he did not “take sides”, his rhetoric echoed narratives often used by Moscow, depicting the West as uniquely responsible for global wars and mass suffering, while overlooking atrocities committed by Russia and its allies. Notably, the rally was covered almost exclusively by state-affiliated Russian media (Tatar-Inform, 2023; Gazeta.ru, 2023; Baltnews, 2023; Kommersant, 2023; EADaily, 2023). At its conclusion, Austro-Russian activist Semyon Boykov declared, “The Russians love Assad because they know that Assad stands up to the CIA and he’s stood up to the Americans and it’s a shame that the Russian government is more interested in Assange’s freedom than the Australian government” (The People’s Revolution, 2023).

These are critical times, when aspiring autocrats demand ‘absolute’ free speech even if it spreads lies or extremism while democratic leaders defend stricter regulation of social media, which can also threaten open debate if applied without safeguards. Assange, with his self-appointed messianic role, has shown indifference to rape allegations and even abandoned allies. According to *PlanV*, “On several occasions, one of the guest’s [Assange] requests was to choose his own security service within the Embassy, even suggesting the participation of Russian operatives” (Plan V, 2015).

Ultimately, Assange’s case illustrates how personal controversies and radical postures can be exploited by Moscow as useful assets to deepen social divisions in democracies that, while imperfect, remain worth defending.

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