Political Technology

'Political technology' is a Russian term for the professional engineering of politics. It has turned Russian politics into theatre and propaganda and metastasised to take over foreign policy and weaponise history. The war against Ukraine is one outcome. In the West, spin doctors and political consultants do more than influence media or run campaigns: they have also helped build parallel universes of alternative political reality. Hungary has used political technology to dismantle democracy. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India has used it to consolidate unprecedented power. Different countries learn from each other. Some types of political technology have become notorious, like troll farms or data mining, but there is now a wholesale global industry selling a range of manipulation techniques, from astroturfing to fake parties to propaganda apps. This book shows that 'political technology' is about much more than online disinformation: it is about whole new industries of political engineering.

Andrew Wilson is Professor of Ukrainian Studies in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London. His first book on political technology was *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (2005).

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The Globalisation of Political Manipulation

Andrew Wilson

University College London

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

To Howard

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Preface

This is my second book on political technology. The first was *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* for Yale University Press in 2005. The timing was deliberate. As argued in Chapter 1, Russia had ended a cycle with the Kremlin establishing control over all the main political parties by the election cycle of 2003–4. At the time, I argued that political technology in Russia was unlike political manipulation in other parts of the world, as it established total systemic control. The argument of this book may not be the complete opposite, but a lot has changed since 2005. Political technology, which is defined in the Introduction as 'the supply-side engineering of the political system for partisan interests', has globalised. Its characteristic modus operandi is the clone or the double, the engineering of alternative political subjects – parties, politicians, think-tanks and non-governmental organisations – to rival and eventually displace the agendas of real political subjects. It is therefore easy to copy. Globalisation, the appearance of the same or similar manipulation techniques in different countries, can be caused by distance learning, by the exchange of personnel, by international actors – and sometimes because the technology in political technology is the same. Troll farms operate in a similar fashion the world over.

So this book is about explaining what political technology is (we do not often use the term, but we have the practice) – how it works and how it spreads. Hence it includes a number of tables comparing and contrasting manipulation techniques in different countries.

I have used many different language sources. For transliteration, I have used adapted Library of Congress rules. I have used shorter versions of names and place names – so Zelensky not Zelenskyi.

I would like to thank all my interviewees. I have benefited from fruitful conversations with colleagues at University College London and the European Council on Foreign Relations. I would like to thank my students, particularly those who have taken the 'Undermining Democracy' course on which this book is based – and particularly students who are from Ukraine, many of whom are now fighting for their country. I am

grateful to all interviewees, to Miklós Haraszti and András Rácz for their help with the Hungary chapter, and to Amogh Sharma for help on India I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers and Jonathan Haslam, Caroline Parkinson and Robert Judkins at Cambridge University Press, plus Amala Gobiraman for work on the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to my kid brother Howard. He was tragically taken by cancer in 2019. He was really interested in the book when we talked about it. I think he would have liked it.