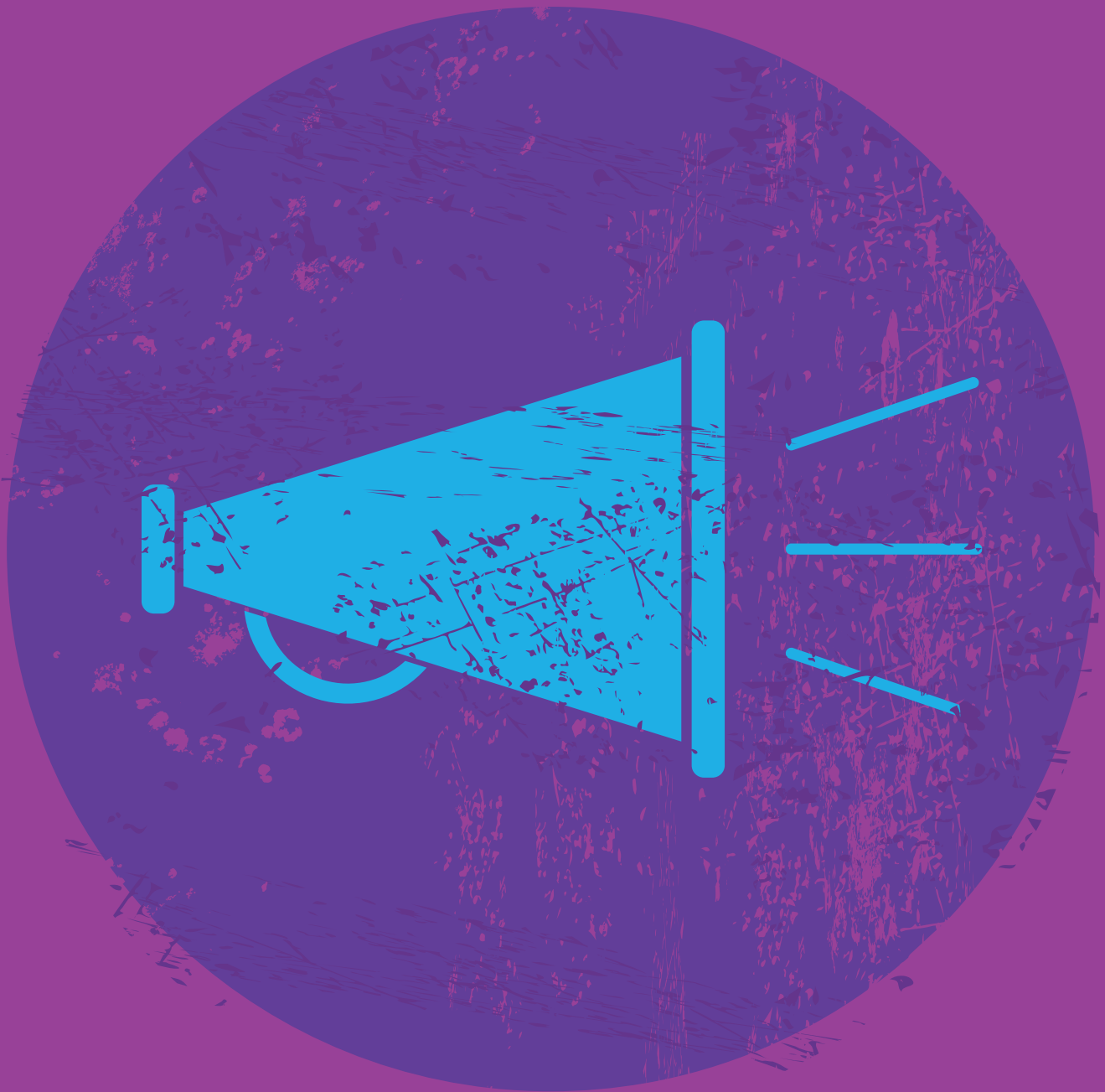


The information battle:

How governments in the former Soviet Union promote their agendas and attack their opponents abroad



Edited by Adam Hug

The Foreign Policy Centre



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About the Foreign Policy Centre

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Executive summary

The information battle examines the ways in which the governments of former Soviet Union (FSU) look to shape international narratives about themselves by using media, social media, advertising and supportive organisations to promote their worldview and challenge the people, institutions and ideas that oppose them. This publication examines the influence of Russian media content in the former Soviet Union and in the wider world. This is delivered through the impact of Russian domestic TV channels reaching Russian speaking audiences in the region, the developing role of the news agency Sputnik and the international broadcaster RT. It examines how these outlets are used not only to promote Russian political narratives but to challenge Western approaches and sow confusion about what is going on in the world. It offers ideas for how independent broadcasters and international outlets can provide effective alternatives.

Despite cracking down on Western backed NGOs at home, the governments of the former Soviet Union are seeking to directly influence the European and US political debate through NGOs, think tanks and lobbying organisations. This publication looks at how to improve the transparency and accountability of such actions. Repressive regimes that use advertising and the hosting of international events to promote themselves, are increasingly being challenged by human rights defenders through the publicity such activities bring. The publication argues that, in what is increasingly becoming a battle involving the use of soft power and information, Western institutions have been losing ground and must take action in order to meet the challenge.

Recommendations

To the donor and NGO community

- Fund the creation of new, independent Russian and local language news content, news coordination and dissemination
- Provide increased funding for independent consortiums of investigative journalists
- Support in depth independent survey work in the countries of the former Soviet Union to assess the audience reach of both domestic and Russian media outlets
- Facilitate non-partisan support of Parliamentary engagement on issues relating to the former Soviet Union, including country visits

To Western governments and regulators

- Track the spread of misleading and untrue content emanating from Russian sources, working with civil society to rebut it where appropriate
- Actively monitor online threats to Western based critics of regimes in the former Soviet Union
- Strengthen lobbying registry requirements, including looking to expand the scope of the UK's statutory register and delivering the proposed formal EU lobbying register
- Re-examine the governance structures of the US Broadcasting Board of Governors

To international broadcasters

- Expand the range of voices asked to provide comment on Western networks
- Collaborate with independent partners in the post-Soviet space to develop content

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Introduction: A battle for hearts and minds

Adam Hug¹

Events can move a debate quickly. When initially developing the idea for this essay collection in the summer of 2014², it was clear that the role of media and social media activity originating from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the links between lobbyists and regimes from the region were issues of growing importance. However it would have been difficult to predict the extent to which much of this debate would become part of mainstream political discourse. The 2016 US Presidential Election saw allegations of Russian government directed hacking and the use of social media to influence political debate; the now ubiquitous term ‘fake news’ bandied about to encompass everything from state directed propaganda, to poor journalism or just stories that one disagrees with; and the rise of anti-establishment forces across Europe and the United States who are gaining ground both in the political debate and at the ballot box, who find common cause with political forces in Russia, all make now an important time to address these issues.

Countries in the post-Soviet space using soft power tools to influence the agenda beyond their borders is not a new phenomenon, and the flow of ideas and information is very clearly not one-way traffic with Western countries using these tools in the FSU for decades. This publication examines the ways in which the governments of FSU countries look to shape international narratives about themselves by using media, social media, advertising and supportive organisations to promote their worldview and challenge the people, institutions and ideas that oppose them.

In recent years, governments from the region have sought to influence international and Western debate to encourage investment and or tourism, to increase their international standing (or at least create a perception of enhanced prestige they can package back to a domestic audience) or to deflect or rebut criticisms about their own behaviour. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have been particularly active in attempting to promote themselves internationally in a positive light, while Georgia was an enthusiastic early adopter of Western public relations and lobbying as part of developing a distinctive national brand. Other states, particularly some of the more closed states of Central Asia, have focused more narrowly on engaging with economic stakeholders and Parliamentary groups to attempt to manage the debate on their own terms. Armenia has utilised its complicated relationship with its influential diaspora to counter-balance the influence of rivals with deeper pockets.

Russia, however, has significantly more ambitious goals for its international engagement. As a number of contributions in this publication show, it seeks to proactively change the international ideological and political environment through its use of broadcast media, both through an overt and covert online presence and through its support of organisations and institutions in Europe and beyond that share their values. It seeks to build on³ and subvert the style of Western values promotion practiced both during the Cold War and its aftermath, but instead of promoting liberal democracy Russia prioritises supporting ‘traditional values’ and ‘state sovereignty’ across the globe. Furthermore, this publication shows that the goal is also to discredit Western behaviour and models of political organisation, in order to blunt Western criticism of their actions on the grounds of hypocrisy and muddying the waters of global discourse through saturating the debate on particular issues with a high volume of ‘alternative facts’.

Media impact

With respect to the use of broadcast media the focus of attention in this publication is understandably on the role of Russia given the small and often poorly developed media institutions across the rest of the region. The Russian influenced media landscape under discussion in this publication falls into three main areas: the level of access to domestic Russian television in the region (including in the Baltic States), the impact of the Russian state news agency Sputnik and the global role of Russia’s internationally focused television channel RT.

The Soviet and Russian imperial legacies have left Russian as a shared language across much of the region particularly for the older generation, as well as for ethnic Russians and minority groups⁴ in the rest of the region. All

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² This collection is part of the wider Exporting Repression Series of publications and events first proposed in 2014 and work on the series first began in the early summer of 2015.

³ And indeed also update and refine its own Cold War approach to propaganda and soft power.

⁴ Who may be less likely to speak the national language of their home countries, particularly if they went to school in the Soviet-era.

countries in the region except Lithuania, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have either active or passive Russian usage at over 50 per cent of their populations.⁵ Rasto Kuzel's contribution to this collection gives an important overview of how Russia's domestic channels (often through their international counterparts)⁶ and local channels that directly rebroadcast content⁷, form the core of Russian language media consumed within Russia's immediate environs, including the countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership and its three Baltic member states. Russian television penetration is lower in Azerbaijan and Central Asia through a mix of lower Russian language use and more restrictive media environments. The primary point of access for these channels is through cable and satellite packages, though internet access is growing. Both Russian state and commercial channels have higher production values and more diverse content than the local offerings in the region, making these channels an attractive viewing option, which in turn provides access to Russian news narratives and, often already shared cultural norms.

As addressed in the contribution by Ben Nimmo, the second dimension is the role of the Sputnik news agency - a combined newswire service, radio station, website and multi-media content provider that replaced the international arm of the Russian news agency RIA Novosti in 2013.⁸ Sputnik provides 6 newswire services, three in English (one international, one Russia focused and one covering Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic States) and one each in Spanish, Chinese and Arabic. It produces its own content in 30 languages directly to 34 countries, with a significant focus on Russia's immediate neighbourhood.

Sputnik's English service may have 1,091,238 Facebook likes and its content via its public facing outlets and its wire service may resurface on blogs and smaller websites on the alt-right and radical left (depending on the story), however the agency's real value is in the lower volume news markets in the FSU and Eastern Europe, where easily accessible and usable national language content can be used by local broadcasters, newspapers and websites. So just as wire stories from traditional news agencies disperse across the media landscape, repackaged and rebranded but their core the same story, so now do Sputnik stories proliferate on different sites across the region.⁹ Sometimes this is the result of a direct ideological choice. For example in Georgia, a country with low direct penetration of Russian channels due to strategic tensions, Sputnik content has been utilised by a number of emerging domestic outlets such as Obieqtivi TV,¹⁰ Iberia TV, Asaval-Dasavali newspaper and websites such as News Georgia, Saqinformi and Georgia and World¹¹ that challenge the country's Western-focused foreign policy and EU backed social reforms. In others, state channels will adopt Russian narratives and news stories when they dovetail with the approach of their national governments. However such content is also being used by hard-pressed newsrooms and websites to fill time or space in their output.

The third dimension of the media dissemination strategy is one best known in the West - RT (formerly Russia Today). RT describes itself as 'an autonomous non-profit organization'¹², with a budget of 19 billion rubles (around £264 million at time of writing)¹³ and claims an audience reach of 70 million viewers per week and 50 million unique online users each month. This puts it broadly on a par with the BBC World Service in terms of expenditure (£254 million for the BBC World Service in 2014-15) if not yet in terms of reach (246 million World Service users across all

⁵ A Arefjef, Russian Language at the turn of the 20th-21st Century, Centre for social forecasting and marketing-Moscow, 2012, https://www.civisbook.ru/files/File/russkij_yazyk.pdf (information found via the EED). It is worth noting however that active use of Russian is below 25 percent in Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Lithuania.

⁶ These international versions primarily rebroadcast domestic content with major outlets including Channel One Russia Worldwide (Pervyi Kanal) including its specific Baltic service (Pervyi Baltiyskiy Kanal), RTR Planet (RTR Planeta), NTV World (NTV Mir).

⁷ Examples include in Moldova Prime (Pervyi Kanal), RTR Moldova (Rossiya 1) and TV7 (NTV) among others. In Belarus they include ONT (Pervyi Kanal), STV (Ren TV), Belarus RTR (RTR), NTV Belarus (NTV). In Kyrgyzstan NTV Kyrgyzstan, in Lithuania REN Lietuva (REN).

⁸ Sputnik, Products and Services, <https://sputniknews.com/docs/products/index.html>

⁹ Other Russian language wire service content is available from Russian domestic services such as TASS, the domestic RIA Novosti (ria.ru) from which Sputnik was hived off, and business focused service Interfax.

¹⁰ Co-founded by Irma Inashvili the Secretary General of the anti-Western and pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) party, with other party activists on its board Media Meter, see Obieqtivi, <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/obieqtivi> and also <http://www.obieqtivi.net/>

¹¹ Nata Dzelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili, Russian Influence of Georgian NGOs and Media, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, June 2015, <https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI/media.and.NGO.pdf> and Tamar Kinturashvili, Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report 2014-15, Media Diversity Institute, http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Anti-Western_Propaganda_Media_Monitoring_Report.pdf

¹² RT Management, <http://rt.com/about-us/management/> Nevertheless there is no real pretense that it is not a state backed broadcaster with funding from sources around the Russian Government.

¹³ RT's own about us management page states RT's 2016 funding to be 19 billion rubles, while on its own myth busting section it challenges Newsweek for using a dollar version of this figure, instead claiming that the 2016 budget is 17 billion rubles <https://www.rt.com/facts-vs-fiction/>. Its broadcast reach figures are sourced from research it commissioned from French Survey firm IPSOS.

platforms).¹⁴ RT runs three 24hr channels in English (with specific US and UK offerings, the latter being available on free-to-air terrestrial television), Spanish and Arabic, with web content in German, French and Russian. It positions itself to cover 'stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events'.¹⁵ Its willingness to provide a platform for more voices perceived as outside the political and social mainstream, from political views on the radical right and left, to controversial academics to outright conspiracy theorists and theories has found a niche in an increasingly fragmented media market place where such views struggle to be heard on the traditional broadcasters.

Both Sputnik (branded as 'Telling the untold') and RT ('Question More') do provide an understandably sympathetic approach to the actions of the Russian government amid the mélange of different viewpoints. However there is strong suspicion that at least in part the aim is 'not to convince people, but to confuse them, not to provide an alternative viewpoint, but to divide public opinions and to ultimately undermine our ability to understand what is going on and therefore take decisions if decisions need to be made'.¹⁶ The ideological approach is as much about muddying the political waters, by focusing allegations of Western hypocrisy to suggest that everyone is the same and sowing confusion, rather than simply building up pro-Russian arguments.

Until very recently Western competition in the post-Soviet space has been in retreat. The worsening media freedom environment has removed the ability to partner with local stations to rebroadcast content within a number of FSU countries.¹⁷ However also with budgets and priorities still being set as if victory in the Cold War had delivered the initially promised freedom, thereby making such services obsolete. Furthermore, the multi-language offerings have tended to remain focused on radio, building on the long-range broadcast networks developed during the Cold War, for a media market place where TV remains the dominant source of news, though all have active online content provision.

The multi-language BBC World Service has seen its budget cut in recent years, particularly since 2010, and as of 2014 responsibility for annually funding this work passed from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office to being directly funded from the license fee along with the rest of the BBC's non-commercial output.¹⁸ The service remains predominantly radio and online focused though it runs two TV channels (BBC Persian and BBC Arabic), with a significant proportion of its provision focused on Commonwealth Countries. The BBC Russian service currently operates only on the internet, having given up transmitting on medium and short wave radio in 2011, though some of its online content and news is rebroadcasted on independent Russian channel Dozhd (Rain) TV.¹⁹ However a recent one-off government grant is facilitating development on an upcoming digital television project.²⁰ As with the Russia service the BBC's Ukrainian and Azeri services went online only in 2011. The BBC's Kyrgyz service however maintains output online, on radio and via television, with the World Service stating that up to 3 million people watch BBC Kyrgyz's output via Kyrgyzstan's Public TV and half a million through the Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic, highlighting opportunities available with willing domestic partners.²¹ The BBC's Uzbek service website and radio output is blocked by the authorities in Uzbekistan but it continues to make its content accessible on a range of platforms.

US international public broadcasting outputs fall under the auspices of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) whose funds are derived from a grant from the US Congress. Voice of America runs a number of English language TV stations globally, as well as a mixture of web TV and radio in a number of different languages including Russian,

¹⁴ UK National Audit Office, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General presented to the BBC Trust Value for Money Committee, June 2016, <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/BBC-World-Service-1.pdf> Note this does not include the budget or viewing figures for BBC World News or many of the BBC's other international entertainment focused TV offerings that operate on a commercial basis.

¹⁵ About RT, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>

¹⁶ Mike Wendling and Will Yates, NATO says viral news outlet is part of "Kremlin misinformation machine, February 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38936812>

¹⁷ Including Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia as well as much of Central Asia.

¹⁸ The license fee is a mandatory payment for using a television or watching live broadcasts online in the UK that is collected directly by the BBC. The English language BBC World News channel, with a 75million global reach is commercially funded and organised separately from the World Service.

¹⁹ The beleaguered Dozhd TV has had its broadcast access in Russia reduced in recent years. During the 2000s the BBC's Russia service's ability to be rebroadcast via domestic radio partners dwindled due to the increasingly restricted media environment.

²⁰ Tara Conlan, BBC World Service to receive £289m from government, November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/23/bbc-world-service-receive-289m-from-government> This funding, £289 million over 5 years, will cover services across the world including 'new radio services in North Korea, Ethiopia and Eritrea; a better TV service in Africa; additional language broadcasts via digital and television in India and Nigeria; better regional content for the BBC Arabic Service, improved digital and TV services in Russia and for Russian speakers; and improved video across its output.'

²¹ BBC, BBC Kyrgyz marks 20 years on air with special content - and 3 million weekly reach on TV, June 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2016/bbc-kyrgyz-20-years>

Ukrainian, Azeri, Armenian, Uzbek and Georgian. However in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe, the second BBG organisation is often the central focus. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/ RL) operates 26 language services to 23 countries (FSU countries, minus the Baltic states, but plus the Balkans, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and for a number of minority Russian languages).²² RFE/RL services are rebroadcast on some domestic stations, where the media environment permits, but its radio content is available via region-wide shortwave transmission, on some satellite services as well as online. RFE/RL and VOA have recently launched a new 24hr news service called Current Time which claims 32 cable affiliates in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Germany and Israel, as well as online and satellite access, expanding on a service that has developed since 2014.²³ German broadcaster Deutsche Welle provides radio content in Russian, Ukrainian and a number of eastern European languages, while Radio France International maintains a Russian service.

Online action

The halcyon days when the internet was seen as an almost magical tool to open up access to information in closed societies have long gone. While it continues to provide opportunities for opposition voices to be heard, and indeed for the international media organisations discussed above to provide access to their content, they are very much not alone in this space. Internet penetration in the region is growing. As of 2016 within the members of the CIS the proportion of internet users stood at 66 per cent, with individual country figures from 2015 ranging from Turkmenistan and Tajikistan at 15 and 19 per cent respectively through to Russia and Kazakhstan on 73 per cent with Azerbaijan at 77 per cent.²⁴ The regions' authoritarian regimes are learning to utilise the medium to disseminate their own narratives, and are proving increasingly adept at influencing the online debate in their countries, in their diasporas and increasingly in the West.

The Russian Government's use of paid and organised trolls to criticise opponents, challenge narratives and provide misleading or false alternative information has been well documented.²⁵ These paid trolls, operating both on Russian and Western comment sites and social media operate with varying degrees of sophistication, some profiles built up to show evidence of a more diverse online life as if they were real, others narrowly focused on the task at hand. In the space beyond the paid-for trolls lie the enthusiastic (and organised) amateurs. In the gap left by the collapse of former nationalist youth movement Nashi, formerly trailblazing trolls, has been the pro-Putin group Set (Network),²⁶ who have been active online in trying to promote pro-government messages and rebut attempts by others to challenge their narratives online.²⁷ In addition, beyond the direct endorsement of the Kremlin networks are a range of new domestic nationalist movements that gain notoriety through online activism and real world stunts to create viral content.²⁸

Arzu Geybullayeva's contribution references the role of the pro-government youth movement, the IRELI Public Union that used to be reasonably sophisticated in its trolling of those who disagreed with the government. However following the loss of key activists, the group's online activism is now eclipsed by less subtle pro-regime activism from the youth branch of the ruling Yeni (New) Azerbaijan Party. A key tactic online continues to be challenging any focus on domestic human rights, arguing instead that the focus should be around Nagorno Karabakh and the conditions facing Azerbaijan's Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).²⁹ In a contribution for Open Democracy on this theme Arzu documents the way in which her and other activists in exile, particularly those involved with Emin Milli's Berlin-based Meydan TV³⁰, have been targeted by organised twitter mobs with links to the ruling party. Meydan is forced to block around 50 users per day from its Facebook page over trolling and has faced repeated Distributed Denial of

²² RFE/RL Language Services, <http://pressroom.rferl.org/p/6087.html>

²³ Broadcasting Board of Governors, Current Time, February 2017, <https://www.bbg.gov/2017/02/07/current-time-independent-russian-language-news-network/>

²⁴ ITU, ICT STATISTICS Home Page, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/default.aspx> Some of these higher figures need to be treated with caution given concerns about the standards of statistical collection in these restrictive countries.

²⁵ Max Seddon, Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America, June 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america?utm_term=.jBoWJdZ#ep4zYXNM Shaun Walker, Salutin' Putin: inside a Russian troll house, Guardian, April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/putin-kremlin-inside-russian-troll-house> See also NATO Stratcom, Internet Trolling as a hybrid warfare tool: the case of Latvia, <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/internet-trolling-hybrid-warfare-tool-case-latvia-0>

²⁶ Anna Nemtsova, Vladimir Putin's biggest fan club: Media-savvy youth group Set is churning out propaganda and clothing to promote Russia's leader, December 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putins-biggest-fan-club-media-savvy-youth-group-set-is-churning-out-propaganda-and-clothing-9901715.html>

²⁷ Tom Balmforth, 'We fight for democracy' – Russia's pro-Kremlin youth respond to propaganda warning, February 2015, Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/03/russia-ukraine-pro-kremlin-youth-respond-propaganda-warning>

²⁸ An example would include Maria Katasonova and the People's Liberation Front whose sympathies are linked to the international 'alt-right' and who have been active in challenging independent NGOs and participating in pro-Trump trolling around the 2016 US Election. See <https://www.ft.com/content/d53f326e-54db-11e6-befd-2fc0c26b3c60> and <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-01-20/youth-movement-will-be-partying-friday-make-america-great-again-russia>

²⁹ It should be noted of course that Armenia has an active nationalist presence on social media, both from within the country and in the diaspora with a similar focus on Nagorno Karabakh (albeit from the opposite perspective) and Genocide Recognition.

³⁰ Arzu Geybullayeva, In the crosshairs of Azerbaijan's patriotic trolls, November 2016, <https://opendemocracy.net/od-russia/arzu-geybullayeva/azerbaijan-patriotic-trolls>

Service (DDOS) attacks to attempt to shut down their web presence. For years human rights defenders in Azerbaijan have had their emails hacked and social media presence monitored and recent work by Amnesty International has documented some of these instances, including how those now based abroad such as Leyla and Arif Yunus have been targeted. Amnesty have documented the use of 'Spear Phishing', targeted email spoofing fraud attempts, as well as customised malware.³¹

Political activists criticising their opponents online, in sometimes abusive language, is far from just the prerogative of post-Soviet regimes. However the degree of official sanction and organisation makes it worth noting as part of the tools available to governments in the region to promote their agendas and attack dissenting voices.

Making their mark on the world

Influencing the media is only one of the ways in which countries of the FSU seek to influence global narratives to their advantage. The first of other ways is through the use of advertising and event hosting to position their nations on the world stage, shape how they are perceived by the casual observer and enable their governments to use international prestige as a mechanism for boosting domestic support.

Azerbaijan has become one of the most prodigious hosts and promoters in the region. It turned its surprise victory in the 2011 Eurovision song contest into an opportunity to showcase itself to the world through the Baku 2012 Eurovision Song Contest. The event was surrounded by glossy promotion to show off the results of Azerbaijan's oil-fuelled economic transformation. This was followed by the 2015 European Games in Baku, a new competition created by the European Olympic Associations to compete with the pre-existing European Championships in athletics and other disciplines. In 2016 Baku hosted the European Grand Prix and plans to host a regular Azerbaijan Grand Prix from 2017 onwards. Group games and a quarter-final at the 2020 European Football Championships will also take place in Baku. Major construction projects were initiated to help facilitate these, including the new Baku National Stadium (built to host the European Games and the upcoming 2020 football matches), Baku Crystal Hall (built in less than a year to host Eurovision) and the Grand Prix circuit on the streets of Baku. These projects have been the catalyst for large investments in infrastructure, often with opaque procurement practices and a somewhat cavalier approach to planning policy,³² that have helped feed the narrative of Baku as a boom town.

As well as the higher profile events, Azerbaijan has also been active in hosting small to medium size events where organisers are in need of finding a willing partner to pay for the event. Examples include the 2012 Internet Governance Forum, the 2016 United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the 2016 World Sailing Championships and the 2016 Chess Olympiad; these will be followed by future events such as the 2018 European Trampoline Championships³³, the 2019 Summer European Youth Olympic Festival³⁴ and the 2020 European Mens' Artistic Gymnastics Championships.

When the world is not coming to Baku, Baku has been increasingly coming to the world through sponsorship and advertising. Azerbaijan's state owned oil company SOCAR became an official sponsor of the 2016 European Championships, to complement its existing sponsorship of the International Judo Federation, the Montreux Jazz Festival, the World Economic Forum (Davos) and regional initiatives such as the Georgian Chess Federation.³⁵ Understandably, SOCAR was one of the core sponsors of the inaugural 2015 Baku European Games. SOCAR's strategy can be seen to have at least some commercial dimension given that it is involved in the retail sale of petroleum through filling stations in Georgia, Romania, Ukraine and Switzerland as well as Azerbaijan, though clearly its promotion strategy serves a broader strategic purpose. Azerbaijan's sponsorship of Atlético Madrid helped to raise its national profile, coming as it did with that team's rise to European prominence in 2014.³⁶ Advertising has

³¹ Claudio Guarnieri, Joshua Franco and Collin Anderson, False Friends: How Fake Accounts and Crude Malware Targeted Dissidents in Azerbaijan, Amnesty International, March 2017, <https://medium.com/amnesty-insights/false-friends-how-fake-accounts-and-crude-malware-targeted-dissidents-in-azerbaijan-9b6594cafe60#bw6r2ievd>

³² See for example Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan: Illegal Evictions Ahead of Eurovision, February 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/17/azerbaijan-illegal-evictions-ahead-eurovision>

³³ Trend News Agency, Baku to host European Men's Artistic Gymnastics Championship, February 2017, <http://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2717249.html>

³⁴ Dan Palmer, Baku to host 2019 Summer European Youth Olympic Festival, January 2017, <http://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1045735/baku-to-host-2019-summer-european-youth-olympic-festival>

³⁵ SOCAR, Make Your Debut, http://makeyourdebutsocar.com/en_gb/about-socar

³⁶ Owen Gibson, Azerbaijan's sponsorship of Atlético Madrid proves spectacular success May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/may/01/azerbaijan-sponsorship-atletico-madrid-spectacular-success>

been combined with soft-focus journalism in glossy magazines³⁷ and breathless reports about the physical transformation of Baku.³⁸

Even Azerbaijan's grandest efforts however were dwarfed by Russia's preparations for the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, that as well as being an advert for Russian soft power acted as the focal point for a massive investment and stabilisation programme for Russia's volatile North Caucasus region. A headline figure of around \$50 billion was floated as the potential total investment with a tenuous link to the games, including substantial opportunities for corruption.³⁹ Russian state-owned Gas monopoly Gazprom has become a substantial player in European football as one of the core sponsors of the UEFA Champions League⁴⁰ and of Schalke in the German Bundesliga, in addition to its support for Red Star Belgrade and Zenit St Petersburg. Though the company has a range of subsidiaries active in Europe, its approach would seem to be designed to provide reassurance that Gazprom was a firm and reliable fixture in the European landscape rather than a state-owned firm of a potentially hostile power whose dominance of certain European gas markets creates a potential security risk. Its focus on Germany, where it also sponsors Europe's second biggest theme park Europa-Park, is unsurprising given that country's strategic importance and its cooperation with the Nordstream gas pipeline project that runs between the two nations.⁴¹

Kazakhstan has tried to position itself as an honest, reliable broker on the world stage. Its longstanding hosting in Astana of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, a conference of its own creation, has helped to set that tone.⁴² This project is in part about projecting the narrative that Kazakhstan is a stable, moderate Islamic country, one that is non-aligned in the sectarian conflicts besetting the Middle East, an approach that has helped it play a mediation role over Syria. Its positioning as a mature, stabilising presence was integral to its decision to host the 2010 OSCE Summit. In a broader and more investment-focused dimension, Astana is hosting the 2017 Expo. In terms of national branding it is also worth looking at the Astana Pro Team, bankrolled by Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund, Samruk-Kazyna, that helped put the country's newish capital on the international map.⁴³ The top level international cycling team now forms part of the wider 'Astana Presidential Club' that brings it together with FC Astana, boxing, motorsports and basketball organisations to deliver what its website describes as the 'development and promotion of international image of Astana and Kazakhstan based on national multisport brand (sic). The aims of the project are entering the world sports space...'⁴⁴

All of this international work serves a dual purpose; trying to improve national prestige and profile - in part with the aim of encouraging foreign direct investment or tourism, such efforts are also designed to be reflected back to a domestic audience as visible signs of national progress and prestige. It enables the governments in question to argue that if the country is viewed positively from abroad this equates to an implicit endorsement of its practices. Whether such prestige spending can be sustained in the medium to long-term, given the impact of reduced oil prices in recent years, will remain to be seen.⁴⁵ Furthermore, particularly since Azerbaijan's 2012 Eurovision experience, such international ventures are increasingly seen as opportunities for the human rights record of the host country to come under increased scrutiny by NGOs and the media, limiting the opportunities for positive PR, at least in the Western media.

Shaping the political debate

As documented in the FPC's *Sharing Worst Practice* publication in this Exporting Repression series and elsewhere, in recent years there has been a substantial increase in pressure on independent NGOs and think tanks across the

³⁷ As well as puff pieces in Western lifestyle magazines, Azerbaijan's first daughter Leyla Aliyeva was even able to persuade Conde Nast to set up its own Azerbaijan focused glossy, Baku Magazine, <http://www.baku-magazine.com/magazine/>

³⁸ Azerbaijan's Amazing Transformation (Discovery Channel), June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBSB_2CM7UA

³⁹ Did the Winter Olympics in Sochi really cost \$50 billion? A closer look at that figure.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/did-the-winter-olympics-in-sochi-really-cost-50-billion-a-closer-look-at-that-figure/2014/02/10/a29e37b4-9260-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da_story.html?utm_term=.aa33a3c30ac4

⁴⁰ It's we light up football adverts are an integral part of the match television coverage <https://www.gazprom-football.com/en/Home.htm>. See also Jack Pitt Brook, Chelsea vs Schalke: Controversial Gazprom deals cast cloud ahead of Champions League game, Independent, September 2014,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/european/chelsea-vs-schalke-controversial-gazprom-deals-cast-cloud-ahead-of-champions-league-game-9736801.html>

⁴¹ Though again it is worth being clear that Gazprom has a number of subsidiaries active in the German market.

⁴² Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, <http://www.religions-congress.org/index.php?lang=english>

⁴³ Akmola became Kazakhstan's Capital in December 1997 with its name changed to Astana in May 1998. The Astana cycling team was founded in 2007

⁴⁴ Astana President's Professional Sports Club

<http://www.astanaproteam.kz/modules.php?name=astana&page=kazakhstan-club&pid=65>

⁴⁵ Heaping on the Caviar Democracy, 1843 Magazine (The Economist)

<https://www.1843magazine.com/features/heaping-on-the-caviar-diplomacy>

former Soviet Union.⁴⁶ This is particularly the case for those who receive funding from Western governments and foundations, which have been targeted under variations of the Russian Foreign Agents Law, that creates onerous specific reporting requirements and forces organisations to announce that they are a ‘foreign agent’ in all written and verbal statements. Despite this trend at home FSU governments are active in attempting to influence the political debate in Europe and the United States through the use of public affairs firms and lobbying organisations, the support of sympathetic politicians, academics, NGOs and think tanks. A number of the contributions here address different dimensions of the challenge with Dr David Lewis and Melissa Hooper focusing on European research and lobbying groups with links to governments in the region, while Ana Dvali and Revaz Koiava look at the way in which the Georgian Government under the leadership of then President Mikheil Saakashvili was used to help reframe how the country was viewed in Western capitals. The earlier *Institutionally Blind* publication in this series has addressed the issue of Western politicians being involved in pro-regime groups and sympathetic election monitoring missions, though Lewis and Hooper expand on those issues here.⁴⁷

In addition to the Russian, Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani cases addressed by other authors it is worth noting that US and European lobbying firms have played an active role supporting different factions and oligarchs in Ukrainian politics since the Orange Revolution, with the same firm sometimes representing entirely different viewpoints from one year to the next,⁴⁸ with both Trump and Clinton Election Campaign Managers Paul Manafort and John Podesta having previous links to President Yanukovich’s party and groups such as the European Centre for a Modern Ukraine.⁴⁹ Some of the more closed Central Asian regimes have focused on support for small scale friendship groups such as the British Uzbek Society.⁵⁰

FSU governments are not the only voices from the region that try to shape the international narrative about their countries. In a similar fashion, opposition forces from the region have sought to support events and analysis from those with a more critical take on what is going on. For example, a number of groups linked to jailed billionaire Mikael Khodorkovsky and his former company Yukos Oil engaged with think tanks and other organisations that took a more critical line on Putin’s Russia.⁵¹ Since his release Khodorkovsky and his family have developed a number of organisations including the Open Russian Foundation and the affiliated research arm the Institute of Modern Russia to influence the debate on Russia, who partner with other think tanks to host events.⁵² Opposition groups and out-of-favour oligarchs work with public affairs firms to protect their personal and legal interests and attempt to influence Western public opinion in a more regime critical direction.

Countries from across the former Soviet Union are making use of Western-style soft power tools to influence public opinion and promote their interests, even when they are restricting the reach of Western organisations within their own borders. This essay collection seeks to give an overview of the developing landscape, assess the key issues and put forward new approaches on how best to respond to the challenge.

⁴⁶ Adam Hug (ed.), *Sharing worst practice: How countries and institutions in the former Soviet Union help create legal tools of repression*, May 2016, <http://fpc.org.uk/publications/sharingworstpractice>

⁴⁷ Adam Hug (ed.), *Institutionally blind? International organisations and human rights abuses in the former Soviet Union*, February 2016, <http://fpc.org.uk/publications/institutionallyblind>

⁴⁸ Andrew Rettman, *Ukraine chief seeks friends in EU capital*, EU Observer, October 2010, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/31161> APCO Worldwide for example has provided support to the Presidential Administrations of both President Yushchenko and President Yanukovich as well as to the Premiership during the term of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, <http://www.odwyerpr.com/story/public/4873/2015-06-29/apco-gives-pr-support-embattled-ukraine.html> and <http://www.smi-online.co.uk/documentportal/speakerprofile/148501.pdf>

⁴⁹ See Luke Harding, *How Trump’s campaign chief got a strongman elected president of Ukraine*, August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/16/donald-trump-campaign-paul-manafort-ukraine-yanukovich> and Eli Lake, *Ukraine’s D.C. Lobbyists in Disarray as Dictator Flees*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/25/ukraine-s-d-c-lobbyists-in-disarray-as-dictator-flees.html>

⁵⁰ Corporate Europe Observatory, *Spin doctors to the autocrats: How European PR firms whitewash repressive regimes*, January 2015, https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/20150120_spindoctors_mr.pdf

⁵¹ This engagement during this period included with the Foreign Policy Centre.

⁵² See for example: Henry Jackson Society, *Event: ‘25 Years On: Russia Since the Fall of the Soviet Union’*, December 2016, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2016/12/07/event-25-years-on-russia-since-the-fall-of-the-soviet-union/>

What our authors say

Rašo Kužel looks at the popularity of Russian media in the former Soviet Union countries. He points out the differences in the role and reach of the main Russian channels in Armenia, Belarus and Moldova, compared to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. He concludes that while it is not easy to estimate the real impact of Russian propaganda in these countries, it is clear that the lack of objective reporting, as well as a lack of diverse views among Russian-speaking audiences, poses a real challenge across the region. Kužel believes that if national media enjoyed high levels of trust and popularity in the Eastern Partnership countries, it would serve as a good tool against Russian media propaganda and criticises the fact that governments in these countries have done very little or nothing to encourage the existence of an independent, vibrant and competitive media landscape, essential for providing a variety of news and views.

Natalya Antelava writes that in Ukraine, the international media was not ready for the disinformation onslaught and was involuntarily aiding the alternative narrative constructed by the Kremlin. The mistakes of Western media outlets in Ukraine offer valuable lessons to all journalists covering the 'post-fact', 'post-truth' world.

Dr Justin Schlosberg critically reflects on the respective editorial missions of both RT and the BBC, drawing on a comparative case study analysis of coverage during the second Euromaidan conflict in Ukraine. Amid a global news paradigm where truth and reality are becoming ever more contested, he argues for a new approach to global news ethics that avoids some of the problems inherent in both the concepts of 'impartiality' and 'alternative news'.

Ben Nimmo argues that Russia's disinformation efforts in Sweden and Finland have met with mixed success. The local language variants of the Sputnik internet channel failed to penetrate or win a substantial following, and were perceived as a Kremlin propaganda tool. They closed down after less than a year. In the aftermath, evidence has emerged of a shift in policy towards a more indirect approach, using local voices which endorse official Russian government positions and policies, largely from the political fringes. This approach is still evolving; however, growing public awareness of the concept of information war and the role of political extremes in it means that the Kremlin's information projects continue to face scepticism.

Dr David Lewis writes that while modern authoritarian states still imprison journalists and close down newspapers, they increasingly rely on more sophisticated ways to suppress criticism and skew narratives in their favour. Post-Soviet states such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan use slick media and lobbying operations to boost their image at home and abroad. They often hire Western PR companies to promote their views in international media, to lobby European and American politicians, and to discredit political opponents. Authoritarian states create their own think tanks and non-governmental organisations, but use such groups to promote government views. They often rely on pliant or supportive Western academics and politicians to channel official views, or to act as uncritical election monitors. Non-democratic states have also learned to use social media to their advantage, both as an effective method of surveillance and as a new platform for their messaging. Lewis argues that the international activism of Eurasia's authoritarian states deserves more critical attention.

Melissa Hooper argues that the Russian government's use of various media and messaging tools to disrupt the application of universal human rights norms in the EU and US, and declare democracy a failed experiment, includes a new front. This is the use of seemingly-independent think tanks and foundations to put forth xenophobic ideas that target migrant, Muslim, LGBTQ, and other minority communities as threats to those who 'belong'. These think tanks and foundations are not independent, however, they are funded by the Russian government either directly, or by Russian-government-partnered oligarchs who act as agents to spread the Kremlin's ideologies. Organisations such as the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation or the World Public Forum produce messaging that sacrifices the rights of minorities as they aim to demonstrate that the current EU and US democracies are failing and unsafe, and in need of replacement – which Russia can offer. For all these reasons, the EU and US governments, or at least intelligence agencies and civil society, should work together to document the funding and influence that are the source of these anti-human rights and non-evidence-based proposals.

Ana Dvali and Revaz Koiava examine how the international promotion of Georgia intensified after the 2003 Rose Revolution. The new United National Movement Government of Georgia set ambitious goals and remained committed to trying to promote the country's image as a democratic and reformist state around the world,

something its supporters believe had a great impact on the country's development. However, critics argue that the image the government tried to create was far from reality, and the substantial amount of funds spent on promotion were a waste. The situation changed after 2012; the new Georgian Dream government has focused less on international promotion and spends fewer resources to shape international opinion. They compare the international promotion strategies of the two governments; in particular, how they have interacted with various international actors and which instruments they used to raise international awareness of the Georgian national brand.

Arzu Geybullayeva explores the ways in which authoritarian regimes from the former Soviet Union use lobbying and nation branding to promote their achievements and blunt criticisms. She focuses on the cases of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, using the idea of the 'brand state'. The essay also looks at the efforts these governments make online to harass their opponents.

Richard Giragosian writes the Republic of Armenia's relationship with its global Armenian diaspora has always been complex, and at times, even confrontational. Yet, despite a degree of misunderstanding and a deep cultural divide, this relationship is both symbiotic and significant. While the diaspora was deeply engaged in providing economic support to the Armenian state through the 1990s, the combination of entrenched corruption and a closed economy has ended that period of financial support and investment, though remittances particularly from those temporarily working in Russia still provide a major source of funds. The politically sophisticated Armenian diaspora, well-integrated and politically active in several Western countries, play an important role in support of Armenian foreign policy. Despite occasional differences, especially over attempts to normalise relations with Turkey, the diaspora's diplomatic leverage gives the Armenian state a distinct advantage, particularly in contrast to their Azerbaijani and Turkish rivals. But Armenia has failed to fully harness the natural advantage of its global diaspora, and the diaspora has never fulfilled expectations of more direct engagement in such critical issues as democratisation and sustainable economic development in Armenia.

How many people watch Russian media in the former Soviet Union countries?

Rasfo Kužel

Television remains the most efficient method of influencing public opinion in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) countries. So what is the real impact of Russian TV channels in these countries? The situation differs from country to country. This essay takes a closer look at the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The role of the main Russian channels is more significant in Armenia, Belarus and Moldova, where these channels are still freely available⁵³ and remain quite popular, than in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine, where the potential impact of these channels is more limited. In Ukraine, and to some extent also in Georgia, the popularity of Russian media has been undermined due to the armed conflicts in 2014 and 2008 respectively.⁵⁴

Notwithstanding the war with Russia nine years ago, the potential impact of Russian propaganda in Georgian society is still significant. During the 2016 parliamentary elections, unlike in previous campaigns, there were more parties that directly or indirectly pursued anti-Western views and openly advocated closer relations with Russia. One of them, the Alliance of Patriots, which favoured greater integration with Russia and opposed Georgia joining NATO, was able to narrowly pass the 5 percent threshold needed to get into the parliament. By comparison, many smaller parties with a clear pro-Western orientation failed to win any seats.

According to National Democratic Institute research, twenty percent of television viewers in Georgia watch via satellite, cable and the internet the news and current affairs programmes on foreign channels, with the majority of these people relying on Russian channels, notably Channel One, RTR and Russia 1. English speaking channels, such as CNN, Euronews and BBC World Service were only the fifth, sixth and eighth preferred information sources on the list.⁵⁵ The pro-Russian narrative can be found in some Georgian media as well. Monitoring conducted by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) in 2014 and 2015 found that Russian propaganda was present in the form of anti-Western rhetoric on three media outlets. More specifically, it was Georgian channel Obiektivi, which is a general broadcast licensee available via cable networks, and two websites, sakinformi.ge and geworld.ge. The study further revealed that this type of reporting was not present on the mainstream media.⁵⁶

The potential impact of Russian media is more significant in ethnic minority areas, where Georgian language media does not have a good outreach. For example, in the Javakheti region, people have always had problems receiving local news, so they mainly watch Russian channels. The majority of the population in minority-settled areas use Russian channels as their primary source of information. Regrettably, the central Georgian media do not report stories that are relevant to the minority-populated regions. The situation is even worse in Abkhazia with almost no Georgian mainstream media present there. According to a poll conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) for National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2016, as many as 30 percent of people in minority settlements opined that Georgia's foreign policy should be pro-Russian, with only 7 percent favouring a pro-Western orientation. By contrast, 16 percent of respondents who lived in urban areas with access to Georgian mainstream media preferred pro-Western foreign policy orientation against 8 percent who preferred pro-Russian.⁵⁷ As such, it is clear that Russia's influence is more significant in those areas where there is no alternative information to Kremlin narratives.

In Ukraine, some measures restricting Russian media have been introduced as a result of the conflict in the eastern part of the country, including a ban on Russian channels introduced by the broadcasting regulator in July 2014. In a survey by the NGO Detector Media 13.2 percent of Ukrainian households could receive the Russian channel Channel 1, 12.2 percent could get NTV, 11.6 percent Russia TV and 6.8 percent Dozhd. Of these viewers the mechanisms through which they access Russian media is via satellite (78.7 percent), the Internet (7.8 percent), cable TV (5.8 percent) and using an analogue antenna (37.4 percent in the east of Ukraine).⁵⁸ According to Diana Dutsyk, executive

⁵³ Mainly through terrestrial transmitters but also in the form of localized version of Russian TV channels (for example NTV – Belarus).

⁵⁴ Monitoring of Russian channels by MEMO 98, Internews Ukraine and Yerevan Press Club, Independent Journalism Center (Moldova), Yeni Nesil Union of Journalists (Azerbaijan), Belarusian Association of Journalists (Belarus), and Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics (Georgia), Final report 2015 http://memo98.sk/uploads/content_galleries/source/memo/russia/full-report-in-english.pdf

⁵⁵ Public Attitudes in Georgia, National Democratic Institute. April 2016, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_0.pdf

⁵⁶ Anti-western propaganda, media monitoring report, Media Development Foundation. 2014-15, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/library/Anti-Western+propaganda>

⁵⁷ National Democratic Institute, Public Attitudes in Georgia, Nov 2016, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_November%202016%20poll_Issues_ENG_vf.pdf

⁵⁸ Survey of Russian propaganda Influence on Public Opinion in Ukraine was conducted by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology for NGO Detector Media in December 2016 http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector_media_en/reports_eng/survey_of_russian_propaganda_influence_on_public_opinion_in_ukraine_findings/

director of NGO Detector Media, the information war carried out by Russia against Ukraine has been a dominant factor influencing the quality of reporting. Some journalists drawn into this conflict started performing a counter-propaganda role, which, in her opinion, consequently makes media discourse biased, engaged, and emotional.⁵⁹ As a result, people are often confused and not able to tell the facts from controversial points, which is the principal aim of Russian propaganda. For example, when asked who was guilty of shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in a poll by the Levada Centre, as many as 81 percent of ethnic Russian respondents living in Ukraine put the blame on the Ukrainian military. Notwithstanding the evidence that the plane was downed by a Buk-M1 anti-aircraft missile fired from rebel-controlled territory, their positions appeared to be aligned with the Russian channels' reporting which suggested that either a Ukrainian missile or a Ukrainian aircraft was responsible for shooting down the plane.⁶⁰

A poll conducted by the Kyiv International Sociology Institute for Detector Media in December 2016 found that some 87 percent of Ukrainians receive news primarily from Ukrainian national channels, while almost 8 percent use Russian TV channels. As for the military conflict in Donbass, Ukrainian TV is trusted the most (40 percent), whereas trust in Russian television is very low (only 1.3 percent). At the same time, however, when asked to what extent they believed that the Kyiv events of winter 2014 were an illegal military coup d'état, as many as 34.3 percent of respondents agreed, and about 48 percent disagreed.⁶¹ The Kremlin-sponsored narratives have the biggest impact in eastern Ukraine, including in the territories controlled by Ukraine, given the availability of the majority of Russian media. Only about half of the population in the ATO zone has access to Ukrainian channels, with people from several districts near occupied Crimea being able to watch only Russian television channels.⁶²

In Belarus, Russian content is dominant in the media with television channels relying on entertainment and other programming provided by Russian television networks. Pro-Kremlin media continues to play a significant role, with their news and entertainment shows available on TV channels that are free of charge (including on so called *hybrid* channels, such as *NTV Belarus* or *RTR Belarus*). For example, when answering a question on their opinion about the accession of Crimea by Russia, 59 percent of Belarusians opined that it was a reunification of Russian lands with Russia, a restoration of historical justice which was the official Russian version of the story pursued by the main Russian TV channels.⁶³ *Interfax-Zapad* and *Prime-TASS*, two Russian-owned information agencies, sell newswire services to other media in Belarus. As for non-Russian foreign ownership, it remains very limited, with Russian companies in charge of two popular newspapers, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii* and *Argumenty i Fakty*, two news agencies, *Interfax-Zapad* and *Prime-TASS*, and VTV, an entertainment television channel.

In Azerbaijan, only a small segment of the population uses Russian TV channels as their information source, and they are available only through cable television, satellite antenna or the Internet (the same as in Georgia). At the same time, however, when reviewing the content of Azerbaijani TV channels, it is possible to find similarities with the Russian media narratives in the way they portray foreign affairs. The mainstream media in Azerbaijan defend the state from the global information war being waged by Western countries. Russian, as well as Turkish media outlets, contribute to such conspiracy theories. Several resources in Russian serve the Russian-speaking minority. It has to be said however that none of these differ in content from those broadcast in Azerbaijani. Almost all the main news media also broadcast in Russian.

According to studies conducted in Moldova, Russian media has the highest credibility among 15 percent of the population. By comparison, 13 per cent of the population trusts Moldovan media and 7 percent Romanian.⁶⁴ The propaganda from Kremlin-controlled Russian TV channels that is rebroadcast in Moldova, as well as a launch of an online portal Sputnik in 2015, further influenced the media sector. The media in general adapt the editorial content knowing that Romanian language speakers have a more pro-Western orientation, while those that speak Russian are usually pro-Russian.

⁵⁹ IREX Media Sustainability Index, Ukraine 2016 <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2016-ukraine.pdf>

⁶⁰ Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, Russian and Ukrainian TV viewers live on different planets, Washington Post, February 2015,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/26/russian-and-ukrainian-tv-viewers-live-on-different-planets/?utm_term=.08bd4269803f

⁶¹ Survey of Russian propaganda Influence on Public Opinion in Ukraine was conducted by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology for NGO Detector Media in December 2016 http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector_media_en/reports_eng/survey_of_russian_propaganda_influence_on_public_opinion_in_ukraine_findings/

⁶² ATO zone or Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone is a term used to identify Ukrainian territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions under control of Russian military forces and pro-Russian separatists.

⁶³ A public opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies in March 2015 available at <http://www.iiseps.org/analitica/829>

⁶⁴ The Barometer of Public Opinion of the Institute of Public Policy in October-November 2014 at <http://www.ipp.md/?l=en>

In Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, reporting by the leading local media on key local and global issues offers an alternative to reporting by Russian channels and thus helps to 'balance' their impact. The media in the countries that are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, Belarus and Armenia, are not able to offset the impact of Russian media as the leading local TV channels (with comparable viewership to the Russian channels) are constrained in covering controversial external political problems.⁶⁵ In Armenia, the coverage of the armed conflict in Ukraine clearly demonstrated that it was mostly presented by the mainstream media in a similar way to that of pro-Kremlin channels. The major proportion of international news broadcast by television outlets is based on that provided by Russian channels.

Ethnic Russians form the largest minority group in many Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Moreover, many people were taught in the Russian language which makes a significant portion of the population bilingual – and thus able to follow the Russian media. When it comes to particular programmes, it is the news programmes on Russian TV channels that are particularly attractive to audiences. People consider them to be more professional than the available local alternatives. Russian media have sufficient facilities and equipment for the production and distribution of news. Four major state television channels that receive both state funding and advertising revenue provide programmes of a very high technical quality, creating high audience expectations in this respect. The Russian media best succeed in influencing public opinion particularly in those countries where their broadcasting is not restricted. This is apparent in how people in the EaP countries perceive what is happening in Ukraine as well as the confrontation between Russia and the West.

Politicians in the Kremlin make no secret of the fact that they are spending millions of dollars on messaging that supports their worldview and their larger strategic goals. When looking closer at the content of Russian TV channels, it becomes clear that the Kremlin has taken information propaganda into the national security context to significantly influence the opinions and dispositions of local and international society. The Russian narrative consists of emotional messages aimed at creating negative stereotypes of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, discrediting the Western political or cultural space and supporting homophobic and xenophobic opinions among the public. By pursuing these myths, Russia posits itself as the only real ally to FSU countries with a collective identity, faith, history and culture. Simultaneously, it portrays the West as an existential threat to all the values mentioned above.⁶⁶

While it is not easy to estimate the real impact of Russian propaganda in FSU countries, it is clear that the lack of objective reporting, as well as a lack of diverse views among Russian-speaking audiences, poses a real challenge across the region. The various monitoring exercises of Russian media revealed that the Kremlin does not appear to aim so much at justifying its domestic and foreign policies, but rather at undermining the confidence of international audiences in the legitimacy of their governments and, in more general terms, Western liberal values.

Russian TV channels still matter in most of the FSU countries. It is also possible to conclude that Russia's influence is more significant in those areas where there is no alternative information to Kremlin narratives. It is however important to have good quality reporting as a real alternative and not channels which defend the state and serve as its propaganda tools. The national media enjoying high level of trust and popularity in the EaP countries would serve as a good tool against the Russian media propaganda. Regrettably, EaP countries have done very little or nothing to encourage the existence of an independent, vibrant and competitive media landscape, which is essential for providing a variety of news and views. The former Vice President of the United States Hubert Humphrey once said: "Propaganda, to be effective, must be believed. To be believed, it must be credible. To be credible, it must be true." In the times when we are exposed to lies, half-truths and disinformation, we need good quality reporting which should be supported in all countries affected by Russian propaganda.

⁶⁵ Monitoring of Russian channels by MEMO 98, Internews Ukraine and Yerevan Press Club, Independent Journalism Center (Moldova), "Yeni Nesil" Union of Journalists (Azerbaijan), Belarusian Association of Journalists (Belarus), and Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics (Georgia), Final report 2015
http://memo98.sk/uploads/content_galleries/source/memo/russia/full-report-in-english.pdf

⁶⁶ Ibid.

How (not to) cover lies: Lessons of Russian disinformation

Natalia Antelava⁶⁷

On March 12 2014, long before anyone could imagine Donald Trump becoming President of the United States and concepts of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' turning into global buzzwords, a group of journalists gathered outside a Ukrainian military base in Perevalnoe, outside Simferopol, the regional capital of Crimea. Standing next to several dozen screaming protestors, the journalists, many of them from Russia, watched how hundreds of soldiers armed with Kalashnikovs and light antitank missiles and wearing balaclavas and brand-new insignia-free uniforms, lined up along the perimeter of the long concrete fence surrounding the base.

The events unfolding in Crimea were so bizarre, so unprecedented, none of us journalists quite knew how to describe them. Later, Russian channels would call it "re-unification" and the rest of the world would label it annexation but at the time no one could be quite sure what Putin's game in Crimea was. The Russian media, however, seemed to have been under strict orders. "Do these soldiers look like volunteers to you?" a chain-smoking Russian TV journalist in Perevalnoe asked me, crowning the rhetorical question with an elaborate profanity. Minutes earlier I had overheard him on his phone with the editor in Moscow after his TV crew lost their live link to the studio. The editor told him the link had been cut because the reporter called Russian soldiers Russian soldiers and that he would either have to stick to 'volunteer battalions' or leave Crimea. "I am ashamed," said the journalist, who asked me not to name him. But from then on, following his editor's and Vladimir Putin's lead, he would only refer to the Russian troops in Crimea as "self-organised volunteer battalions." A mortgage and three children, he explained to me, is what made him stick to the lie.

Western journalists covering Crimea and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine did not have to make difficult moral choices, but they too were pushed into an alternative reality constructed by the Kremlin, and involuntarily aided its narrative. Fast forward three years and today we live in the world where 'post truth' is a real word and alternative reality has spread far beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Whether it is covering the effects of Brexit on the NHS or politicians in Washington who now present 'alternative facts', reporting on lies is more than ever part of the job description of many journalists. And as journalists find their way in our post-fact, post-truth world, they should learn from the mistakes the Western media made in Ukraine.

The Ukraine conflict became a real challenge to the accepted rules of Western-style 'objective' reporting. Balance is at the core of Western journalism, which teaches reporters to present multiple sides of the story and to make sure that all their reporting is based on information that can be verified. But the Ukraine conflict, more so than any crisis before it, showed that unless this quest for balance is accompanied with in-depth, committed, nuanced reporting, it works against the larger goal of providing an accurate picture of what is going on.

The reason why Ukraine became the litmus test for international media was because it was the first crisis truly saturated with lies and disinformation from all sides. Of course propaganda, and fake news have always been part of any conflict, but in the era of information overload, where every opinion has a platform, disinformation reached an entirely new level.

The international media did not seem to be ready for the disinformation assault. With a flurry of press-releases, statements and interviews the Kremlin skilfully disputed the facts on the ground, and the Western media used the Kremlin's lines to provide 'balance' to those facts on the ground. Unlike Russian journalists, most of my colleagues from the Western media outlets did not use Vladimir Putin's 'volunteer self-defence unit' term to describe the Russian soldiers, but very few actually called them what they were: Russian troops. Instead they used more obscure terms like 'unidentified soldiers' or 'little green men'.⁶⁸ This, academic Marta Dyzhok argues, means that as a result the media failed to frame the story clearly, allowing allowed disinformation to shape the narrative. In other words, unwillingly the international media endorsed a lie. Dyzhok writes 'The choice of images, terminology, information presented or omitted in many international media reports is one reason that the entire issue of what happened in

⁶⁷ Natalia Antelava is a co-founder and CEO of Coda Story (<http://www.codastory.com/>), a single-issue crisis reporting platform. She is an Emmy-nominee and award winning journalist originally from Tbilisi, Georgia. She started her career freelancing in West Africa but has since been BBC's resident correspondent in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East, Washington DC and most recently India. She has reported undercover from Burma, Yemen and Uzbekistan and her investigations into human rights abuses in Central Asia, Iraq and the United States have won her a number of awards. Prior to setting up Coda Story, she covered the war in Eastern Ukraine for the BBC and the New Yorker @antelava

⁶⁸ Vitaly Shevchenko, "Little green men" or "Russian invaders"?, BBC News, March 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26532154>

Crimea, how, why, and the results, are still subject to debate. To an uninformed audience, it was not evident whether Russia was protecting ethnic Russians from an illegitimate fascist, right-wing government in Kiev, or whether Russia was invading a neighbouring country. The fact that Crimea's legitimately elected government was deposed at gunpoint was not highlighted, yet plenty of attention was devoted to the event called a referendum a few weeks later'.⁶⁹

The Ukrainian conflict was, by no means, underreported. It was covered extensively albeit with, typical for the media, lulls in between outbursts of coverage when the global media attention moved elsewhere. However, despite some outstanding pieces of reportage, for the most part Western media simply juxtaposed two opposing narratives, without going deeper or finding hard evidence of lies on either side.

Of course, lack of depth and superficiality are accusations made about journalism on virtually every subject, and the media often has very legitimate reasons to be superficial. The very nature of large-scale news operations on breaking news stories lends them to superficiality: reporters are rotated in and out of the conflict, while on the ground they are asked to file constant updates and their reporting is complimented, or balanced, with arrays of studio interviews that offer plenty of opinions. But in the age of the constant onslaught of alternative opinions, facts and information, this proved to be a dangerous way to operate.

'Perhaps the greatest shortcoming in international reporting was that the causes of violence were not adequately explored'. Dyzhok argues that the same applied to the coverage of the Maidan protests which proceeded Crimea saying that 'Dramatic images of clashes were widely circulated, and made it onto many top-photos-of-2014 lists. (However, the overwhelming majority of protesters were peaceful, creative, and only a small extreme element advocated violent methods. The radicals caught the attention of the cameras, as did their slogans and nationalist insignia). But few reports were asking the question: 'who instigated the violence?''⁷⁰

The first lesson of Ukraine is that in the era when information is a weapon, 'who' and 'why' should take priority over of journalism's other Ws: 'when' and 'what'. It is asking the 'who' and 'why' questions that allow journalists to cut through noise and lies, go beyond superficiality of the daily news cycle, to report in-depth and to confront 'fake news' head on.

And this is also where Ukraine offers its second lesson. Today, as media professionals and experts debate 'fake news' some ask whether confronting fake news is necessary at all? In an article 'Is fake news a fake problem?' Jacob Nelson, a PhD candidate at Northwestern University argues that according to his research, fake news audiences remain extremely small and users of 'fake news' sites often visit other, legitimate media sources.⁷¹

But Nelson's own conclusion is counter-intuitive to his argument, writing that 'If half of the fake news audience had been approaching both real and fake news for the past year with an open mind, you would expect that audience to shrink as readers eventually abandoned fake news sites. That this has not happened suggests the fake news audience isn't reading real news because they believe it might also be accurate, but because these sources are popular and they want to know how the rest of the world 'falsely' understands current events. If this is indeed the case, it means solving the fake news problem will be much trickier than limiting its supply.'

Nelson notes that so far, solutions to fake news problems focus on myth-busting and fact-checking websites. 'Facebook recently integrated fact-checking into its publication process, while Google no longer allows Google-served advertising to appear on sites that 'misrepresent' information'.⁷² Others focus on improving journalism: BuzzFeed Editor-in-Chief Ben Smith has advocated for more support for objective, accurate reporting as a way to counterbalance the fake news creeping its way across social media feeds.⁷³

⁶⁹ Marta Dyczok, The Ukraine Story in Western Media, E-International Relations, April 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/30/the-ukraine-story-in-western-media/>

⁷⁰ Marta Dyczok, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Jacob L Nelson, Is 'fake news' a fake problem? Columbia Journalism Review, January 2017, <http://www.cjr.org/analysis/fake-news-facebook-audience-drudge-breitbart-study.php>

⁷² Ken Doctor, Newsonomics: Fake-news fury forces Google and Facebook to change policy, Nieman Lab, November 2016, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/11/newsonomics-fake-news-fury-forces-google-and-facebook-to-change-policy/> See also Emily Bell, Facebook drains the fake news swamp with new, experimental partnerships, December 2016, http://www.cjr.org/tow_center/facebook_drains_fake_news_swamp_new_experimental_partnerships.php

⁷³ Ben Smith, How can Tech and Media fight fake news, November 2016, http://www.cjr.org/first_person/ben_smith_fake_news_buzzfeed_facebook.php

But Ukraine showed that none of this is enough. The danger and power of fake news, whether state-funded like it is in Russia or commercially driven as it often is with sites in the United States, is that it distorts reality, introduces doubt and undermines legitimate arguments. If in the Soviet time's the Kremlin's goal was to get people on its side, these days the goal is to make them think that 'everyone else is bad'. Fake news designed for click-bait may have a different goal, but ultimately they have the same effect: they muddy fact-based narratives, create alternative realities, maim truth and allow politicians to call anything or anyone "fake news".

In Ukraine very few Western reporters made an effort to investigate the greatest triggers of violence: the lies, from both sides, which helped to fuel the conflict. As the Ukrainian media responded to the Kremlin's information war with its own, a lot less sophisticated and much more chaotic propaganda onslaught, the Western media chose to stay out of it. It seemed as if the international media organizations never asked themselves the question which is topping their agenda now: How do we cover lies? In the case of Ukraine: how do we show the correlation between the lies broadcast on television and the battle unfolding on the ground. Balanced reporting is not enough to cover the murky, slippery subject of disinformation, and as I found out for myself it is only when journalists get in to specifics that a lie can convincingly be de-bunked.

For a long time, amid constant live updates covering the war for the BBC, I did not have the time and resources to focus on the disinformation element of the war, even though I was always acutely aware of how the hatred broadcast on Russian TV screens led to bloodletting on the ground. That parallel reality was also less of a priority for my editors, who were more interested in clearer, more easily digestible, newsier stories of gun-battles and protests. But in April 2015, while buying a quick snack in a supermarket in Donetsk my producer Abdujalil Abdurasulov and I overheard two women discussing a devastating rocket attack that killed a 10 year old girl in the city's suburbs. The women were understandably angry with the Ukrainian troops ("the neo-nazis" as they referred to them) who had fired the rocket. The story had been picked up by all Russian channels and we decided to look into it as well. There was a slight lull in news at the time, which allowed us to spend a couple of days on the story - an unbelievable luxury in the world of daily news. The rebel spokesperson Eduard Basurin, confirmed the death of the girl to us and the area where she was killed, but he refused to give the family's address, so we then spent hours looking for them in the area where the attack had allegedly taken place. When we didn't find any traces of the family or the attack, we went to hospitals and the city's morgue that should have received the body of the girl, they had not. Eventually, we approached Russian television crew that had reported on the story and they confessed, on camera, that "the girl never existed" and that they broadcast the story because "they were told to".

The piece on the Donetsk girl that never existed ended up being one of the BBC's most watched TV pieces from Eastern Ukraine, with almost 2 million views on Facebook alone. By the time the piece had aired, Vladimir Putin had himself debunked his own lie of 'volunteer battalions' by admitting that they were indeed Russian troops.⁷⁴ It cemented the narrative of 'Russian disinformation' within the Western media mind-set, but the fact that the ultimate de-bunking was done by Putin himself also de-legitimised it. I have not been able to find a single piece of journalism that managed to trace a 'little green man' in Crimea to his hometown in Russia. Later on, the pieces that provided specific, vivid, character-based examples of this disinformation remained few and far between. Among the most notable examples was an excellent investigation by Simon Ostrovsky for Vice News which traced a story of an alleged 'volunteer soldier' in Eastern Ukraine back to his military base in Buriatia, Russia. What made Ostrovsky's reportage so effective and so widely watched was the fact that it went beyond stating that 'Russians lie', instead it asked 'who' and it explained 'why'.⁷⁵

This, I believe, is the only way that the media can counter the menace of fake news. It is only through specific characters that media can break through the fog of generalities which is the oxygen that disinformation breathes. If fake news thrives on characters that don't exist, like Syrian refugees who rape girls in Frankfurt, then reporting that counters them should too rely on specific, compelling characters that debunk these myths.

⁷⁴ Shaun Walker, Putin admits Russian military presence in Ukraine for first time, December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine> See also RT, Putin acknowledges Russian military servicemen were in Crimea, April 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-defense-russian-soldiers-108/>

⁷⁵ Simon Ostrovsky, Selfie Soldiers: Russia Checks in to Ukraine, Vice News, June 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zssIFN2mso>

This is the kind of journalism that requires the most commitment and resources, but without which we will continue to present to our increasingly sophisticated audiences simplified and ultimately misleading narratives about the world.

In Ukraine, lack of these questions ultimately led to the victory of 'fake news' over real news. Of course, the Russian disinformation did not convince global public opinion that all Ukrainians were 'neo-nazis', but it never meant to. It won because it stripped the Western media of its ability to frame the crisis clearly.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of Ukraine is that without editorial commitment to in-depth, nuanced reporting on complex crises, the media will continue to sink deeper into its own echo-chamber, polarizing societies rather than informing them and endorsing fake news instead of proving them what they are: lies.

In search of credibility: RT and the BBC in a 'post-truth' world

Dr Justin Schlosberg⁷⁶

Introduction: Cracks in the Western (neo) liberal consensus

Among many other things, 2016 will surely be remembered as the year that the terms 'post truth' and 'fake news' took root in political, journalistic, academic and popular discourse. Barely a week seems to go by where they are absent from headlines or the focus of a new call for academic papers. So pervasive is their use that they have become virtually devoid of meaning, with everyone from the US president to tin pot dictators invoking them to describe unfavourable news.

If we are suffering from a deficit in factual or evidence-based reporting, it is certainly not a new phenomenon. The British tabloid press will hardly be remembered as champions of truth-telling. For decades, media critics have lamented what they saw as a growing tendency among the press to privilege gossip over facts, sensationalism over serious news, and spectacle over informative reporting.⁷⁷

But the same cannot be said of their broadcasting counterparts in the UK, and especially the BBC which continues to enjoy an unrivalled reputation for quality, accuracy and balance. According to Ofcom's most recent data on news consumption, BBC television news is ranked higher than all of its competitors in this respect, with 61 percent of its users considering it both an accurate and trustworthy news source (compared to 45 percent for CNN and 35 percent for RT).⁷⁸

In the global news market, the longstanding Anglo-American hegemony established through CNN and BBC World was first challenged by the rise of Qatar-based network Al Jazeera in the early 2000s.⁷⁹ The channel's early success owed much to its reputation as a source of alternative frames for the US-led War on Terror, and the reactionary responses of US political elites seemed to underline its disruptive potential.⁸⁰ But it was the launch of its English-language channel in 2006, fronted by established and respected western journalists, which marked the most significant disruption to the BBC-CNN duopoly.

What Al Jazeera exposed in both the BBC and CNN was not lies or propaganda in a crude sense, nor an exclusive preoccupation with issues that conformed to a Western ideological agenda, nor the omission of critical perspectives of Western governments and ideals. But they did expose a tendency towards selection of stories and facts that, on balance, aligned with a Western neoliberal consensus and definition of world problems. It was into this fracturing and polarising global agenda that RT emerged with an explicit mission to cover issues and perspectives marginalised by the so-called 'mainstream media'.

Underlying this discourse is an implicit critique of impartiality, and its association with news authority, credibility and professionalism. The problem with impartiality has always been about *which* critical perspectives are admitted into any given controversy or debate, the drawing of boundaries around what is acceptable criticism, beyond which 'there is no alternative'.⁸¹

The ideology of 'There is No Alternative' – or 'TINA' as the phrase has become known⁸² was originally popularised by Margaret Thatcher in her repeated dismissal of arguments against economic liberalism.⁸³ Its sentiment was later echoed in Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the 'end of history' following the collapse of Soviet Communism in

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⁷⁷ See, for instance, Franklin, Bob. 1997. *Newszak and News Media*. London: Arnold.

⁷⁸ Ofcom. News Research 2016 weighted coded tables. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0034/97198/Ofcom-News-Research-2016-weighted-coded-tables.pdf

⁷⁹ El-Nawawy, Mohammed and Farag, Adel Iskandar. 2002. *Al-Jazeera: How the free Arab news network scooped the world and changed the Middle East*. Boulder: Westview.

⁸⁰ Alice Fordham, Up next on Al Jazeera: Donald Rumsfeld, *WashingtonPost.com*, http://washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/up-next-on-al-jazeera-donald-rumsfeld/2011/09/29/gIQA1d0O8K_blog.html

⁸¹ Hall, Stuart (1982). The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennet, J. Curran & J. Woollacott (eds.). *Culture, Society and the Media*. London: Methuen.

⁸² Downing, John; Tittley, Gavan; Toynbee, Jason. 2014. Ideology critique: The challenge for media studies. *Media, Culture and Society*, 36: 878-887.

⁸³ In the European sense of the term 'liberalism.'

1989, signalling “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁸⁴

This fostered an arena of debate within the Anglo-American channels that was circumscribed and restricted. It failed to draw adequate attention to falsehoods propagated by US and UK governments over everything from weapons of mass destruction to extraordinary rendition. And it failed to give a fair hearing to economic alternatives in the aftermath of the global financial crash. It marked the epitome of Western hegemonic power; the mechanism by which some alternatives are omitted from the consensus framework and as such, excluded from the realm of what is possible, realistic, or *common sense*.⁸⁵ Ben Bagdikian was perhaps the first to articulate the subtleties of this kind of filtering power when he pointed out that:

*Most owners and editors no longer brutalize the news with the heavy hand dramatized in movies like “Citizen Kane” [...] More common is something more subtle, more professionally respectable, and, in some respects, more effective: the power to treat some subjects accurately but briefly, to treat other subjects accurately but in depth, or in the conventional options every medium has of taking its own initiatives, carefully avoiding some subjects and enthusiastically pursuing others.*⁸⁶

A new kind of propaganda

Though there is controversy and uncertainty over the global audience reach of RT, there is no doubt that its branding as an ‘alternative’ news channel has been effective in penetrating audiences in the West. Its critics rightly point out the lack of scrutiny applied to the Kremlin, but its journalists perceive their role differently: to counter imbalance in the Western broadcast hegemony. In this narrative, Putin – like Trump – is the perennial underdog, battling for a fair hearing against the oppressive force of mainstream consensus boundaries.

Of course, at the higher levels, that narrative is nothing more than a cynical exploitation and co-option of progressive discourse aimed ultimately at promoting the regressive and autocratic agenda of Putin. There are clearly fundamental differences between RT and the BBC that are probably best captured by the distinction between a state and public broadcaster. Although the BBC’s independence may be compromised in subtle and pervasive ways, it is not controlled by the British government in the way that RT is controlled by the Kremlin. Perhaps more importantly, the BBC’s editorial and compliance structure provide a stronger filter against factually inaccurate news as suggested by the testimony of former RT journalists. Sarah Firth was an RT reporter who resigned amid the controversy surrounding the shooting down of flight MH17 during the height of the second Euromaidan conflict in Ukraine. Her subsequent comments on the BBC’s Andrew Marr show suggested that within ‘sensitive’ stories at least, RT’s mission was being undermined by factual recklessness:

*I’ve worked at RT for five years and I’ve had my reasons for doing that and I’ve often very loudly defended RT and what they were trying to achieve. I think the problem is when it comes to stories like this it’s so sensitive you kind of really see what’s going on... It’s really tricky because I think when you look at some of the slightly inflammatory headlines that we have here, you can kind of see this...the idea of countering what the Western mainstream media does is a very valuable one but it’s not being done accurately. You’ve got to do it accurately. You’ve got to have the facts to back it up.*⁸⁷

Such qualified critiques reflect the contradictions at the heart of news in an ideologically polarised landscape. One recent study suggested that RT audiences were partly attracted to the channel because it was perceived as being ‘honest about lying’.⁸⁸ As with the above quote, it suggests that RT’s editorial mission and overarching narrative is perceived as legitimate and credible, even if some of its stories and journalistic practices are not.

Of course, the reality of international newsgathering is much more complex than is suggested by any simplistic binary between truth and falsehood. Distortions in coverage can emerge when *some* facts are selected and others

⁸⁴ Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. The end of history? *The National Interest*, summer: 3-18.

⁸⁵ Miliband, Ralph. 1973. *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: Quartet Books.

⁸⁶ Bagdikian, Ben. 2000 [1983]. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press. p. 16.

⁸⁷ The Andrew Marr Show paper review, July 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-28390325>

⁸⁸ Katerina Patin, Why has a Kremlin-controlled news network become a hit in the West?, Coda, January 2017, <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/honest-about-lying>

excluded, or when the sources of evidence are not duly scrutinised. This was precisely what the New York Times famously apologised for in 2004 in respect of its coverage leading up to the Gulf War.⁸⁹

Revolution or coup?

Major political controversies also tend to hinge more often on conflicting interpretations of issues or events, rather than disputed evidence. In this respect, 20th February 2014 was a day that perhaps more than any other exposed the ideological fault lines between RT and the BBC. It marked the height of violent unrest in Kiev with at least 22 people killed in the main square amid fierce clashes between police and opposition activists. Two reports on that day – one by the BBC⁹⁰ and one by RT⁹¹ – exemplified the contrasting pictures and contesting accounts of what took place within the same square, in the same city, on the same day. The contrast was all the more striking given that journalists from both channels were housed within the same hotel overlooking the square, and basing their reports on their own eye witness testimony.

A comparison between them reveals the distinct editorial selection decisions made at every level and in every aspect of the reporting: the selection of particular shots to use as accompaniment to the journalistic narrative; the selection of certain words or phrases used to describe or label key actors or groups within the conflict; the selection of issues to highlight as background or foreground context; and the selection of sources to reference or feature in the reports.

To begin with, much of the RT report is delivered as a live ‘two-way’ between a correspondent and anchor. This imbues not only a sense of urgency and drama, but also realism, with less reliance on an edited construct. The BBC’s report, on the other hand, is scripted and the tone more sombre and reflective. It too conveys a sense of realism but through an appeal to a different set of dramatic values. The RT report consists predominantly of live shots from an outdoor balcony overlooking the square, giving us a helicopter view in contrast to the BBC’s shots which consist predominantly of on-the-ground close ups. Underlying each is a distinct notion of journalistic authoritativeness: the accuracy and precision of close up footage combined with the formality of the scripted report, versus the balance and ‘realness’ of the live aerial perspective.

But the divergent frames emerge explicitly from the selection of particular types of sources, shots, language and issues in each report. The BBC report focused on the immediate context of the violence whilst the RT report gave comparatively more attention to the background context, including the alleged breaking of a truce by opposition fighters. The BBC featured interviews ‘on the ground’ with a protestor and doctor apparently treating injured protestors within the hotel-turned-makeshift-hospital, whilst RT featured commentary from a retired British police officer remarking on the inevitability of the police’s use of force under the circumstances. Both reports also make pronounced emotive appeals as regards the apparent brutality of the opposing side:

A few [protestors] had weapons but most were armed only with makeshift shields. They were gunned down mercilessly. Even those trying to rescue their comrades weren’t safe (BBC)

Our video agency Ruptly sent this footage of two police officers trying to help an injured colleague. Now here you can see them being caught in an explosion of some sort...we [also] obtained footage said to show one [police officer] needing an ambulance but the rioters apparently refusing (RT)

What is particularly striking in all of this is the routine use by RT of the terms ‘militants’ or ‘rioters’, compared to the BBC’s exclusive reliance on the term ‘protestors’. Above all else, this captures the divergent ideological standpoints underlying each narrative. Through the subtle selection of particular terminology, the respective broadcasters invoked diametrically opposed perspectives as to the causes, consequences and meaning of the day’s events. Despite their respective implicit claims to credibility and authority, both ultimately presented little more than a partisan account mirrored on the east-west worldview divide.

As for facts, they were clearly present in both stories. But neither offered much insight into the over-arching question of whether the violence was produced by a fascist-led coup of a democratically elected government or a repressive state hell-bent on crushing dissent. The truth, no doubt, lay somewhere in between.

⁸⁹ From the editors; The Times and Iraq, New York Times, May 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/26/world/from-the-editors-the-times-and-iraq.html?_r=0

⁹⁰ Ukraine death toll rises as truce unravels, BBC News, February 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26271824>

⁹¹ Ukraine bloodshed: Kiev death toll jumps to 77, RT, February 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/ukraine-kiev-death-toll-955/>

Conclusion: How to counter propaganda without using counter propaganda

There is a burgeoning critical narrative of the BBC that suggests its impartiality commitment is an obstacle to offering a meaningful corrective to fake news⁹², whether it stems from the Daily Mail, Donald Trump or RT. But there is equally a danger that in the ever-polarising news landscape, the BBC comes to perceive its role in ways not dissimilar to RT: countering what it considers to be the biased and imbalanced perspectives offered by others. Real impartiality in this context is not about providing countering perspectives, but scrutinising evidence and questioning claims on all sides in all controversies, with equal attention and scepticism.

If the BBC is to make any inroads into alienated audiences within and beyond Western borders, it must make strident efforts to reposition itself outside of the polarising news landscape. That requires a radical rethinking of the process by which certain stories, issues and frames achieve ascendancy in its international news agenda. Rather than treating RT as an outlier or an enemy, it should be used as a resource. Its contrasting agenda should prompt editors to ask, for instance, why the BBC's coverage has tended to marginalise certain claims and perspectives.

Western governments should also rethink their response to the success of Putin's soft power and recognise that the only way to win a propaganda war is not to fight it. The reality of audience polarisation in the new global divide is such that the recent launch of a new 24 hour Russian-language network by the US Broadcasting Board of Governors (via its media outposts such as Voice of America)⁹³ will likely fall on deaf ears, as will similar plans in place at the BBC.⁹⁴ For audiences in the grip of the Kremlin's channels – the ones that must be reached if that grip is to be in any way loosened – it is the BBC and Voice of America who are the purveyors of propaganda and fake news.

What is needed more than ever is a different approach – a new channel or newsgathering service that truly transcends ideological divides and speaks truth to all centres of power on the global stage. The closest we've come to reaching for that ideal is Euronews – a pan-European news channel created in 1993 and uniquely funded by both Russia and Western governments. But the result has been the inverse of what is needed. Rather than scrutinising all power without fear or favour, it offers little scrutiny of any. It's self-proclaimed role 'to broadcast reality'⁹⁵; a stenographic approach to news that overlooks the question of *whose* reality is being broadcast, or what role news channels themselves play in reality construction.

A news channel that does not start from such critical perspectives is one that is unlikely to challenge the 'reality' imposed by dominant worldviews emanating from the global North or South, East or West. It remains forever bound to the consensus framework; a news channel without *journalism*. Challenging truth claims on all sides, and engaging with the grey areas in between has always been the job of real journalism. Editors need to have the courage not only to call out fakery but to acknowledge when the facts are not known; to provide not just an accurate but a truly full and balanced picture of international events and issues, however uncertain and unresolved, and with all the unending messiness of truth.

⁹² Catherine Bennett, The BBC's fixation on 'balance' skews the truth, theGuardian.com, September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/03/bbc-impartiality-skews-evidence-based-facts>

⁹³ Broadcasting Board of Governors, BBG launches 24/7 Russian-language network, February 2017, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/bbg-launches-247-russian-language-network-300404012.html>

⁹⁴ James Panichi and Alex Spence, BBC enters Putin's media war, Politico, September 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/bbc-enters-putins-media-war/>

⁹⁵ See www.euronews.com/about

Failures and adaptations: Kremlin propaganda in Finland and Sweden

Ben Nimmo⁹⁶

Sputnik goes phutnik

In April 2015, the Sputnik propaganda news agency launched local-language services in all four Nordic nations. Sputnik is a growing arm of Kremlin influence, with content published in 32 languages from Abkhaz to Vietnamese. But its foray into the Nordics was brief: less than a year later, in early March 2016, it shut all four services down.⁹⁷

The scale of the failure is apparent from the outlets' social media followings. Sputnik Sverige, in Sweden, gained 356 followers on Twitter in a year's operation. Sputnik Suomi, in Finland, did half as well, with 174. Sputnik Danmark only managed 132, while Sputnik Norge, in Norway, gained just 102.⁹⁸

Other Russian attempts at influence in the same period also appear to have backfired. Most famously, in June 2015 Russia's ambassador to Sweden, Viktor Tatarintsev, told the Dagens Nyheter newspaper in an interview that Russia would take "military countermeasures" if Sweden were to join NATO.⁹⁹ His comment followed a sharp rise in Swedish support for NATO accession, triggered by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014: support had been only 17% in 2012, but jumped to 31% in 2014.¹⁰⁰

Tatarintsev's threat did not initially have the intended consequences: according to a poll published in September 2015, 41% of Swedes said that they favoured accession, while 39% opposed it.¹⁰¹ The long-term effect may have been more substantial: by July 2016, support for joining NATO had slipped to 33% of respondents.¹⁰² Moreover, when the Swedish parliament ratified a Host Nation Support agreement with NATO in May 2016,¹⁰³ both far-right¹⁰⁴ and far-left¹⁰⁵ MPs argued that a rapprochement with NATO could "increase the tension in our neighbourhood" and lead to Sweden being targeted by "others", comments seen as referring primarily to Russia and its threats. Nonetheless, the agreement was approved by an overwhelming majority of 291-21,¹⁰⁶ and popular support for NATO in July 2016 remained double the 2012 figure.

In Finland, meanwhile, scepticism towards Russia has grown sharply since the 2014 Crimean annexation. A poll released in December 2016 showed that 50% of Finns considered Russia a threat, compared with a figure of just 28% in 2010.¹⁰⁷ Given these diplomatic and communication failures, it is worth examining some of the factors in Sweden and Finland which may have contributed to them.

Awareness is the key

One key factor in both Finland and Sweden is a high degree of public awareness of the dangers of disinformation and propaganda. In February 2015, Finnish investigative journalist Jessikka Aro published a report on the so-called 'troll factory' in St. Petersburg, a clandestine operation in which employees were paid to work 12-hour shifts posting pro-Russian and anti-Western content online.¹⁰⁸ The social media trolling she received as a result was so aggressive that

⁹⁶ Ben Nimmo specialises in studying disinformation and propaganda and the various responses to them. He is Senior Fellow for Information Defence at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which uses open source and digital forensic methods to study security incidents and the information flows around them. He worked as a journalist in the Baltic States and Brussels until 2011, and as a press officer at NATO from 2011 to 2014. He has travelled widely in the Nordic and Baltic regions and speaks a number of languages including Swedish, German, Russian and Latvian.

⁹⁷ Trude Pettersen, Sputnik closes Nordic language services, Barents Observer, March 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/society/2016/03/sputnik-closes-nordic-language-services>

⁹⁸ The Twitter accounts are still online and can be viewed at the handles @Sputnik_Se, @Sputnik_Fi, @Sputnik_Dk and @Sputnik_Norge.

⁹⁹ Zachary Davies Boren, Russia warns Sweden it will face military action if it joins Nato, The Independent, 19 June 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-warns-sweden-it-will-face-military-action-if-it-joins-nato-10331397.html>

¹⁰⁰ Nearly one third of Swedes want to join NATO, The Local, May 2015, <http://www.thelocal.se/20150520/nearly-one-third-of-swedes-want-to-join-nato>

¹⁰¹ More Swedes want to join NATO than stay out, The Local, September 2015, <http://www.thelocal.se/20150914/poll-more-swedes-now-for-nato-than-against>

¹⁰² More Swedes now against NATO membership, The Local, July 2016, <http://www.thelocal.se/20160707/more-swedes-now-against-nato-membership>

¹⁰³ Yes to memorandum of understanding with NATO on host nation support, Swedish Parliament statement, May 2016, <http://www.riksdagen.se/en/news/2016/maj/27/yes-to-memorandum-of-understanding-with-nato-on-host-nation-support-ufou4/>

¹⁰⁴ Amendment to motion 2015/16:3375 opposing the Swedish government's proposal on Host Nation Support, Sverigedemokrater, published by the Swedish Parliament, April 2016, http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/motion/med-anledning-av-prop-201516152_H3023375

¹⁰⁵ Amendment to motion 2015/16:3375 opposing the Swedish government's proposal on Host Nation Support, Venstrepartiet, published by the Swedish Parliament, April 2016, http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/motion/med-anledning-av-prop-201516152_H3023377

¹⁰⁶ Charles Duxbury, Sweden ratifies NATO cooperation agreement, Wall Street Journal, 25 May 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sweden-ratifies-nato-cooperation-agreement-1464195502>

¹⁰⁷ Russia more feared but NATO less popular in Finland, New Europe, December 2016, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/russia-feared-nato-less-popular-finland/>

¹⁰⁸ Jessikka Aro and Mikä Mäkeläinen, YLE Kioski traces the origins of Russian propaganda, February 2015, <http://kioski.yle.fi/omat/at-the-origins-of-russian-propaganda>

she became an international figure in her own right,¹⁰⁹ and brought the concept of Russian trolling into mainstream Finnish discourse.

A few months later, in June 2015, Finnish research Saara Jantunen published a book titled 'Infosota' (The info war), exposing the techniques and practices of Russian disinformation in and around Ukraine.¹¹⁰ Jantunen was also savaged by online trolls as a result, but the term 'info war' became common currency in Finland, and a lively debate arose on how to counter it.¹¹¹

A striking example occurred on 4th December, after a Finnish man shot dead three women in the town of Imatra, not far from the Russian border, and a popular destination for Russian shoppers. An anonymous account on Twitter quickly launched the false claim that the shooter had been a neo-Nazi in the Finnish Defence Forces, and his victims had been Russian women. (In fact, all three were Finns.) The account user addressed the claim to a number of news outlets in an apparent attempt to launder it into the media.

Within half an hour, Jantunen and other Finnish observers had debunked the claim online, aggressively pushing the rebuttal to the media outlets which had been initially targeted, and labelling it 'pro-Russian propaganda'. Over the following 24 hours, the anonymous account holder confessed to having staged the fake as a 'troll test', then deleted the account. The perpetrator has not been identified and there is insufficient evidence to prove a Russian connection, but the incident does show the awareness to the danger of fake news which is prevalent in Finland.¹¹²

The concept of information war has also penetrated the mainstream in Sweden. One 2016 article in the culture section of Dagens Nyheter was headlined, 'We have to relate to the fact that we are living in an information war'. The author, Ola Larsmo, wrote, 'What every thinking person has to relate to is that we live in the midst of an information war; from Putin's 'troll factories' where disinformation is produced industrially for all the world's comment fields and twitter feeds, to the Swedish racists who clone themselves with thirty different aliases from which they can play 'each his own public outcry' and threaten journalists, and to Islamic State's nicely produced web magazine Dabiq, where terror and genocide are packaged as something attractive and adventurous.'¹¹³

Another leader in tabloid Expressen was even starker, claiming simply, 'We are under attack by Russian propaganda'.¹¹⁴ On 11th December, the head of Sweden's Military Intelligence and Security Directorate, Gunnar Karlsson, said in a TV interview that Russia was the single most visible actor targeting Sweden with disinformation: "The actor above all we see is Russia ... It can be about spreading false information, twisting the truth, pushing some arguments more than others to complicate the picture of what is happening."¹¹⁵

It is in this context that the failure of Sputnik's Nordic branches should be seen. Public trust in the mainstream media is high. According to a poll published by Dagens Nyheter on March 31, 2016, over 70% of the population felt a high or moderate level of trust in the national radio and TV stations; around half had high or moderate trust in the main daily newspapers, with just a few percent actively distrusting them (a large number of respondents replied 'neither trust nor mistrust' or 'don't know').¹¹⁶ Sputnik Sverige was widely represented in the mainstream media as a disinformation tool.¹¹⁷ It was seldom cited, and when it was, it was often presented as a proxy for the Kremlin's point of view. It was also blatant. According to a magisterial study of its output by Swedish researchers Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, 'The most common themes in 2015 were Crisis in the West (705 articles), Positive image of Russia (643) and Western aggressiveness (499). These pervasive categories are followed, in descending order, by the themes Negative image of countries perceived to be in the West's sphere of influence (424), West is malicious (309),

¹⁰⁹ See for example Andrew Higgins, Effort to expose Russia's 'troll army' draws vicious retaliation, New York Times, May 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/europe/russia-finland-nato-trolls.html?_r=0

¹¹⁰ The book has not been translated into English, but information can be found online at <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27211416-infosota>.

¹¹¹ See for example the Finnish Wikipedia page Troll (info war), at [https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolli_\(infosota\)](https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolli_(infosota))

¹¹² Ben Nimmo, Donara Barojan and Nika Aeksejeva, Tragedy and the Troll, Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab, December 2016, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/tragedy-and-the-troll-95ae31166dd1#tv4vdis23>

¹¹³ Ola Larsmo, Vi måste förhålla oss till att vi lever mitt i ett informationskrig, Dagens Nyheter, September 2016, <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kulturbedatt/ola-larsmo-vi-maste-forhalla-oss-till-att-vi-lever-mitt-i-ett-informationskrig/>

¹¹⁴ Anna Dahlberg, Vi är under attack från rysk propaganda, Expressen, December 2016, <http://www.expressen.se/ledare/anna-dahlberg/vi-ar-under-attack-fran-rysk-propaganda/>

¹¹⁵ Must-chefen pekar ut Ryssland som it-hot, SVT, December 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/must-chefen-den-aktor-vi-framfor-allt-ser-ar-ryssland>

¹¹⁶ Hans Rosén, Högt betyg till mediernas trovärdighet, DN, March 2016, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/hogt-betyg-till-mediernas-trovardighet/>

¹¹⁷ See for example Hemligt grupp ska möta ryskt informationskrig, Dagens Nyheter, 27 October 2015, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/hemlig-grupp-ska-mota-ryskt-informationskrig/>.

International sympathy and cooperation with Russia (304), Western policy failures (112) and Divisions within the Western alliance (72).¹¹⁸ Added to this, Sputnik Sverige was mocked for the poor quality of its Swedish language. Thus its ability to pass disinformation into the mainstream was severely limited. Sputnik Suomi received similar treatment. In effect, the attempt was too obvious to deceive an audience already aware of the potential threat.

Adaptation and indirect approaches

However, the closure of the Nordic branches of Sputnik has not diminished the information pressure on Sweden and Finland; according to sources interviewed for this paper in both countries, the emphasis has shifted to more indirect influence, working through local proxies, especially on the political fringes.

In Sweden, the name most often cited in this regard is Egor Putilov, a mythical Russian journalist who wrote in Swedish for leading outlets including Aftonbladet, Expressen and Sveriges Radio, and whose blog posts criticising Sweden's migration policy were regularly cited by leaders of the far-right Sverigedemokrater (Sweden Democrats, SD). In September 2016, Aftonbladet broke the story that there was no such person as Egor Putilov: the name was one of at least five pseudonyms used by a Russian immigrant who worked for the SD in the Swedish parliament.¹¹⁹

The scandal deepened when Sveriges Radio revealed that 'Putilov' had bought a house outside Stockholm from a Russian businessman (and since convicted criminal) for 6 million kronor (approximately £540,000), and sold it two months later for double the price.¹²⁰ According to security experts interviewed by the radio programme, this made him a direct security risk.

This brought the scandal to SD, because as an SD employee, 'Putilov' had been security cleared by SD, not by the parliament's security services.¹²¹ His link to Russia was seen as particularly significant because SD had a record of voting in support of Russia in the European Parliament, a pattern documented by leading journalist Patrik Oksanen,¹²² and had opposed the NATO Host Nation Support Agreement in the Swedish Parliament.

In the wake of the Putilov scandal, Oksanen reported a number of other links between senior SD members, the European far-right, and Russia,¹²³ reflecting a pattern which has been identified across Europe and is seen as a key channel for Kremlin influence.¹²⁴ Oksanen called for SD to be excluded from the parliamentary committee overseeing the work of the security police, arguing that "even if an agreement can be reached with SD in other questions, such as the environment and infrastructure, it's entirely excluded to give the party any sort of influence in defence, security and constitutional questions." No proof of direct collusion between SD and the Kremlin has been published, but the Putilov scandal has raised questions in Sweden about potential Kremlin influence through the political extremes.

Strategic point: Gotland

Another key theme which emerged in 2015-16 was the status of the Swedish island of Gotland, which lies south-east of Stockholm, well out into the waters of the Baltic Sea. This is arguably the most strategically important point in the Baltic, as it sits alongside the main shipping lane between Russia, the Baltic States and the West. It is Swedish sovereign territory and was heavily militarised during the Cold War, but was demilitarised in the peaceful period thereafter.

On 20 May 2015, Russian researcher Viktor Kremenyuk argued that Gotland should be a neutral zone, claiming that it had been neutral in the 1920s.¹²⁵ The comment provoked alarm in Sweden, where it was seen as both factually

¹¹⁸ Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case, Journal of Strategic Studies, January 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1273830>

¹¹⁹ Alexander, 34, är SD:s hemliga desinformator, Aftonbladet, September 2016, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article23449197.ab>

¹²⁰ SD-tjänstemannen gjorde miljonvinst med rysk affärsman - "potentiell säkerhetsrisk", enligt experter, Sveriges Radio, 23 September 2016, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=6522899>

¹²¹ Juan Flores, SD bryter tystnaden om Egor Putilov, Dagens Nyheter, September 2016, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sd-bryter-tystnaden-om-egor-putilov/>

¹²² Patrik Oksanen, Russia-index: 11 new EU-sceptic parties added, EU-blogger, January 2015, <https://eublogg.wordpress.com/2015/01/10/russia-index-11-new-eu-sceptic-parties-added/>

¹²³ Patrik Oksanen, Därför burde SD genast kastas ut av Säpos insynsråd, September 2016, <http://www.dt.se/opinion/ledare/oksanen-darfor-borde-sd-genast-kastas-ut-ur-sapo-s-insynsrad>

¹²⁴ Anton Shekhovtsov, The far right front of Russian active measures in Europe, blog, August 2016, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.no/2016/08/the-far-right-front-of-russian-active.html>

¹²⁵ Rysk expert: Håll Gotland neutralt, TV4, May 2015, <http://www.tv4.se/nyheterna/klipp/rysk-expert-h%C3%A5ll-gotland-neutralt-3181567>

incorrect and implicitly threatening,¹²⁶ especially following reports that the Russian military had exercised a landing on Gotland that March.¹²⁷ Swedish officials say that various Russian commentators have since echoed the theme.

The Kremlin media and Russian officials have added to Swedish disquiet. Sputnik's English service has repeatedly labelled Sweden as "neurotic" and "paranoid" over its Gotland fear¹²⁸ - terms often used to denigrate Western criticism of Russia's aggression.¹²⁹ In April 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeated the threat of military countermeasures in an interview with daily Dagens Nyheter.¹³⁰

Once more, however, the pressure appears to have been counterproductive: in September 2016, in a surprise move, Sweden returned the first military unit to permanent basing on Gotland.¹³¹

Finland – domestic actors

In Finland, the Kremlin's narrative is supported by a mixture of domestic and anonymous online actors; however, they appear to have had less political impact and are limited to smaller groups. This is partly because Finland's main anti-immigration and Eurosceptic party, the True Finns, is extremely critical of the Kremlin, closing off a channel of influence which has proven effective in other countries.¹³²

The names most often mentioned in the context of Russian disinformation in Finland are Johan Bäckman, a commentator who represents the Kremlin-founded Russian Institute for Strategic Studies in the Nordic countries,¹³³ and scandal-focused tabloid MV-Lehti, together with its chief editor, Ilja Janitskin.

Bäckman is a well-known figure in Finland, with a record of making controversial statements. He has, for example, called the Finnish social services' interventions in child custody cases including Russian parents a "very profitable business",¹³⁴ accused the US and NATO of planning "provocations" against Russia,¹³⁵ and called Jessikka Aro a "well-known agent of the American-Baltic secret services".¹³⁶ His statements validate the Kremlin's narrative to a Finnish and international audience; however, he is sufficiently well known in this role in Finland that his impact is limited.

MV-Lehti's leanings are strongly anti-immigrant, anti-establishment and pro-Russian. It, too, is known for its attacks on Kremlin critics, including Aro. However, in October 2016 the Finnish police issued a European Arrest Warrant for chief editor Janitskin, reportedly on suspicion of aggravated defamation, money collection offences, illegal threats, and copyright offences.¹³⁷ MV-Lehti continued publishing, but the scandal has hindered its ability to spread disinformation beyond a core, committed far-right audience.

At the same time, Finland serves as the subject of disinformation aimed primarily at other countries. An example of the latter emerged on 1 December 2016, when a Russian blog ran a story that Finland had become the first country to drop EU sanctions on Russia.¹³⁸ The story was a twisted version of a Financial Times report on Finnish economic meetings with Russia.¹³⁹ A series of accounts began tweeting the story, and continued to do so for days;¹⁴⁰ some of the accounts involved appear to specialise in spreading pro-Kremlin messaging.¹⁴¹

¹²⁶ Johan Wiktorin, Med lögnen som vapen, Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, May 2015, <http://kkv.se/med-lognen-som-vapen/>

¹²⁷ 'Russia rehearsed invasion of Sweden', The Local, June 2015, <http://www.thelocal.se/20150625/russia-rehearsed-military-invasion-of-sweden>

¹²⁸ See for example Nordic Neurosis: Sweden scared Russia is eager to get Gotland, Sputnik, June 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201606031040736416-sweden-gotland-nato-russia/>, and Milking it: Sweden benefits from own psychological warfare, Sputnik, October 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610101046186405-sweden-russia-psychological-warfare/>

¹²⁹ See for example Sputnik, July 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201607091042700698-nato-summit-moscow-west/>

¹³⁰ Michael Winiarski, Om Sverige går med i NATO, kommer vi att vidta nödvändiga åtgärder, Dagens Nyheter, April 2016, <http://fokus.dn.se/lavrov/>

¹³¹ Sweden just created a permanent troop on Gotland to "take responsibility for the country's sovereignty", Business Insider Nordic, September 2016, <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/swedens-supreme-commander-just-created-a-permanent-troop-on-gotland-2016-9/>

¹³² Patrik Oksanen, Russia-index: 11 new EU-sceptic parties added, EU-blogger, January 2015, <https://eublogg.wordpress.com/2015/01/10/russia-index-11-new-eu-sceptic-parties-added/>

¹³³ Johan Bäckman, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies website, <https://riss.ru/profile/johan-backman/>

¹³⁴ Seizing children from families is very profitable business, expert says, Sputnik, December 2014, https://sputniknews.com/radio_burning_point/201412161015924326/

¹³⁵ US and NATO up for new anti-Russia provocation, this time in the Baltic - expert, RIA Novosti, August 2014, https://en.ria.ru/radio_burning_point/20140805191768221-US-and-NATO-Up-for-New-Anti-Russia-Provocation-This-Time-in-The/

¹³⁶ Rusline, Johan Bäckman: "Many Finnish journalists are recruited by the US-Baltic special services, September 2014,

http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2014/09/19/johan_bekman_mnogie_finskie_zhurnalisty_yavlyayutsya_zaverbovannymi_sotrudnikami_amerikanopribaltijskih_specsluzhb

¹³⁷ Warrant issued for arrest of MV-lehti editor, Finland Times, October 2016, <http://www.finlandtimes.fi/national/2016/10/07/30681/WarrantissuedforarrestofMVlehtieditor>

¹³⁸ Military Review, Media: Finland removes economic sanctions against Russia, topwar.ru, December 2016, <https://topwar.ru/104773-smi-finlyandiya-snimaet-ekonomicheskie-sankcii-v-otnoshenii-rossii.html>

¹³⁹ Richard Milne, Norway and Finland thaw relations with Russia, Financial Times, November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/269a73e4-b70b-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62>

¹⁴⁰ For example <https://twitter.com/babuhkatata/status/807680150091563009> on December 2016.

¹⁴¹ For example <https://twitter.com/vegchelovek>, an account set up in 2014 and based on the image of the "polite people", Russian special forces who seized Crimea.

The news was false: Finland had not changed its position on sanctions, as the original FT story made clear. Given the language, the main target appears to have been Finland's Russian-speaking community, and the Russian public more generally. However, the narrative intent appears to have been to undermine the EU's semblance of unity, using Finland in disinformation, rather than disinformation in Finland.

Conclusion: adaptation and flexibility

Thus, Russia's approach to disinformation and influence in Finland and Sweden is characterised by adaptation and flexibility. The Sputnik experiment was a failure, revealing the deep scepticism in both countries towards Moscow's direct channels. Since then, evidence has emerged of a more indirect approach.

Sweden and Finland are both part of the bigger strategic picture. From the Kremlin's point of view, the priority appears to be to keep them out of NATO; following that, the imperative seems to be to influence their domestic policies, especially in decisions concerning defence. So far, however, this approach has been of mixed effectiveness. Awareness of the challenge of disinformation continues to grow; defence decisions are taken on the basis of a potential Russian threat. The Kremlin will continue to attempt to exert influence on Finnish and Swedish decision-making, but so far, it has met with limited success.

Dictators of discourse: Eurasian autocracies and the international battle of ideas

David Lewis¹⁴²

Authoritarian states have always sought to control information and manipulate the message. Historically, they relied on the blunt instruments of censorship and propaganda. Modern authoritarians still imprison journalists and close down newspapers, but they have also found more sophisticated ways to suppress criticism and skew narratives in their favour. Governments still need to control information at home, but they are also engaged in an information battle internationally. They use Western PR companies, government-backed NGOs and think-tanks, pliant or supportive academics and politicians, and interventions on social media to suppress critics and legitimise their regimes.

Russia has been most active in the information battle, and its goals and aims are far more ambitious than many other post-Soviet states. President Putin has called on staff in government-funded Russian media to “break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon media.”¹⁴³ Journalists are seen to be on the frontline of an ‘information war’, part of a broader pattern of geopolitical competition. The Russian government has funded an array of news agencies and NGOs that promote a Kremlin-funded line. The news agency Sputnik, launched in 2014, was designed, according to its head Dmitry Kiselev, to fight ‘against aggressive propaganda that is now being fed to the world and which forces a unipolar construction of the world’.¹⁴⁴ Information takes a prominent place in Russia’s National Security Strategy, in which Moscow outlines a struggle for global dominance, in which ‘information mechanisms’ play a central role.¹⁴⁵

Other authoritarian states in Eurasia use some of Russia’s templates for controlling information and promoting alternative narratives, but they are less concerned with global geopolitics and more worried about defending their own regimes from domestic and international criticism. Across Eurasia, nervous autocrats have cracked down hard on independent journalists, bloggers and media outlets over the last decade. Freedom House rates 10 of the 13 post-Soviet republics as ‘not free’ in terms of their media.¹⁴⁶ But it’s not just about censorship and repression. The smarter authoritarians understand the need to repackage official narratives in popular formats. News programmes aim for Western-style production values, and use discussion shows and talking heads. Only the most repressive states, such as Turkmenistan, still favour dreary, Soviet-style propaganda.

Internationally, this mimicry of genre is even more important. States use public relations experts to dress up their government narrative in language that will appeal to a Western audience. The Kazakh government has hired a string of public relations and strategic consultancy companies, including Portland Communications, Tony Blair Associates, BGR Gabara and Media Consulta, to promote its own narrative of economic progress and political stability and downplay criticism of its human rights record and lack of democratic progress.¹⁴⁷ PR companies place op-eds in leading Western newspapers, lobby parliamentarians and aim to influence government policies. Azerbaijan has also been an active user of Western PR companies, with ARCO, CSM Strategic and Burson Marsteller all reported to have signed contracts with the regime, despite the rapid worsening of government repression against political opponents in recent years.¹⁴⁸

One variation on the role of PR companies has been the use of private intelligence companies and legal consultancies. Arcanum, a Zurich-based company controlled by the US holding company RJI Capital Group, is a private intelligence group that employs many former senior intelligence officials as its consultants. According to opposition Kazakh newspapers, citing leaked emails, the Kazakh government employed Arcanum on a multi-million dollar contract as part of its campaign against exiled banker Mukhtyar Ablyazov.¹⁴⁹ Although it does not name its

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¹⁴³ Cited in B. Bidder, ‘Putin’s Weapon in the War of Images’, *Spiegel Online*, August 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/putin-fights-war-of-images-and-propaganda-with-russia-today-channel-a-916162.html>

¹⁴⁴ ‘Russia launches foreign news service to fight West’s “propaganda”’, AFP, November 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Olga Oliker, ‘Unpacking Russia’s New National Security Strategy’, January 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russias-new-national-security-strategy>

¹⁴⁶ Freedom House, *The Battle for the Dominant Message: Freedom in the World 2016*, April 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>

¹⁴⁷ Deirdre Tynan, ‘Kazakhstan: Top-Notch PR Firms Help Brighten Astana’s Image’, *Eurasianet*, January 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64860>

¹⁴⁸ For detailed case-studies, see Corporate Europe Observatory, ‘Spin doctors to the autocrats: how European PR firms whitewash repressive regimes’, January 2015, <https://corporateeurope.org/pressreleases/2015/01/european-pr-firms-whitewashing-brutal-regimes-report>

¹⁴⁹ Super-Khan’s bodyguards – people who work for Akorda, *Respublika*, September 2014, available at <http://bit.ly/2mJh8Kn>; Arcanum caught up in Kazakh intrigues, *Intelligence Online*, <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/corporate-intelligence/2015/02/25/arcanum-caught-up-in-kazakh-intrigues,108063585-ART>

client, Arcanum outlines this type of contract on its website: 'Arcanum has been retained in a major political dispute between a sovereign government and its political foes. Arcanum's investigations have resulted in the tracing of illegal assets worth billions of dollars by one of our clients' opponents. Arcanum also carried out a public relations and messaging campaign which resulted in front page media placements in major publications around the world. These included the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, New York Times, Washington Post, RIA-Novosti, Ynet (Israel), Associated Press, Agence France Presse, and Reuters.'¹⁵⁰

Although repackaged op-eds do ensure that a government's views are disseminated, they gain more credibility if they can be backed by an independent source, such as a respected civil society or non-governmental organisation. Leaked emails published by the *Le Temps* newspaper in Geneva appear to show a PR campaign proposed to the Kazakh Ministry of Justice, which involved funding an 'independent' report by a European anti-corruption NGO.¹⁵¹ The Kazakh government has also funded Western think-tanks and universities. Via the lobbying firm APCO, it funded three reports on Kazakhstan by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. Although CACI insisted that they had full editorial control over the reports, the resulting papers appear likely to have been viewed positively in Astana.¹⁵²

Kazakhstan has also been active in funding its own civil-society type organisations abroad. Many governments do fund foreign policy research institutes, but reputable think-tanks offer the prospect of research and advocacy that has some independence from government views. For example, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is an independent think-tank that embraces a plurality of opinions. The Brussels-based Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA) may sound similar, but it is a very different beast.¹⁵³ It mimics the form and activity of a think-tank – it publishes papers, hosts workshops and has a board of directors that includes senior European politicians such as former EU External Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and former UK foreign minister Jack Straw. In reality, however, it is funded by the government of Kazakhstan, and the views and opinions expressed by its representatives hardly differ from the official views of the government in Astana.¹⁵⁴ The ECFA is just one of many mimicking civil society organisations that appear to have the form of think-tanks and civil society organisations, but are actually acting as conduits for the thinking of post-Soviet authoritarian governments. The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) plays a similar role. Although it appears to be an independent organisation, designed to promote good relations between Azerbaijan and Europe, in practice it is little more than a lobbying organisation, run by PR experts.¹⁵⁵

A similar mode of mimicry is at work around elections in post-Soviet autocracies. Legitimate international election monitoring bodies, such as the OSCE's ODIHR, have strongly criticised elections in countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. However, to try to reduce the influence of these critics, authoritarian governments have invited alternative election observers to legitimise their flawed polls. Some of these so called 'zombie monitors' come from the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or similar organizations.¹⁵⁶ But others are Western politicians or academics, willing to whitewash accounts of elections, however undemocratic the polls may be. Most importantly, it is these voices that are quoted in local media to impress domestic audiences. For example, at parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan in 2015, where official observers from the OSCE/ODIHR team saw 'serious procedural errors and irregularities', observers invited by the government from Britain, Lithuania, Norway, Austria and Bosnia-Herzegovina gave positive accounts of the election at a press conference held even before the polls closed.¹⁵⁷

At parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan in November 2015, the OSCE/ODIHR cancelled its monitoring mission after the government imposed restrictions on the number of observers it could deploy. Instead, the regime drafted in its own selection of some 500 'monitors', including foreign businesspeople and parliamentarians with favourable views

¹⁵⁰ Arcanum Global Case Studies, <http://arcanumglobal.com/about-arcanum-global/case-studies/>

¹⁵¹ See Sylvain Besson, Le Kazakhstan enrôle un expert genevois dans sa campagne d'influence occulte, *Le Temps*, June 2015, http://www.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/eff006b2-1439-11e5-96f4-d5eb39d18cde/Le_Kazakhstan_enr%C3%B4le_un_expert_genevois_dans_sa_campagne_dinfluence_occulte

¹⁵² Ken Silverstein, Lobbyists and Fred Starr Team Up to Promote Kazakhstan, *Harper's Magazine*, 1 October 2008, , <http://harpers.org/blog/2008/10/lobbyists-and-fred-starr-team-up-to-promote-kazakhstan/>

¹⁵³ See <http://www.ecfr.eu/>

¹⁵⁴ ECFA held its Third Annual Meeting of its Advisory Council on the 6-7 October 2016 at Cliveden House, Berkshire, in the presence of HRH the Duke of York.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05MCTMclorE>

¹⁵⁵ Corporate Europe Observatory, 'Spin doctors to the autocrats: how European PR firms whitewash repressive regimes', 20 January 2015, <https://corporateeurope.org/pressreleases/2015/01/european-pr-firms-whitewashing-brutal-regimes-report>

¹⁵⁶ Alexander Cooley and Christopher Walker, Vote of the Living Dead, *Foreign Policy*, October 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/31/vote-of-the-living-dead/>

¹⁵⁷ Kazakhstan: The Anatomy of a Pointless Election, *Eurasianet*, March 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77881>

of the government, and members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).¹⁵⁸ The conclusions of these observers were used in the domestic press to legitimise the election.¹⁵⁹ For example, under the headline, 'UK House of Lords: Azerbaijan ensures transparent parliamentary election' Azerbaijani media reported praise for the elections from British parliamentarians Lord Evans and Baroness O'Cathain.¹⁶⁰ Baroness O'Cathain's visit was arranged through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Azerbaijan, with air fares and hotel paid for by the Azerbaijan embassy in London.¹⁶¹ Such an arrangement is not unusual: APPGs are useful mechanisms for lobbying; in a number of cases governments have provided administrative support to the groups and organised country visits.¹⁶² The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) even acts as the secretariat for the APPG on Azerbaijan.¹⁶³

Even the most authoritarian regimes can find unofficial election observers to boost the government narrative in this way. In Uzbekistan, one of the most repressive states in the world, elections are notoriously undemocratic. The OSCE/ODIHR's report on the 4 December 2016 presidential election concluded that 'The legal framework is not conducive to holding democratic elections' and noted that 'limits on fundamental freedoms undermine political pluralism and led to a campaign devoid of genuine competition'.¹⁶⁴ However, the Uzbek government invited European politicians to monitor and report positively on the poll.¹⁶⁵ This has been the pattern at previous elections. Following parliamentary elections in April 2015, British academics and businesspeople who had acted as government-approved 'observers' provided positive accounts of the poll at an Uzbek embassy press conference.¹⁶⁶

The information battle has been particularly fraught over events of state violence and repression, such as the killing of hundreds of civilians in Andijan in May 2005. International organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, claimed that Uzbek government forces were involved in a massacre of civilians.¹⁶⁷ The Uzbek government described the events as an externally-backed terrorist attack, in which those who died were the victims of Islamist terrorists.¹⁶⁸ A government video of the events was presented at the Carnegie Center in Washington DC. Although the hosts attempted to be even-handed, the summary suggested that 'The film...does not decisively answer whether the use of force, and more specifically its timing was justified'.¹⁶⁹ This ambivalent conclusion was at odds with the sharp condemnation of the Andijan violence by groups such as Amnesty International, which described the violence as 'a mass killing of civilians'.¹⁷⁰ More than a decade later, the interpretation of the Andijan events remains contested. While human rights groups continue to call for accountability for the killings more than 10 years after the events, the Uzbek government has rejected any criticism. They have received partial support from sympathetic Western analysts, who have argued that the Andijan incident 'was not a massacre'¹⁷¹ and criticised Western media for 'jumping to judgement' against the Uzbek government.¹⁷² Disputes over the nature of events and the appropriate responses are entirely legitimate. Yet, in cases such as Andijan, authoritarian governments have been able to use accounts by Western academics and analysts to discredit critical accounts of contested events and bolster support for government narratives.

The new battlefield for the modern authoritarian state is digital. Sites such as Facebook or its Russian equivalent Vkontakte are hugely popular across the former Soviet Union. Enthusiasm has waned for the idea of social media as a potentially revolutionary technology, which would challenge authoritarian control over the free flow of information. Although social media allows news and online discussions to circulate relatively freely, authoritarian states have become increasingly sophisticated in their responses. States still use so-called 'first generation' controls,

¹⁵⁸ For a detailed account of the Council of Europe's relations with Azerbaijan, see the extensive reporting by the European Stability Initiative (<http://www.esiweb.org>); also Gerald Knaus, 'Europe and Azerbaijan: The End of Shame', *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), July 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Giorgi Lomsadze, Azerbaijan: Post-Election, No Regrets about Absence of OSCE Monitors, *Eurasianet*, November 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/75851>

¹⁶⁰ UK House of Lords: Azerbaijan ensures transparent parliamentary election, *AzerTac News Agency*, November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2l8srIF>

¹⁶¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/biographies/lords/baroness-o-cathain/3217/register-of-interests>

¹⁶² Edward Malnick and Robert Mendick, Patrick Mercer investigation puts parliamentary groups under scrutiny, *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2013, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/10093648/Patrick-Mercer-investigation-puts-parliamentary-groups-under-scrutiny.html

¹⁶³ UK Parliament, Register Of All-Party Groups-Azerbaijan, <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/register/azerbaijan.htm>

¹⁶⁴ Election Observation Mission, Republic of Uzbekistan – Early Presidential Election, December 2016, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, p. 1.

¹⁶⁵ Casey Michel, Election Whitewashing, Uzbekistan Edition, *The Diplomat*, December 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/election-whitewashing-uzbekistan-edition/>

¹⁶⁶ Briefing on results of the Elections of the President the Republic of Uzbekistan followed by celebration of Navruz Spring Festivity, Uzbek Embassy, 8 April 2015, http://uzbekembassy.org/e/press_releases/34853/

¹⁶⁷ Amnesty International, Lifting the Siege on the Truth about Andizhan. Amnesty International, September 2005; 'Bullets Were Falling Like Rain': The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2005. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/06/06/bullets-were-falling-rain/andijan-massacre-may-13-2005>.

¹⁶⁸ Nick Megoran, Framing Andijon, narrating the nation: Islam Karimov's account of the events of May 2005. *Central Asian Survey* 27 (1): 15-31, 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Martha Brill Olcott, Marina Barnett, The Andijan Uprising, Akramiya and Akram Yuldashev, June 2006, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2006/06/22/andijan-uprising-akramiya-and-akram-yuldashev/1gi>

¹⁷⁰ Amnesty International, Lifting the Siege on the Truth about Andizhan. Amnesty International, September 2005.

¹⁷¹ Jeffrey W. Harman, The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know, Silk Road Paper, May 2016. Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, p. 64.

¹⁷² John C Daly, Rush to Judgment: Western Media and the 2005 Andijan Violence, Silk Road Paper, May 2016. Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.

such as blocking websites or closing down access to the Internet.¹⁷³ Azerbaijan has been particularly repressive in its response to bloggers.¹⁷⁴ But states have increasingly turned to new legislation and the courts to limit digital activism, both domestically and internationally. The Kazakh government attempted to use US courts to attack the opposition *Respublika* website, after it published leaked emails.¹⁷⁵ In a series of court cases, Kazakhstan used the US Computer Fraud and Abuse Act to mount a campaign through international courts to close the newspaper's website and harass its editors and contributors. Although Kazakhstan ultimately failed to win the case, the pressure group EFF argued that the US statute was 'deeply flawed' and highlighted the danger that repressive governments may use anti-hacking and computer fraud legislation to suppress legitimate journalism internationally.¹⁷⁶

Governments also use social media to track and control individual dissidents or to monitor possible anti-government protests or demonstrations.¹⁷⁷ In this way, social media offers a highly effective mechanism of mass surveillance. According to a report by Privacy International in 2014, 'Central Asian governments use electronic surveillance technology to spy on activists and journalists in the country, and exiles abroad'. Israeli companies have reportedly provided extensive technological support.¹⁷⁸ A detailed report by EFF also claimed that the Kazakh authorities may have hacked accounts of political opponents in exile.¹⁷⁹

The next step for authoritarian regimes is to use social media as a platform for their own propaganda, using their own social media sites or – more effectively – encouraging independent bloggers and activists to support government policies. Sometimes, they are successful. A tour of popular bloggers in Kazakhstan to the town of Zhanaozen, immediately after 14 protestors were shot dead by police in December 2011, provided support for important parts of the government narrative.¹⁸⁰ By ensuring that 'independent' bloggers and activists circulate aspects of a government narrative, the message gains more credibility with a wider public. Government officials have even taken to Twitter and Facebook to plug their own policies. Sometimes this digital activism backfires: news reports linked the demotion of former Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Massimov to his over-active use of Twitter.¹⁸¹ However, there is a gradual shift from governments simply trying to block social media to finding creative ways of using it to promote their own message and delegitimise opponents.

Conclusion

Post-Soviet states have sometimes rightly complained about biases and gaps in international reporting. However, in most cases, their intervention in the international information space has sought to suppress legitimate criticism, discredit political opponents, and boost their own propaganda. Too often, Western politicians, PR companies, analysts and academics have been only too willing to play along in this discursive game. As some PR professionals have argued, there needs to be far more caution about PR companies working for authoritarian governments.¹⁸² Western parliamentarians and academics should think twice about becoming involved in election monitoring initiatives outside the agreed channels of the OSCE or signing up to support 'think-tanks' or other organisations funded by authoritarian regimes. Instead, more support should be offered for better media coverage and collaborative academic research on the region, together with genuine debates in civil society to both find common ground in the information battle and to maintain space for more critical views to flourish.

¹⁷³ Deibert, R., Palfrey, J., Rohozinski, R., Zittrain, J., & Haraszti, M. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁷⁴ For details, see 'A Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan', available at <http://www.esiweb.org>

¹⁷⁵ Judge Rules Kazakhstan Can't Force Facebook to Turn Over Respublika's IP Addresses in Another Win for Free Speech, EFF, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2016/03/another-ruling-against-kazakhstan-its-attempt-use-us-courts-censorship>

¹⁷⁶ David Greene and Karen Gullo, Kazakhstan's Exploitation of Flawed U.S. Law To Censor Respublika Finally Ends, In Cautionary Tale About CFAA Abuse, EFF, 19 January 2017.

¹⁷⁷ MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2011. Networked authoritarianism in China and beyond: Implications for global internet freedom. *Journal of Democracy* 22: 32-46.

¹⁷⁸ Privacy International, Private Interests: Monitoring Central Asia, November 2014, <https://www.privacyinternational.org/node/429>

¹⁷⁹ See Catherine Putz, Kazakhstan Hacks Back: Operation Manul and Astana's Pursuit of Dissidents, *The Diplomat*, 8 August 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakhstan-hacks-back-operation-manul-and-astanas-pursuit-of-dissidents/>

¹⁸⁰ David Lewis. 2016. 'Blogging Zhanaozen': Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan', *Central Asian Survey* 35 (3), 421-438.

¹⁸¹ Kazakh Prime Minister Demoted After Social-Media Activity, RFE/RL, December 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-prime-minister-sacked/27975194.html>

¹⁸² Ross Torossian, PR Firms Ought To Say 'No' Once In a While, *Observer.com*, January 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/01/even-pr-firms-ought-to-say-no-once-in-a-while/>

The non-governmental sector: Pro-Russia tools masquerading as independent voices

Melissa Hooper

Introduction

There has already been much discussion in the Russia-watching world about the tools Russia uses to spread its influence, and it is quite an arsenal.¹⁸³ They include a worldwide media programme with an annual budget of over US\$300 million, the use of social media trolls and co-option of tiny media outlets to generate false grassroots 'movements' and stories consistent with Kremlin messaging, sometimes adopted by unsuspecting Europeans and Americans, that target minority communities said to threaten national 'values' to the point that they spur physical threats, as well as garden variety hacking and outright buying of influence.¹⁸⁴ One of the most-discussed has been Russia's support to disruptive political parties in Europe,¹⁸⁵ including those on the far-right (Front National)¹⁸⁶ and centre right (sections of the Republicans)¹⁸⁷ in France, radical right and far right parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany¹⁸⁸, Liga Nord in Italy,¹⁸⁹ Jobbik¹⁹⁰ and Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary¹⁹¹, and the far-left (Syriza)¹⁹² and Golden Dawn¹⁹³ in Greece, Podemos¹⁹⁴ in Spain, as well as a number of Green parties throughout Europe¹⁹⁵). However, support to political parties is just one piece of a larger network of interconnected technologies and tools. These tools rest on the foundation of a worldwide media program with an annual budget of over US\$300 million,¹⁹⁶ set to broadcast in 30 languages,¹⁹⁷ conducted through RT, Rossiya Segodnya, and Russia Beyond the Headlines, including a Youtube channel, print, and TV media in English, Arabic, Spanish, German, and French, as well as Russian, that peddles disinformation,¹⁹⁸ half- or partial-truths,¹⁹⁹ false stories,²⁰⁰ and weaponises false media narratives²⁰¹ especially about minority populations such as migrants²⁰² or LGBT communities²⁰³. Their online vitriol targeting minority communities, sometimes unwittingly adopted by the mainstream media,²⁰⁴ can lead to offline physical threats.

An important component in the Kremlin's corrupt networks of false messaging are what look like legitimate grassroots-developed journalistic outfits and NGOs²⁰⁵ that support Russia's anti-refugee and pro-nationalist and

¹⁸³ Keir Giles, Philip Hanson, Roderic Lyne, James Nixey, James Sherr, Andrew Wood, The Russian Challenge, Chatham House, June 2015, http://www.academia.edu/19557277/Russias_Toolkit.

¹⁸⁴ For more information on various strategies the Russian government uses, see Melissa Hooper, Issue Brief: Six Ways (Other Than Hacking) that Russia is Exploiting Divisions and the Rise of Xenophobia in Europe, Human Rights First, January 2017, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/russian-influence-europe>.

¹⁸⁵ Antonis Klapsis, An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia, Wilfried Marten's Centre for European Studies, 2015, <http://www.martenscentre.eu/publications/far-right-political-parties-in-europe-and-putins-russia>.

¹⁸⁶ Helene Fouquet, Gregory Viscusi, Henry Meyer, LePen Struggling to Fund French Race As Russian Bank Fails, Bloomberg Politics, December 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-12-22/le-pen-struggling-to-fund-french-race-after-russian-backer-fails>.

¹⁸⁷ Marlene LaRuelle, France: Mainstreaming Russian Influence, in The Kremlin's Trojan Horses, Atlantic Council, November 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_web_1213_second_edition.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Melanie Amann & Pavel Lokshin, German Populists Forge Ties with Russia, Spiegel Online, April 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Foster & Matthew Holehouse, Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties, as U.S. conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy, The Telegraph, January 2016, <http://bit.ly/1nrAYtz>.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Dániel Hegedűs, The Kremlin's Influence in Hungary, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), DGAPkompakt, February 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/think-tank/publications/dgapanalyse-compact/kremlins-influence-hungary>.

¹⁹² Henry Stanek, Is Russia's Alliance with Greece a Threat to NATO?, The National Interest, July 2016 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-alliance-greece-threat-nato-16998>.

¹⁹³ Gabrielle Trault-Farber, Russian, European Far-Right Parties Converge in St Petersburg, The Moscow Times, March 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russian-european-far-right-parties-converge-in-st-petersburg-45010>.

¹⁹⁴ Briefing, Russia's European Supporters: In the Kremlin's Pocket, The Economist, February 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21643222-who-backs-putin-and-why-kremlins-pocket>.

¹⁹⁵ RT, RT's 2016 budget announced, down from 2015, MSM too stumped to spin?, RT, May 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/318181-rt-budget-down-msm/>; See also Brookings Institution, Brookings Hosts Vice-President Joe Biden for Remarks on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, May 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/20150527_biden_transcript.pdf.

¹⁹⁶ RT, RT's 2016 budget announced, down from 2015, ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Miriam Elder, Russia Has A New Propaganda Outlet And It's Everything You Thought It Would Be, Stop Fake, November 2014, <http://www.stopfake.org/en/russia-has-a-new-propaganda-outlet-and-it-s-everything-you-thought-it-would-be/>.

¹⁹⁸ Intelligence Community Assessment, Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections, January 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ Christopher Paul & Miriam Matthews, The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model, Rand Corporation, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf.

²⁰⁰ Neil MacFarquhar, A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories, New York Times, August 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html?_r=0.

²⁰¹ Christopher Paul & Miriam Matthews, The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model, Rand Corporation, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf.

²⁰² Daniel Boffey, Russia 'stoking refugee unrest in Germany to topple Angela Merkel', The Guardian, March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/05/russia-refugee-germany-angela-merkel-migration-vladimir-putin>.

²⁰³ Péter Krekó, Lóránt Györi, Katya Dunajeva, Russia is Weaponizing culture in CEE by creating a traditionalist 'counter culture', December 2016 <http://bit.ly/2hFTfl2>.

²⁰⁴ Natasha Bertrand, It looks like Russia hired internet trolls to pose as pro-Trump Americans, Daily KOS, July 2016 <http://bit.ly/2g6LEeD>.

²⁰⁵ Ivana Smolenova, The Pro-Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Prague Security Studies Institute, June 2015, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/253_is-pro-russian-campaign.pdf.

authoritarian messaging – but are actually government-linked organisations²⁰⁶ that act as if they were real foundations,²⁰⁷ think tanks,²⁰⁸ or civic interest groups²⁰⁹. However, these organisations exist to echo back, seemingly using an independent voice, the strategic messages placed by the Kremlin that target minority communities in service of sowing conflict and countering democratic visions of human rights. Some of these ‘non-governmental’ organisations are formed around Orthodox religions,²¹⁰ conservative Christian values,²¹¹ or Russian language²¹² and culture²¹³. Some even include paramilitary²¹⁴ support to far-right activists²¹⁵ and training for youth²¹⁶ to ‘provide protection’ against the scary foreign influence of migrants and refugees. Interestingly enough, the foreign influence deemed a threat are people fleeing violence that is itself supported and fomented by Russia, as it has supported Assad’s brutal war in Syria.

The faux civil society groups funded by the Kremlin and its agents include organisations that engage in observation (though not actual monitoring²¹⁷) of elections, legal cases, and demonstrations, to protect the sovereignty of the state (instead of rights to fair elections, trials or freedom of speech). They include associations,²¹⁸ conferences²¹⁹ and forums,²²⁰ some of which bring together separatist movements²²¹ or conservative far-right movements²²² and parties together in Russia to share ideas, and some of which bring westerners to interact with anti-western ideologies²²³ in the hope that the pro-Russia ideas will catch on. All share a disdain for what they perceive as western concepts of individual rights, democratic processes, and protections for minority groups such as migrants, Muslims and LGBTQ groups. These organisations do not work alone to foment narratives about the danger of minority groups or lack of security in democracies. Their work is buttressed by other tools, such as hacker collectives²²⁴ that strategically release information to foment fear, and economic incentives to influence key policy-makers; a tool that allows non-governmental entities to collaborate in affecting policy with Russian sympathisers in

²⁰⁶ Vladka Vojtkova, Vit Novotny, Hubertus Schmid-Schmidsfelden, Kristina Potapova, The Bear in Sheep’s Clothing: Russia’s Government-Funded Organizations in the EU, Wilfried Marten’s Centre for European Studies, July 2016, <http://www.martenscentre.eu/publications/bear-sheeps-clothing-russias-government-funded-organisations-eu>.

²⁰⁷ Elisabeth Braw, The Kremlin’s Influence Game, in World Affairs Journal, March 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/elisabeth-braw/kremlin%E2%80%99s-influence-game>

²⁰⁸ Natalya Kanevskaya, How the Kremlin Wields its Soft Power in France, RFE/RL, June 2014 <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-soft-power-france/25433946.html>

²⁰⁹ Vladka Vojtkova, Vit Novotny, Hubertus Schmid-Schmidsfelden, Kristina Potapova, The Bear in Sheep’s Clothing: Russia’s Government-Funded Organizations in the EU, Wilfried Marten’s Centre for European Studies, July 2016, <http://www.martenscentre.eu/publications/bear-sheeps-clothing-russias-government-funded-organisations-eu>.

²¹⁰ Andrew Higgins, In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines With Firepower, New York Times, September 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/europe/russia-orthodox-church.html>.

²¹¹ Mall Hellam, Russia In Europe: the reactionary values agenda, Open Estonia Foundation, 2016,

https://oef.org/ee/fileadmin/user_upload/Russia_in_Europe_Executive_Summary_of_Research_Reports_final_ENG.pdf.

²¹² Transcript: Putin says Russia will protect the rights of Russians abroad, Washington Post, March 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html.

²¹³ Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, Daniel Antoun, Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia’s Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the former Soviet Union, CNA Corporation, November 2015, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf.

²¹⁴ Arthur de Liedekerke, The rise of paramilitary groups in Central and Eastern Europe, New Eastern Europe, January 2016, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1862-the-rise-of-paramilitary-groups-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

²¹⁵ John R. Schindler, Putin’s Support for Europe’s Far-Right Just Turned Lethal, Observer, October 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/10/putins-support-for-europes-far-right-just-turned-lethal/>

²¹⁶ Jakub Janda and Ondrij Kunda, Mechanisms of Influence of the Russian Federation into Internal Affairs of the Czech Republic, European Values Think Tank, September 2016, <http://bit.ly/2njnjl0>

²¹⁷ NED Forum Think Democracy, How Dictators Use Zombie Elections Monitors to Stay in Power, BuzzFeed, October 2014, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/thinkdemocracy/how-dictators-use-zombie-election-monitors-to-stay-uo7i>.

²¹⁸ BBC Ukraine Crisis, Europe far-right parties meet in St Petersburg, Russia, BBC, March 2015, <http://bbc.in/1CJHroj>

²¹⁹ Tony Paterson, Putin’s far-right ambition: Think tank reveals how Russian President is wooing – and funding – populist parties across Europe to gain influence in the EU, Independent, November 2014 <http://ind.pn/1LDsLND>

²²⁰ Daniel W. Drezner, Is there value in Valдай?, Washington Post, October 2016, <http://wapo.st/2nAkRtS>

²²¹ Casey Michel, US and EU Separatist Groups To Gather on Moscow’s Dime, The Diplomat, July 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/us-and-eu-separatist-groups-to-gather-on-moscows-dime/>

²²² BBC Ukraine Crisis, Europe far-right parties meet in St Petersburg, Russia, BBC, March 2015, <http://bbc.in/1CJHroj>

²²³ Tony Paterson, Putin’s far-right ambition: Think tank reveals how Russian President is wooing – and funding – populist parties across Europe to gain influence in the EU, Independent, November 2014, <http://ind.pn/1LDsLND>

²²⁴ Owen Matthews, Russia’s Greatest Weapon May Be Its Hackers, Newsweek, May 2015 <http://europe.newsweek.com/russias-greatest-weapon-may-be-its-hackers-326974?rm=eu>

the Governments or Parliaments of the Czech Republic²²⁵, Hungary²²⁶, Estonia²²⁷, Latvia²²⁸, Lithuania²²⁹ and Bulgaria²³⁰.

NGOs can also be used for intelligence-gathering. In 2013, Yury Zaytsev, the head of the Russian Center for Science and Culture, was investigated for spying.²³¹ The Center had been setting up all-expense paid trips²³² for young professional Americans, including young advisors to politicians, apparently as an effort to cultivate them as intelligence assets. Other investigations have turned up outsized donations from NGOs to pro-Russian political parties,²³³ or suspicions that the organisation is a listening post.²³⁴

How GONGOs, zombies and fake NGOs promote ideologies harmful to human rights

The Russian government uses think tanks and foundations that either it has funded, or Russian-government-associated oligarchs have funded, to spread false messages that target minorities in achieving their goals of (1) presenting the EU as unsafe; (2) presenting democracy as a failed experiment; and (3) urging the need for an alternative to democracy – often proposed as the Eurasianist ideology of Alexander Dugin. Specifically, these think tanks and foundations disseminate messages that migrants and Muslims are overwhelming the EU, are taking resources that should be spent on the ‘rightful’ citizens of the nation, or that the EU and its democracy are a degraded institution because it is too accepting of LGBTQ communities. The harm in this approach is that, unlike the democracy-promotion agenda of the west, it is based on little or no scientific evidence or analysis, and it targets minority communities in ways that can predictably lead to violence and harm being committed against these communities.

Russian use of non-governmental tools to spread anti-Western messaging often takes the form of NGO ‘experts’ that legitimise destabilising messages, or legitimise Russian-slanted forums (such as a single French ‘expert’ presenting at the Dialogue of Civilizations). The messages they legitimise often point out weaknesses in Western policies and push them to an overwrought conclusion. For example, they argue that the West cannot guarantee the safety of citizens due to infiltration by too many threatening migrants, or the idea that the EU cannot deliver on its economic promises, making it a worthless endeavour for those eyeing membership (Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Serbia). Three specific strains of this argument are prominent.

First, false NGOs and associations posit that Russia, the leader of the Russian cultural world, must act to protect its compatriots from threats.²³⁵ This philosophy comes straight from the fascist theory of Eurasianism²³⁶ put forth by Putin’s advisor Alexander Dugin,²³⁷ who believes that the Eurasian world of compatriots must unite against the West. These compatriots can be of Russian heritage²³⁸ (such as Germans from Russia or Russlanddeutsche²³⁹),

²²⁵ Gregory Feifer and Brian Whitmore, The Velvet Surrender, New Republic, September 2010 <https://newrepublic.com/article/77397/russian-aggression-the-velvet-surrender-vladimir-putin-vaclav-klaus-czech-republic>

²²⁶ Dániel Hegedűs, The Kremlin’s Influence in Hungary, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), February 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/think-tank/publications/dgapanalyse-compact/kremlins-influence-hungary>; Neil MacFarquhar, How Russians Pay to Play in Other Countries, New York Times, December 2016, <http://nyti.ms/2mFq18Z>; Damien Sharkov, Far-Right MEP Accused of Acting as Russian Spy, Newsweek, September 2014, <http://europa.newsweek.com/far-right-mep-accused-acting-russian-spy-273444?rm=eu>

²²⁷ Stratfor, A Political Scandal in Estonia and Russian Influence in the Baltics, December 2010 <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/political-scandal-estonia-and-russian-influence-baltics>

²²⁸ Mikhail Bushuev, Latvian voter overshadowed by Russian questions, Deutsche Welle, October 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/latvian-vote-overshadowed-by-russian-questions/a-17971632>.

²²⁹ Steven Lee Myers, Lithuanian Parliament Removes Country’s President After Casting Votes on Three Charges, New York Times, 7 April 2004, <http://nyti.ms/2nzXctu>

²³⁰ Dmytro Bechev, Russia’s Influence in Bulgaria, New Direction The Foundation for European Reform, 2016, http://europeanreform.org/files/ND-report-RussiasInfluenceInBulgaria-preview-lo-res_FV.pdf; John R. Haines, The Suffocating Symbiosis: Russia Seeks Trojan Horses Inside Fractious Bulgaria’s Political Corral, Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 2016, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/08/suffocating-symbiosis-russia-seeks-trojan-horses-inside-fractious-bulgarias-political-coral/>

²³¹ Sari Horwitz, Head of DC Based Russian Cultural Center Being Investigated as Possible Spy, Washington Post, 23 October 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/head-of-dc-based-russian-cultural-center-being-investigated-as-possible-spy/2013/10/23/63a0bb54-3c02-11e3-a94f-b58017bfee6c_story.html?utm_term=.1c7cb4827e5d.

²³² Molly Redden, FBI Probing Whether Russia Used Cultural Junkets to Recruit American Intelligence Assets, Mother Jones, October 2013, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/10/fbi-investigating-yury-zaytsev-russian-diplomat-spy/>.

²³³ Stratfor, A Political Scandal in Estonia and Russian Influence in the Baltics, December 2010, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/political-scandal-estonia-and-russian-influence-baltics>.

²³⁴ Jacqueline Grapin, Perspectives: Russia boosts its influence in France, European Affairs, July 2016, <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/ei-blog/286-european-affairs/ea-july-2016/2174-perspectives-russia-boosts-its-influence-in-france>.

²³⁵ Transcript: Putin Says Russia Will Protect the Rights of Russians Abroad, Washington Post, March, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html?utm_term=.ed7dc0a9c69e.

²³⁶ Charles Clover, The Unlikely Origins of Russia’s Manifest Destiny, Foreign Policy, July 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/geopolitics-russia-mackinder-eurasia-heartland-dugin-ukraine-eurasianism-manifest-destiny-putin/>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Damir Magusic & Agnia Grigas, Putin’s Compatriots, The American Interest, October 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/10/23/putins-compatriots/>.

²³⁹ Melanie Amann, Markus Becker, Benjamin Bidder, Hubert Gude, Konstantin von Hammerstein, Alexej Hock, Christiane Hoffmann, Martin Knobbe, Peter Maxwell, Peter Müller, Gordon Repinski, Sven Röbel, Anna Sadovnikova, Matthias Schepp, Jörg Schindler, Christoph Schult, Russia’s Propaganda Campaign Against Germany, Spiegel, February 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/putin-wages-hybrid-war-on-germany-and-west-a-1075483.html>.

Russian speakers²⁴⁰ (in Crimea or the Baltics²⁴¹), or even Slavs (Serbia)²⁴². The theory has also been used to offer protection to peacekeepers²⁴³ in the perceived Russian sphere of influence (Georgia in 2008), or those that simply agree with Russia's ideas. It relies on a distorted view of the 'responsibility to protect' language²⁴⁴ that was used to justify the US bombing of Kosovo in 1999, and further distorts the principle from one that aims to protect against crimes against humanity to one that sanctions military involvement²⁴⁵ to protect against discrimination and alleged language rights violations.²⁴⁶ Russia urges these groups to see the West as antagonistic and migrants or refugees as enemies who are offered benefits that they are not provided.²⁴⁷ Russia has established paramilitary organisations sometimes registered as NGOs (for example in Slovakia²⁴⁸, Ukraine²⁴⁹, Serbia²⁵⁰, the Baltics²⁵¹), allegedly so Russian compatriots can protect themselves, since European governments will not do so.

Second, Russia seeks to create an infrastructure of groups that support 'sovereign democracy'²⁵² and state security at the expense of individual rights, portraying universal human rights as a Western 'perspective'.²⁵³ Russia argues that minority groups are given protections despite their threatening²⁵⁴ (migrant, Muslim, LGBT) ways of life, at the risk and expense of other citizens. This view buttresses the increasing nationalism²⁵⁵ seen in places like Germany, France, Hungary, Poland and indeed the United States and United Kingdom – some of which in Europe is also supported by Russia through the funding of far-right and far-left political parties. As set out above Russia has been documented as providing some kind of support – either financial, information-based, or other in-kind support, to both far-right parties – such as the Front National in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and Freedom Party in Austria, and far-left parties such as Syriza in Greece, socialist parties in Bulgaria and Moldova, and Green parties in Europe; it also has supported separatist movements in places as diverse as Spain, Ireland and the US states of Texas and California.²⁵⁶ These nationalist groups urge their governments to return to a prior, theoretically safer, time in their history – including a return to greater power to the nationalist and fascist government or movement.

Third, Russia claims leadership in the community that seeks to protect 'traditional values'²⁵⁷ domestically and internationally. It has introduced at least four resolutions²⁵⁸ in support of 'family values' and against LGBTQ rights, in the UN Human Rights Council, and passed one in 2016.²⁵⁹ Russian religious right NGOs worked to contribute to these resolutions, providing a false veneer of legitimacy as 'experts',²⁶⁰ since the information they provide is not based on scientific studies conducted through a peer-reviewed process, and are often merely opinions, not facts. They also

²⁴⁰ David Herszenhorn, Putin Vows to 'Actively Defend' Russians Living Abroad, Atlantic Council, July 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/putin-vows-to-actively-defend-russians-living-abroad>.

²⁴¹ Agnia Grigas, Compatriot Games: Russian-Speaking Minorities in the Baltic States, World Politics Review, October 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14240/compatriot-games-russian-speaking-minorities-in-the-baltic-states>.

²⁴² The Global Politics, The Pan-Slavism and Tsarist Russia's Balkan Policy, December 2016, <http://global-politics.eu/2016/12/21/pan-slavism-tsarist-russias-balkan-policy/>.

²⁴³ Julia Ioffe, Russia and Georgia, Three Years Later, New Yorker, August 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/russia-and-georgia-three-years-later>.

²⁴⁴ Derek Averre & Lance Davies, Russia, humanitarian intervention, and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria, Chatham House Royal Institute of International Affairs, July 2015, vol.9, n.4, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/ia/russia-humanitarian-intervention-and-responsibility-protect-case-syria>.

²⁴⁵ Agnia Grigas, Compatriot Games: Russian-Speaking Minorities in the Baltic States, World Politics Review, October 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14240/compatriot-games-russian-speaking-minorities-in-the-baltic-states>.

²⁴⁶ Sarah de Geest, Russian Intervention in Ukraine: R2P Limits and reclaiming the Concept and Narrative, Human Security Centre, April 2015, <http://www.hscentre.org/russia-and-eurasia/russian-intervention-ukraine-r2p-limits-reclaiming-concept-narrative/>.

²⁴⁷ News and Events, Guy Mettan's book on the reasons for Western Russophobia was published, Endowment for St Andrew the First-Called Foundation, May 2016, <http://www.st-andrew-foundation.org/en/2016/05/12/russkij-izdana-kniga-gi-mettana-o-prichinax-zapadnoj-rusofobii/>.

²⁴⁸ Athur de Liedekerke, The rise of paramilitary groups in Central and Eastern Europe, New Eastern Europe, January 2016, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1862-the-rise-of-paramilitary-groups-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

²⁴⁹ Aleksandr Gostev & Robert Coalson, Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge From The Shadows, RFE/RL, December 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.

²⁵⁰ Damir Marusic, Did Moscow Botch A Coup in Montenegro?, The American Interest, October 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/10/30/did-moscow-botch-a-coup-in-montenegro/>.

²⁵¹ Agnia Grigas, Compatriot Games: Russian-Speaking Minorities in the Baltic States, World Politics Review, October 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14240/compatriot-games-russian-speaking-minorities-in-the-baltic-states>.

²⁵² David Clark, Putin is Exporting Sovereign Democracy to New Allies, Financial Times, December 2016, <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2016/12/20/putin-is-exporting-sovereign-democracy-to-new-em-allies/>.

²⁵³ Sarah Fisher, Sovereign Democracy: Russia's response to the color revolutions, The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository, May 2014, <http://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=honors>.

²⁵⁴ David Trilling, Russia Poll: Migration Likeliest Threat to National Security, Eurasianet, July 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67279>.

²⁵⁵ Owen Jones, Putin is a human rights-abusing oligarch. The British left must speak out, The Guardian, January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/26/vladimir-putin-russia-oligarch-british-left-speak-out>.

²⁵⁶ Melissa Hooper, Issue Brief: Six Ways (Other Than Hacking) that Russia is Exploiting Divisions and the Rise of Xenophobia in Europe, Human Rights First, January 2017, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/russian-influence-europe>.

²⁵⁷ Melissa Hooper, Russia's 'Traditional Values' Leadership, in Sharing Worst Practice: How countries and institutions in the former Soviet Union help create legal tools of repression, Foreign Policy Centre, June 2016, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/russias-traditional-values-leadership>.

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Peter Montgomery, International Backlash: The Religious Right at the UN, Political Research Associates, November 2016, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2016/11/14/international-backlash-the-religious-right-at-the-un/#sthash.13vhPLlo.dpbb>.

²⁶⁰ Mall Hellam, Russia In Europe: the reactionary values agenda, Open Estonia Foundation, 2016, https://oef.org.ee/fileadmin/user_upload/Russia_in_Europe_Executive_Summary_of_Research_Reports_final_ENG.pdf.

organised the religious right as an international political bloc,²⁶¹ and argued that the US and EU have denigrated their morals because they recognise and accept the rights of LGBTIQ communities.²⁶²

It is important to note that the dissemination of false ideas and stories by Russian-funded outlets and NGOs is different from lazy journalism²⁶³ that fails to fact-check information before publishing it. These organisations are strategically used as an arm of Russian foreign policy in that they are provided funding from Russia and they disseminate specific and calculated forms of messaging that emphasise false failures or weaknesses of the West, with the goal of destabilising democratic societies.

Example one: The Vladimir Yakunin network

Vladimir Yakunin, formerly the chair of Russian Railways, is a close associate and former fellow-KGB associate of Vladimir Putin's, and is under sanctions in the United States as a result.²⁶⁴ He has developed high-profile organisations, including exchange programmes, discussion forums and values-based organisations, in at least five European states: Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France and Greece, and has close ties to the US religious right. It was Yakunin's payments – through his NGO²⁶⁵ – to politician Edgar Savisaar that provided the basis for Estonia's investigation into Savisaar's acceptance of bribes in 2015.²⁶⁶ Yakunin helped pay for the religious-right World Congress of Families Moscow Conference in 2014, amid controversy over Russia's invasion of Crimea, and he has funded a variety of Orthodox charities supporting the 'traditional values' movement.²⁶⁷ Yakunin is on the Board of Trustees of Russkiy Mir, one of the Russian government's global aid organisations that²⁶⁸ funds programmes for Russian compatriots globally. He has close ties with Konstantin Kosachev, head of the biggest Russian international aid organisation, Rossotrudnichestvo.²⁶⁹ Yakunin's network deserves suspicion as a dissemination point for Kremlin ideologies with links to cases of alleged corruption such as Savisaar.

Yakunin's network includes the St. Andrew the First Called Foundation, established in Geneva in 2013, the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, established in Berlin in 2016,²⁷⁰ and the World Public Dialogue of Civilizations, originally established in Vienna²⁷¹ but now taken over by an associate, Walter Schwimmer (also involved in the Berlin organisation). All three follow the same ideological line, disseminating reports and presenting conferences supporting the idea that democracy is 'failing' due to its acceptance of LGBT rights and of migrants, such that a new – authoritarian and Eurasianist – model must be developed (with a reference to Putin advisor Alexander Dugin) that would be better able to ensure national security. Yakunin also has an Endowment in Geneva intended to provide funding to this NGO empire.²⁷²

In Paris, Yakunin and Assemblée Nationale member Thierry Mariani jointly lead the conservative Dialogue Franco-Russe,²⁷³ whose stated aim is cooperation between the two countries. Members include prominent conservative and establishment figures such as former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and companies such as Airbus, Alstom, and Bouygues.²⁷⁴ Mariani, through the Dialogue, invited (and paid for) a group of Assemblée Nationale members to travel to Moscow and Crimea in July 2015, despite warnings that they were being exploited.²⁷⁵

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Giorgi Lomsadze, A 'Family' Gathering Commemorates an Anti-Gay Riot, Coda Story, May 2016, <https://codastory.com/lgbt-crisis/world-council-families>.

²⁶³ David Rutz, 5 Times the Washington Post Failed at Fact-Checking, Washington Free Beacon, March 2015, <http://freebeacon.com/politics/5-times-the-washington-post-failed-at-fact-checking/>.

²⁶⁴ US Department of the Treasury Resource Center, Ukraine-related Designations, March 2014, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140320_33.aspx.

²⁶⁵ News, KAPO declassifies Savisaar files, ERR.ee, December 2010, <http://news.err.ee/v/politics/36650917-4ee3-42db-a1b9-d0308976ea20>.

²⁶⁶ Ott Ummelas, Estonian Police Detain Kremlin Ally in Bribery Investigation, Bloomberg, September 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-22/estonian-police-detains-kremlin-ally-in-bribery-investigation>.

²⁶⁷ Hannah Levintova, How US Evangelicals Helped Create Russia's Anti-Gay Movement, Mother Jones, February 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-russia-gay-rights>.

²⁶⁸ Russkiy Mir Foundation, Vladimir Yakunin Leaves JSC 'Russian Railways', August 2015, <http://www.russkiymir.ru/en/news/194530/>.

²⁶⁹ Russkiy Mir Foundation, Information Service, Head of Rossotrudnichestvo Participates in Dialogue of Civilizations, September 2014, <http://russkiymir.ru/en/news/151794/>.

²⁷⁰ Ben Knight, Putin associate opens Russia-friendly think tank in Berlin, July 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-associate-opens-russia-friendly-think-tank-in-berlin/a-19372110>.

²⁷¹ Lukas Wehnert, Stand up to Western Top Dogs, Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, September 2016, <https://doc-research.org/en/aboutus/stand-western-top-dogs/>.

²⁷² Dialogue of Civilizations Endowment Fund, About the Foundation, last visited March 2017, <http://dofc-foundation.org/about/>.

²⁷³ Association Dialogue Franco-Russe, Events Calendar, last visited 4 March 2017, <http://dialoguefrancorusse.com/en/>.

²⁷⁴ Claire Demesmay, 'There are Always Two Sides to the Truth': French Susceptibility to Russian Propaganda, German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAPkompakt, Number 4, February 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/27570>

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

These organisations serve to spread eurosceptic, anti-LGBT, and anti-migrant views throughout the capitals of Europe.²⁷⁶ The Berlin think tank reportedly will serve as a headquarters of a worldwide network aimed at making 'Russia's view of the world popular'.²⁷⁷ The World Public Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute hosts a network of those that 'share the values of the Foundation' in each of the 43 states in the European Union.²⁷⁸ His Paris organisation's influence was cited, alongside the new Orthodox Church (discussed below),²⁷⁹ as a reason for the uptick in pro-Russian sentiment among French politicians.

Yakunin's World Public Forum also organises the Rhodes Forum annually in Greece as a platform for conservative researchers, scientists, politicians to discuss 'alternative models' to democracy.²⁸⁰ The 2016 Forum included the Prime Ministers of Hungary and Slovakia, Victor Orban and Robert Fico, and the Czech President Milos Zeman.²⁸¹

Yakunin is also a major funder of religious right propaganda against LGBTQ communities. His wife, Natalya, is President of the Sanctity of Motherhood organisation²⁸² - a 'pro-family movement' which aims to instill the 'image of a traditional family with three and more children as the social norm'.²⁸³ He is one of the leading members of the World Congress of Families, an American organisation²⁸⁴ that holds an international conference each year to strategise around implementation of far-right religious policies globally. In 2014, the conference was supposed to be held in Moscow, but some US organisations pulled out,²⁸⁵ appalled at Russia's invasion of Crimea. The conference was held under a different name - with funding from Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev²⁸⁶ and the participation of at least five²⁸⁷ US organisations. Leaders of WCF²⁸⁸ include Bryan Fischer, Pat Buchanan, Franklin Graham, Jack Hanick (formerly of Fox News) from the US, and Vladimir Yakunin, Konstantin Malofeev, Natalia Yakunina, Yelena Mizulina (Duma member who introduced both the anti-LGBT propaganda law in 2013 and the recently-passed law decriminalising domestic violence) and Alexei Komov (director of external affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church) from Russia.

Yakunin's network is one to watch, not least because he is a true believer in Kremlin propaganda. In a June 2016 interview conducted through his St. Andrew the First Called Foundation, Yakunin echoed the view that the Kremlin is only defending itself in developing media and foundation-based propaganda, stating that "The Kremlin is properly counteracting anti-Russian propaganda," with its actions.

Example two: The French network

In addition to Yakunin's Dialogue Franco-Russe, which has developed solid links between the Kremlin and politicians and businesses, several new Russian-funded organisations have been established in Paris to spread Russia's favoured anti-human rights ideologies. This is a worrying trend in light of France's presidential election this year with pro-Russia candidates and parties having a chance to gain power. Recent construction of a huge Russian Orthodox Church in Paris is also causing a stir.

The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (IDC) modelled on the US NGO Freedom House, was created in 2008 to 'help citizens understand Russia's position on human rights and democracy'.²⁸⁹ The organisation defends the idea of 'managed democracy' and human rights based on traditional values, subjugated to national interests. The Paris

²⁷⁶ Endowment for St Andrew the First-Called Foundation, About the Foundation, last visited March 2017, <http://www.st-andrew-foundation.org/en/about-found/>.

²⁷⁷ Ben Knight, Putin associate opens Russia-friendly think tank in Berlin, July 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-associate-opens-russia-friendly-think-tank-in-berlin/a-19372110>.

²⁷⁸ Anna Lindh Foundation, ALF Network of Networks, last visited March 2017, <http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/network-of-networks>.

²⁷⁹ Claire Demesmay, 'There are Always Two Sides to the Truth': French Susceptibility to Russian Propaganda, German Council on Foreign Relations, DGAPkompakt, Number 4, February 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/27570>; Erasmus, A new Orthodox church next to the Eiffel Tower boosts Russian soft power, The Economist, December 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/12/ecclesiastical-diplomacy>

²⁸⁰ Lukas Wehnert, Stand up to Western Top Dogs, Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, September 2016, <https://doc-research.org/en/aboutus/stand-western-top-dogs/>.

²⁸¹ Dialogue of Civilizations Rhodes Forum, The Chaos of Multiplicity: An Urgent Call for Dialogue, The Rhodes Forum 2016, last visited March 2017, <https://doc-research.org/forum/>.

²⁸² Istoki Endowment Fund, All-Russian Programme 'Sanctity of Motherhood', last visited March 2017, <http://istoki-foundation.org/en/program/all-russian-programme-sanctity-of-motherhood/>.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Cole Parke, Natural Deception: Conned by the World Congress of Families, Political Research Associates, January 2015, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2015/01/21/natural-deception-conned-by-the-world-congress-of-families/#sthash.sXAKGi5l.672oifz.dpbs>.

²⁸⁵ Hannah Levintova, Did Anti-Gay Evangelists Skirt US Sanctions on Russia?, Mother Jones, September 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/09/world-congress-families-russia-conference-sanctions>.

²⁸⁶ Giorgi Lomsadze, A 'Family' Gathering Commemorates an Anti-Gay Riot, Coda Story, May 2016, <https://codastory.com/lgbt-crisis/world-council-families>.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Hannah Levintova, The World Congress of Families' Russian Network, Mother Jones, February 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/02/world-congress-families-us-evangelical-russia-family-tree>.

²⁸⁹ Olga Khvostunova, The Propaganda of the Putin Era, April 2013, Institute of Modern Russia, <http://imrussia.org/en/politics/443?start=1>.

office, l'Institut de la Democratie et de la Cooperation, is headed by Natalya Narochitskaya,²⁹⁰ a former Duma member for the ultranationalist Rodina (Fatherland) party. It invites representatives of the Catholic and radical right to its conferences, legitimising their fringe views.²⁹¹ The IDC NGOs have been described by Andrey Makarychev as 'propaganda platforms rather than... intellectual think tanks'.²⁹²

The Alliance France-Europe-Russie (AAFER) is chaired by Fabrice Sorlin, a former far-right National Front party candidate, and head of the far-right nationalist Dies Irae²⁹³, which has been accused of racist and anti-Semitic behaviour. The organisation has stated in the past that it is dedicated to 'uniting the Anglo-Saxon world (sic) based on shared 'Christian values'.²⁹⁴ Sorlin, along with Brian Brown from the United States (see below) collaborates with the conservative religious movement in Russia, specifically with Yelena Mizulina, Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev of the World Congress of Families to promote 'Christian values'.²⁹⁵

Vladimir Potanin, owner of Norilsk Nickel, is an active Russian Orthodox promoter who finances the Russian Orthodox (Church) University. Potanin was also awarded contracts by Putin to build and operate Olympic facilities for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. His Potanin Foundation supports cultural exchanges, a French-Russia bilateral training programme for youth, and student fellowships.²⁹⁶

The Eurasian Observatory for Democracy in Elections is both a think tank²⁹⁷ and a faux election monitoring organisation.²⁹⁸ It is considered a 'shadow' or 'faux' election-monitoring organisation because it appears to have been created solely for the purpose of 'monitoring' the Crimean referendum; its monitors (whose identities were not made public) were apparently chosen based on their ideological views and not on their expertise on election issues; and because its report failed to consider issues of threats and intimidation against voters, and an abnormally forshortened time period for information dissemination prior to the vote.²⁹⁹ It has connections to France's Front National, and follows closely the ideology of Alexander Dugin. It disseminates pro-Russian media regarding the failings of the US and Europe and the strength of Russia's Duginist ideology. The organisation sent a Front National representative to observe (and approve) the Crimean referendum on joining Russia.³⁰⁰

The new Kremlin-funded Royal Orthodox Church, just steps away from the Eiffel Tower, serves several strategic goals. It has been called an intelligence listening post³⁰¹, located next to the apartment of the Secretary General of Defence, with other ministries nearby. By adding cultural services inside the building, the Russian Embassy designated it a diplomatic location, preventing French investigation of its activities.³⁰² (Similar concerns have been raised regarding the Russian Orthodox Church in Strasbourg, conveniently located close to the European Parliament).³⁰³

Russian Compatriot Policy operates in France through the Russian Center for Science and Culture which provides cultural programmes to dual nationals, whom they refer to as 'binationals'.³⁰⁴ The Conseil de coordination du Forum des Russes de France also offers trips to Russia for French young people³⁰⁵ – presumably with an eye toward developing their sympathies or gaining intelligence.

²⁹⁰ The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, About IDC, last visited March 2017, <http://www.idc-europe.org/en>.

²⁹¹ Van Herpen, Marcel. 2016. Putin's Propaganda Machine. Pp 242-266. Rowman & Littlefield.

²⁹² Makarychev, Andrey S. 2009. In Quest of Political Subjectivity: Russia's 'Normative Offensive' and the Triple Politicisation of Norms, Readings in European Security vol. 5. Center for European Policy Studies.

²⁹³ Right Wing Watch, Globalizing Homophobia: How the American Right Supports and Defends Russia's Anti-Gay Crackdown, In Focus, February 2014, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/report/globalizing-homophobia-how-the-american-right-supports-and-defends-russias-anti-gay-crackdown/>.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Vladimir Potanin Foundation, 2016-The New Philosophy of Philanthropy, last visited March 2017, <http://english.fondpotanin.ru/>.

²⁹⁷ EODE-Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections, EODE Think Tank, last visited March 2017, <http://www.eode.org/category/eode-think-tank/>.

²⁹⁸ EODE-Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections, EODE Elections, last visited March 2017, <http://www.eode.org/category/eode-international-elections-monitoring/>.

²⁹⁹ Anton Shekhovtsov, Pro-Russian extremists observe the illegitimate Crimean 'referendum', Anton Shekhovtsov's blog, 17 March 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/03/pro-russian-extremists-observe.html>.

³⁰⁰ Van Herpen, Marcel. 2016. Putin's Propaganda Machine. Pp, 242-266. Rowman & Littlefield.

³⁰¹ Jacqueline Grapin, Perspectives: Russia boosts its influence in France, European Affairs, European Institute, July 2016, <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/ei-blog/286-european-affairs/ea-july-2016/2174-perspectives-russia-boosts-its-influence-in-france>.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

Finally the World Without Nazism is a global organisation funded by Russian ex-politician Boris Shpigel,³⁰⁶ who is close to, and gets funding from, the Kremlin. It is registered in France, though it operates throughout the EU, particularly in the Nordic and Baltic states, and the US, to foment disruption associated with ideologies that the EU is unsafe and democracy deteriorating.³⁰⁷

Conclusion

In the last few years, we have learned much about the Russian government's view of 'foreign influence' through its development and application of foreign agent laws restricting relationships between NGOs and media and foreign individuals and governments. Russia's concern has always been based on its view that whoever provides funding to an entity controls the messages it puts out. While this has not been true of US and European government funding – by and large, as long as recipients were not committing human rights violations themselves, their messages were not restricted – we now see that when Russia wields its development funding (and the funding of its oligarch partners) as a foreign policy tool in support of foundations and think tanks, it expects to and does control the narratives and messages put out. Indeed, it finely hones those messages as part of a global strategy aimed at combating universal application of human rights standards and to present Western democracy as a failed experiment that must be replaced.

The ideologies supported and fomented by these Russian-agents acting as 'independent' non-governmental organisations are not only human rights-violating, they threaten the security of the states where they operate, and regional security in the EU and NATO. By stirring up hatred of migrants and refugees, Russia urges a denial of assistance and services to communities in dire need, contributing to the growth of violent extremism as communities lose hope. By fomenting anti-LGBTQ hatred, and anti-Muslim hatred, Russia contributes to an increase in xenophobic crimes committed against these groups – and perceived members of these groups – all over Europe. The US and Europe must initiate strategies to combat this messaging, and the tools that drive it, in order to preserve not only democratic governance, but also human rights values themselves.

Recommendations

Enforce existing transparency regulations that require the filing of annual reports by NGOs and media outlets in countries like France, Germany and the Baltics. European NGOs report that Russian-funded NGOs working in their regions simply do not comply with local rules and laws requiring that they make their donors public and provide annual reports. If organisations are not filing the reports where required, the state or EU regulatory agency should develop a mechanism to make follow-up requests and even apply sanctions or fines for lack of transparency. Reports should be publicly available under NGO transparency rules.

The European Parliament has aimed to make the EU Registry of Lobbying Organizations a mandatory registry for several years, the registry is currently voluntary. It should do so. It should also require disclosure of receipt of government funding as part of the registry. The EU and its member states should know when a foreign-funded organisation is behind the policy proposals being put forth by a foundation or think tank.

The EU and US intelligence entities should coordinate their research and investigation of these ties. This is in recognition of the fact that Russian-funded foundations and think tanks are not intended to function legally, so often they will not willingly comply with local regulations. In these situations, an investigative mechanism must exist to identify the sources of their funding and policies. This also means the US should partner with the EU to support large-scale journalistic investigation groups, under the model of the cross-border Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) or the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists that investigated and analysed the Panama Papers.

While ideally, US and EU cooperation on these issues would yield the most effective responses to support transparency and the greatest support for human rights-protecting organisations, as populist factions creep into governmental positions across a number of Western democracies, the best strategy now may be for intelligence agencies and/or civil society organisations and journalists themselves to take on the task of exposing the funding sources and links of faux think tanks and foundations. Indeed, doing so may be one bulwark against the rise of xenophobic and populist attitudes that threaten to crowd out the culture of human rights protection on both sides of the Atlantic.

³⁰⁶ Sanita Jemberga, Mikk Salu, Šarūnas Černiauskas, The Kremlin's millions, and its support of pro-Russian activists in the Baltic, October 2015, <http://foreignpolicynews.org/2015/10/07/the-kremlins-millions-and-its-support-of-pro-russian-activists-in-the-baltics/>.

³⁰⁷ Sanita Jemberga, Mikk Salu and Šarūnas Černiauskas, The Kremlin's millions, and its support of pro-Russian activists in the Baltics, Foreign Policy News, October 2015, <http://foreignpolicynews.org/2015/10/07/the-kremlins-millions-and-its-support-of-pro-russian-activists-in-the-baltics/>

Georgia's international promotion during the United National Movement and Georgian Dream eras

Ana Dvali and Revaz Koiava

Georgian government efforts to improve and promote the country's international image have both political and economic dimensions. As Euro-Atlantic integration has become a major theme of the Georgian political agenda, the government has sought international support for the country's integration into Western structures. The economic dimension is equally important, because Georgia's two major political parties, United National Movement (UNM) and the Georgian Dream (GD), both consider direct foreign investments and tourism development as key to economic growth. Respectively, both UNM- and GD-led governments used public relations campaigns as a foreign policy tool of choice to promote the country's international image, though their tactics and the scale of their efforts in this direction greatly differ.

UNM and the national branding build-up

After the 2003 'Rose Revolution', the Georgian government set very ambitious goals, which required the intensification of efforts to promote the country's international image, alongside radical reforms within the country. The United National Movement (UNM) Government's national branding and international promotion policy was largely determined by the personality of the President, Mikheil Saakashvili, who was directly involved in policy planning and implementation. The vertical organisation of executive power and the government's control over mass media allowed the UNM government to tailor the country's international image in accordance with the political elite's plans and priorities.

The great focus of the UNM on nation branding and international promotion drew frequent criticism from the opposition and part of the public, mainly because the image of Georgia that UNM strove to create was a far from the real situation in the country, especially with regard to economic conditions, the level of democratisation, protection of human rights and media freedom. Another reason for public frustration was that, against the backdrop of the economic hardship that a majority of Georgian citizens had to endure, the amount of money that the UNM government poured into these programmes was largely perceived as a wasteful use of public funds that could have been spent more beneficially for the people. However, UNM representatives usually cite the following reasons to justify their branding/promotion policy:

1. Firstly, it was essential to erase the perception of Georgia as a post-Soviet country. Prior to the Rose Revolution, Georgia was often viewed as a failed state. As a result, the UNM government made institutional development and state building its top priority. Along with institutional reforms, another important goal of the government was to inform the international community about its ambitious reform agenda.
2. Secondly, it was necessary to present Georgia as part of Western civilization in order to smooth the country's path towards integration into – and eventual membership of – Western structures. The UNM national branding policy was based on the narrative that Georgia's 1991 declaration of independence was the first step on its way to return to its 'European home', and that the country actually started moving towards the goal in 2003. To fulfil its objectives, UNM needed to portray Georgia as a pro-Western, democratic nation.

Georgia – 'the beacon of democracy' and a reformist country

Due to Georgia's Soviet legacy, the country has little experience of democracy. Therefore, the new government, which took power in the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution, attracted great attention and fuelled heightened expectations. Immediately after taking office, the UNM government 'rolled up its sleeves' and launched an intense effort to create an image of Georgia as a democratic and reformist country. Given the lack of democracy in neighbouring countries and the other countries of the region, Georgia's efforts to establish democracy was a rather 'exotic' regional phenomenon. UNM took advantage of this niche and used it as one of the main instruments in its international public relations (PR) policy. In addition, UNM representatives and Mikheil Saakashvili often cited international rating agencies, most often the World Bank *Doing Business reports* and Freedom House *Country Reports*, both to drive its point home and to prove its efficiency in the eyes of the international community.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Internet.GE, Georgia in 9th place in the Doing Business ratings, October 2012, <http://www.internet.ge/?l=GE&m=2&sm=0&ID=13832>

The reforms were used as another significant international PR instrument for the UNM government. Police reform, reorganisation of public services, and economic improvements were at the forefront of the government's publicity campaign.³⁰⁹ According to a personal interview with a former official of the National Security Council, two policy areas were major priorities: firstly, to share experiences, and in some cases 'export' reforms to other post-Soviet countries, and secondly, to represent Georgia as a reformist and democratic state to Western countries.

Obviously, international ratings do not reflect the full picture of democratic processes in a country. Accurate assessment of democratic development requires much more than to measure democracy and its components on the basis of an international organisation's pre-defined indicators. However, international ratings can be instrumental in promoting a country's image in the international arena. The democratic image of Georgia that the UNM government tried to promote was in stark contrast to the real situation, which was brought to light in the later years of the UNM administration such as the 2012 prison scandal and subsequent events.³¹⁰

Unlike its predecessor, the Georgian Dream (GD) government pays much less attention to international ratings, even though some international agencies have upgraded Georgia's rating in certain areas. For instance, after 2012 Georgia has consistently received a rating of 3 (where a score of 1 represents the highest level of democratic freedom and 7 the lowest level) in Freedom House surveys, as opposed to scores of 3.5 and 4 during the second term of UNM rule (2008-2012). According to Transparency International, the country's performance in the Corruption Perception Index has also improved.³¹¹ The GD government's shift of focus away from the international PR campaigns can be explained by two factors: Firstly GD was one of the most outspoken critics of the UNM government's excessive penchant for PR campaigns, which it said were out of touch with reality; secondly GD is reluctant to follow in the footsteps of its predecessor, because it is well aware that such a policy can backfire. UNM's overzealous international publicity campaign turned a blind eye to the country's domestic problems and deeply annoyed the Georgian public, which eventually led to growing public indignation.

Post-war strategy

The 2008 war had a significant impact on the government's national branding and international PR policy. As a result of the war with Russia and the economic crisis that ensued, the UNM government faced new challenges. After the war, Russia began laying the groundwork for recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia (SO) as independent states. The Georgian government responded with a new foreign policy initiative – non-recognition policy – and intensified its efforts to win support not only from Western nations, but also from Latin American and African countries (as Russia succeeded in persuading several countries³¹² from these regions to recognise Abkhazia's and SO's independence). For instance, the government opened Georgian embassies and consular services in Latin America and Africa, to try to prevent more countries from recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

During and after the 2008 war, amid Russia's anti-Georgian propaganda, Tbilisi has increased its cooperation with Western (mainly American) lobbying companies in order to promote Georgia's positive international image, attract world media attention to Georgia's situation and establish communication lines between the Georgian ruling elite and US decision-makers.

According to Institute for Development of Freedom of Information research, based on lobbying companies' reports to US Congress, the Georgian government paid around \$7 million (USD) from public funds (mainly from the National Security Council budget) for the services of lobbying firms between 2008 and 2012, and \$2.6 million USD in 2013-2015 (GD government).³¹³ After the 2012 elections, the government curtailed public funding for lobbying activities. However, according to news agency *Netgazeti*, GD employed contract lobbying services in the USA during election campaigns³¹⁴ that means the government is using lobbying mainly to support its party.

³⁰⁹ Mikheil Saakashvili – Georgia is in Highest League of World Championship in Doing Business, October 2009, <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/11135-mkhe-sksh-geog-s-n-hghest-legue-of-wod-chmponshp-n-dong-business.html?ar=A>

³¹⁰ Leaked videos of torture and harsh treatment of inmates.

³¹¹ Freedom in the World, Freedom House 2017 report https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf

³¹² Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru.

³¹³ Georgia's lobbying activities in USA, 2008-2015, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, p.11, <https://idfi.ge/ge/lobbying-georgia-usa-2008-2015>

³¹⁴ Net Gazeti, Georgian Dream's contracts with American lobbyists during election campaign, January 2017, <http://netgazeti.ge/news/168332/>

Economic dimension – tourism and investments

The economic dimension of national branding and international promotion policies has gained more prominence since the 2009 economic crisis. While before the 2008 conflict, UNM was anxious to create and promote Georgia's image as a democratic and reformist country, the post-war economic recession forced it to rethink its priorities and make economic recovery a centrepiece of its policy. Priorities were therefore shifted towards measures to facilitate tourism development and attract foreign investment. To achieve its objectives, the government enacted massive economic liberalisation. Free trade agreements were signed with many foreign countries, and taxes were cut to one of the lowest levels in the world during the period of UNM rule. In addition, the government greatly eased labour regulations, giving employers a free hand in deciding employment terms: hiring/dismissals, the number of working hours a day, and wages for normal and extra working hours. The main motivation for these changes was to create a comfortable environment for foreign investors. The Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Georgian embassies) were actively involved in the effort to attract as much foreign investment as possible. All Georgian ambassadors were instructed to do their best to encourage foreign investors to invest in Georgia. It is noteworthy that the need for foreign investments prompted the government to interact and communicate more actively with Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. Despite the growth in foreign investment³¹⁵, its importance was exaggerated, as the economic conditions of the Georgian residents and the unemployment rate remained largely unchanged. According to official data, the share of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Georgia's GDP in 2007-2012 ranged from 19% (the highpoint in 2007) to 6% (average during 2009-2012)³¹⁶.

Since 2003, as part of its international promotion policy, the government has made substantial efforts to present Georgia as a country of great tourism potential. Tourism became a priority economic sector under the UNM Government. The Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) was created as one of the mechanisms to increase Georgia's popularity abroad. To attract tourists to the country, GNTA actively employs TV and online video ads about Georgia, and takes part in various international exhibitions. It also assists Georgian tourism companies to help them improve their communication and cooperation with their foreign partners. The main target regions of the GNTA's tourism development strategy are post-Soviet, neighbouring and Middle Eastern countries; this represents a clear deviation from the UNM government's course, which tended to prioritise tourists from Europe and North America. Another visible difference is that the UNM government had a major focus on TV advertisements, while today, the greater focus is on social and digital media.

The GD government continues down the same path in terms of tourism development. The GNTA budget and apparatus has been steadily increasing in recent years, doubling employee numbers, (the budget was increased from 10 416 990 GEL in 2011 to 22 963 000 GEL in 2016), a clear indication that tourism development remains high on the government's priority list.³¹⁷ The tourism industry is one of the main sectors of the Georgian economy. The number of foreign tourists visiting Georgia has been steadily growing in recent years. According to official data, 5 million more tourists arrived in Georgia in 2015 than in the previous year, a 2.2% increase.³¹⁸

Conclusions

The current government's PR policy is much less aggressive than the PR policy of its predecessors. In the UNM government, decisions were made on the highest political level. However, from 2012-2016, decisions were made differently: GD, as a coalition of very diverse groups, struggled to agree and implement a coherent strategy in many aspects. It is important also to note that the national branding policy used to be personally directed by Mikheil Saakashvili. This aspect, together with the centralised political system, eased the decision-making process. It remains to be seen, however, whether the GD is willing to embrace its predecessor's approach and carry out a national branding and promotion campaign similar to the UNM's. The international promotion of Georgia was a top priority for the UNM government, which channelled substantial funds into its PR campaigns (including payments for lobbying firms and international TV ads). The current government has focused mostly on traditional diplomacy with less spending on various aspects of public relations, trying to be less salient in the international arena regarding their positions on political issues.

³¹⁵ From 1996 to 2003, the foreign direct investment ranged from 82.2 to 265.3 million USD, in contrast to UNM period, when the FDI ranged from 499.1 to 2015 million USD.

³¹⁶ Geostat (National Statistics Office of Georgia), August 2013, http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/georgian/bop/FDI-2012-GEO-.pdf

³¹⁷ Caucasus Business Week, Georgia is Attractive Tourism Destination for All Four Seasons; November 2015;

<http://cbw.ge/economy/georgia-is-attractive-tourism-destination-for-all-four-seasons/>

³¹⁸ Tabula, The year of 2015 saw an increase of tourists by 2.2 percent in Georgia, January 2016, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/103466-2015-tsels-saqartveloshi-shemosuli-turistebis-raodenoba-22-it-gaizarda>

How governments in the former Soviet Union promote their agendas and attack their opponents abroad

Arzu Geybulla

While the Soviet Union might have collapsed over two decades ago, in many of the post-Soviet states, the system by which majority of these countries are ruled is often reminiscent of the purges carried out under Stalin; where political repression; crackdown on the free press and limited space for freedom of association are still prevalent. Not surprisingly as a result, there have been no signs of meaningful democratic transition process especially when the issues at stake are rights and freedoms. The on-going struggle of opposition groups and independent media outlets in the face of authoritarian regimes in many of these countries has become an all too common trend used often to describe the status of present day struggles in post-Soviet republics such as Belarus, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan or elsewhere. In many of these countries, governments continue to promote their agendas while attacking the regimes' opponents at home and abroad.

Since independence

Out of fifteen post-soviet states, seven have not had free and fair elections since independence.³¹⁹ These countries are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, and Tajikistan. In the Freedom House Freedom in the World report 2017, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan made to the list of 11 countries that scored worst for political rights and civil liberties.³²⁰ Only three post-Soviet countries have had all their subsequent elections be free and fair (Estonia, Lithuanian, Latvia) while the rest have a history of some elections being considered free and fair.³²¹ Since independence, in majority of the former Soviet countries, regimes are more concerned about stability at the expense of crackdown rather than institutional, and long term reforms. Unlike the Baltic states, in countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Belarus and Russia, regimes have systematically gone after its critics, closing or dismantling media, confiscating and banning newspapers, detaining, arresting, harassing and persecuting opponents.³²² In many of these countries, harsh anti- defamation laws are still in place that are often used to stifle criticism and intimidate political opposition.

It is an uneven battle ground where the ruling power always prevails while being a critic whether an activist, a rights defender or opposition party member, turns one into an easy target of the ruling regime looking to silence anyone for dissent. In addition, the practice of unfair and undemocratic elections, constitutional changes that benefit the ruling regime always miraculously approved by near majority, monopolies virtually across all sectors of the economy, have created a harsher environment with any kind of checks and balances misplaced in what could be described as despotic rule.

In Russia repression, intimidation and political sabotage have led to the near total extinction of liberal opposition while the introduction of lists with 'extremist' websites and branding of foreign as well as local NGOs as 'foreign agents' have suffocated any sign of hope.³²³

In countries like Azerbaijan, referendums have served as means to consolidate further powers. In the 2009 referendum, President Aliyev, scrapped the presidential term limit and in the most recent 2016 referendum Aliyev secured a longer presidential term, extending it from five to seven years. As a result, next presidential elections that were scheduled for 2018 will now take place in 2020.

Similarly to Azerbaijan, in Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon also scrapped term limits. And in both countries, the age limits to run for parliamentary and presidential elections were lowered, which critics and observers describe as signs that the Presidents' male offspring may be entering the political stage. But the similarities between two countries go beyond just similar amendments in the referendum. 'The most active people, those who did not give up and did not break down, have been arrested. The authorities have planted drugs, religious brochures, or bullets on them [...]', wrote Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan in an essay for Central Asia

³¹⁹ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2017, Populists and Autocrats: the dual threat to global democracy <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

³²⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2017, Populists and Autocrats: the dual threat to global democracy <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

³²¹ Justin Burke, Post-Soviet world: what you need to know about the 15 states, June 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/09/sp-profiles-post-soviet-states>

³²² Helsinki Watch, The former Soviet Union, 1993, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/WR93/Hsw-07.htm>

³²³ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2017, Populists and Autocrats: the dual threat to global democracy, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

Program at George Washington University³²⁴ which has also been largely the case in Azerbaijan. Most recently, a court in Baku sentenced two youth activists to ten years in jail on trumped up drug possession charges for drawing graffiti on the statue of late President Heydar Aliyev.³²⁵

Hello world, we are rich and famous

In his piece, investigating Azerbaijan's lobbying ventures in the US, journalist Ilya Lozovsky wrote, 'Azerbaijan is among the top 10 foreign governments buying influence in Washington [...] In addition to traditional diplomacy, it has advanced these messages through aggressive lobbying in the think-tank world, in state legislatures, and in the halls of Congress'.

Organisations such as the Azerbaijan American Alliance (AAA) in Washington DC, set up by the son of Azerbaijan Minister of Transportation, or the European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS), set up by the son of the Minister of Emergency Situations in London and Brussels, work with local lobbying firms, host various events and promote Azerbaijan abroad as beacon of democracy and liberalism and a potential source of and home for investment.

Commercial advertisements, promo videos, pro-Azerbaijan articles in international media, are often deployed to push for a positive image. A similar strategy appears to be the branding work of Kazakhstan's authorities too. Erica Marat wrote of her observations in *Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation*. 'Relaxing in a luxury hotel room in Paris, world travellers are exposed to TV commercials for Kazakhstan, a 'land of democracy' located in the 'Heart of Eurasia' with similar adverts appearing on the pages of The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and the Economist.³²⁶

'Do you know where the magic lives? Our legacy. Our freedom. Our feelings. Our soul. Our future. Welcome to our world. Kazakhstan, the heart of Eurasia!' showed one such promotional video on YouTube shared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan.³²⁷ And yet, Kazakhstan is ranked under 'Authoritarian' countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2016, occupying 139th place (out of 167), ranking it just below Rwanda and China but before Zimbabwe and just a few seats ahead of Azerbaijan, which is ranked 148th.³²⁸

And yet, low rankings by international watchdogs seem to bother authoritarian leaderships little. Outside of Washington circles, Aliyev and his lackeys have made their way into the structures of European institutions undermining the very core of human rights standards. 'They [Azerbaijan] have done so in close cooperation with Russia' states a most recent publication by the European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin based think tank, known for its critical report, 'Caviar Diplomacy: How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe' that was published in 2012. The newest report, looks at the progress if any, on the state of affairs at the Council of Europe and corruption and concludes there has been little achieved.³²⁹

When lobbying is not enough

In Kazakhstan, 'nation-branding has become a permanent feature of the state discourse' argues Sabina Insebayeva, visiting fellow at George Washington University. 'Since becoming familiar with the idea of the 'brand state', Kazakhstan has deployed a full panoply of branding strategies to cultivate a positive international image, including wide media exposure, 'spectacular urbanisation', and aggressive pursuit of image building projects'.³³⁰

As in the case of Kazakhstan, in Azerbaijan too, no government funds are too much such that, the government of Azerbaijan covered all expenses (including free taxi rides) of some 6,000 athletes who came to compete in the first European Games in 2015. The multi-billion dollar effort cost an estimated US\$1.2bn although many said, the real

³²⁴ Birth and death of democracy in Tajikistan: memories and reflections about elections from 1990 until 2016, CAP Papers 174 September 2016, Muhiddin Kabiri, <https://app.box.com/s/p39sxlcntrn9f5hoscwfeq807tbe9nt>

³²⁵ Arzu Geybullayeva, Two young activists get 10 years in jail each after graffiti on Azerbaijan Patriarch's Statue. December 9, 2016 <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2016/12/09/two-young-activists-get-10-years-in-jail-each-after-graffiti-on-azerbaijan-patriarchs-statue/>

³²⁶ Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 61, No. 7 September 2009, 1123-1136, Routledge, National Branding in Central Asia: a New campaign to present ideas about the state and the nation, Erica Marat, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27752340?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

³²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs- Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan - Heart of Eurasia, November 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB6Ti7hltrk>

³²⁸ The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2016, Revenge of the Deplorables http://pages.eiu.com/rs/783-XMC-194/images/Democracy_Index_2016.pdf

³²⁹ The European Swamp (Caviar Diplomacy Part 2)- Prosecutors, corruption and the Council of Europe, December 2016, European Stability Initiative, http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=181

³³⁰ Imagining the nation: identity, national building, and foreign policy in Kazakhstan, CAP Papers 175, Central Asia Fellowship Series, September 2016 <https://app.box.com/s/tpzad0gd47af9yi9ll7rzwv2x3dxk010>

figures are much higher especially when one considers that the Olympic Stadium alone came with a US\$600m price tag.³³¹

In 2016, Azerbaijan was host to its first ever Formula 1 Grand Prix. Speaking at Azerbaijan-Germany Economic Forum in Berlin, President Aliyev proudly boasted that the race “will attract great attention to our country”. President Aliyev seemed not to be bothered by the tanking economy, and two sharp currency devaluations. But while the president was busy signing off agreements, others paid were paying attention after all. In February 2016, the country was downgraded by Fitch on its long-term foreign and local currency bonds.³³² And just a month earlier, Azerbaijan’s debt was downgraded to ‘junk’ by Standard and Poor’s with a warning to potential investors.³³³

But the most recent stunt in image branding and urge for recognition was adaptation of a book, *Ali and Nino*, a novel by writer Kurban Said (known as Lev Nussembaum) about a love story between Azeri Muslim Ali and Georgian Christian Nino. The couple’s story revolves around World War I and Azerbaijan’s struggle for independence. But with the film’s executive producer being the daughter of Azerbaijan’s president the film turned out to be more of a love story than a film about the country’s first independent republic and the efforts that went into achieving it.³³⁴ Needless to say, the film received much praise from the authorities.

But praise and dismissal is what many authoritarian states know and do best. When the FIFA corruption scandal hit the media, one of the main event sponsors Gazprom was quick to dismiss the scandal. In fact, the Russian oil giant was the only sponsor who expressed no concern. In an interview with CNN, the company’s spokesman Sergei Kuprianov said, “of course, Gazprom’s sponsorship agreement is not affected by the situation around FIFA. How can this situation affect it? It simply can’t”.³³⁵ Kuprianov is absolutely right because no one knows corruption better than Gazprom itself which has been accused of anti-competitive practices in its business operations; suspected of overcharging customers; engaged in fraud, document falsification and money laundering to name a few.³³⁶ But few are going to question this as Russia hosts the 2018 World Cup across 11 of its cities and Azerbaijan chiming in by hosting four qualifying games.

Lies, surveillance and all that jazz

George Orwell once said, “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful, and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind”. If there is one thing some of the most repressive post-Soviet states like Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have in common, then it is to make lies sound truthful. And they have media to do that both at home and abroad. In the case of Russia, we have observed how over recent years, it has gained momentum through its international mouthpiece outlets Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik while stifling independent media voices at home. While outlets such as Dojd TV and Echo Moskvyy radio station continue their presence, some say they are preserved simply as a facade of democracy.³³⁷

In Turkmenistan, Soltan Achilova, one of the remaining correspondents with the Turkmen service for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty reporting from within the country was questioned by the police in October 2016. She was then assaulted and robbed. This is not the first time correspondents of Turkmen Service Radio Azatlyk have been harassed. In 2015, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev was sentenced to three years in prison on trumped up drug charges and according to Human Rights Watch³³⁸, Turkmen authorities control print and electronic media while exercising control over internet access too. Not surprisingly, Turkmenistan is among the top ten countries where the internet is censored according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

In a previous Foreign Policy Centre publication, *No shelter: The harassment of activists abroad by intelligence services from the former Soviet Union*, many of the authors wrote in detail about the various forms of persecution that dissidents face at home and even after fleeing their countries, often having their families go through persecution too, including intimidation and fear.

³³¹ Rayhan Demytrie, Azerbaijan’s price for hosting first European Games, BBC, June 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32977924>

³³² Bloomberg, Fitch downgrades Azerbaijan to ‘BB+’; Outlook negative, February 2016 <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSFit950328>

³³³ Standard and Poor’s downgrades Azerbaijan’s debt to ‘junk’, RFERL, January 2016 <http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-debt-rating-junk/27519547.html>

³³⁴ Arzu Geybullayeva, In Baku’s hands, beloved novel becomes nation-branding infomercial, Eurasianet.org, November 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81436>

³³⁵ Tim Fernholz, The FIFA corporate sponsor dashboard, May 2015, <https://qz.com/413137/the-fifa-corporate-sponsor-corruption-dashboard/>

³³⁶ <http://www.facing-finance.org/en/database/cases/gazprom-bribery-corruption-and-anti-competitive-practices/>

³³⁷ Witold Waszczykowski, The battle for the hearts and minds: countering propaganda attacks against the euro-atlantic community, NATO parliamentary assembly, Draft Report, March 2015.

³³⁸ Human Rights Watch, Turkmenistan: Journalist harassed, assaulted, November 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/07/turkmenistan-journalist-harassed-assaulted>

In January 2017, family members of dissident Azerbaijani rapper Jamal Ali were arrested and detained for four days. The arrests came shortly after the rapper released a video titled “Heykel Baba” [Monument Grandpa] on December 31. The lyrics of the song were a sharp criticism of the ruling regime in Baku and for arresting youth activists Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mammadov and later sentencing them to 10 years in jail. In an interview with Eurasianet.org 29-year-old rapper said, “they are in jail for nonsense, a fact that most people see but can’t express in Azerbaijan out of fear”.³³⁹

More recently, an attempt to keep top investigative journalist Khadija Ismayil from speaking to the European Parliament from her home in Azerbaijan is not just a matter of concern but evidence of the regime in Baku keeping its critics from speaking at any cost. Ismayil who spent 17 months in jail on bogus charges but who was released in May 2016, cannot leave Azerbaijan, as she is still facing five year travel ban. On February 6, Ismayil was invited to testify on the situation of human rights in Azerbaijan. Just twenty minutes before she was scheduled to speak her internet connection was cut off and five minutes later, the electricity was cut off in the entire district where she lives in Baku. Looking out of her apartment window, Khadija noticed two SUV cars parked outside with satellite dishes on their roofs, blocking the cell service. She was only able to proceed with her call after she left her apartment and was in a taxi. But her call was brief. 10 minutes into her call the taxi she was in was surrounded by three police cars. Surprised, the taxi driver got out of the car, trying to make sense of the commotion outside. He then told Khadija police told him he must drive the car into the car pound. Speaking to the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Ismayil said it was important she stayed focused, especially seeing as the authorities were eager to stop her from addressing the event participants in Brussels.³⁴⁰

The tactic of cutting off internet connection and electricity is new, when one looks at the regime’s history of thwarting measures such as deploying an army of government sponsored trolls for lynching. Over the years, Azerbaijan active netizens saw their accounts harassed by members of IRELI- a pro-government youth organisation; youth branch of the ruling party New Azerbaijan (YAP); other pro-government youth organisations and some genuine accounts who believed the government was right, and its critics were wrong. And given there has never been a sense of free expression and diversity of views, the latter made sure the critics were targeted. These accounts have called anti-government pundits traitors, enemies, liars, and a number of other derogatory terms. When they are not on the offensive, “their tweets are repetitive, and seem automatically generated, full of fawning praise for the government and hatred for those who are not as pleased with the regime as they are”.³⁴¹

Trolls are often put to use at international events too where Azerbaijan is criticised for its dismal human rights record. During OSCE’s Human Rights Dimension Meeting in Warsaw last year, a number of accounts from Azerbaijan hijacked conference hashtag #HDIM2016 sharing graphic war photographs from the Karabakh conflict, demanding conference participants recognise the illegal occupation of Azerbaijan territories and the committed violence.

With the advent of surveillance tools, authoritarian states have also made sure they do not lag behind. In July 2015, it was revealed that Azerbaijan was among 21 clients of a Milan based firm The Hacking Team that was selling surveillance technology. Some of these tools allow authoritarian regimes break into individual’s computers and mobile phones, record Skype calls, turn on built-in device cameras, record audio and steal documents. Other clients include Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan from the former Soviet Union.³⁴²

It is also not surprising that authorities in Azerbaijan as well as elsewhere in countries mentioned in this paper, have used DDoS attacks (Distributed Denial of Service). 2016 was a challenging year in that sense. According to the Index on Censorship Mapping Media Freedom, there were 38 threats to press freedom including blocked access to critical news websites such as dissident platform Meydan TV, Azerbaijan Service for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, and opposition newspaper Azadliq.³⁴³

³³⁹ Lamiya Adilgizi, Azerbaijan: Rapper’s Family Punished over song critical of government, January 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81886>

³⁴⁰ Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Released but not free: Azerbaijan’s government fails to silence Khadija Ismayilova, February 2017, Karina Shedrofsky, <https://www.occrp.org/en/blog/6063-khadija-featuew-untitled>

³⁴¹ Arzu Geybullayeva, In the crosshairs of Azerbaijan’s patriotic trolls, OpenDemocracy, November 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/arzu-geybullayeva/azerbaijan-patriotic-trolls>

³⁴² Mapping Hacking Team’s “Untraceable” Spyware, CitizenLab, February 2014, <https://citizenlab.org/2014/02/mapping-hacking-teams-untraceable-spyware/>

³⁴³ Critical websites blocked in Azerbaijan, December 2016, IRFS, <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/critical-websites-blocked-in-azerbaijan/>

In Uzbekistan for years authorities have blocked access to international media outlets like The New York Times, Financial Times, Reuters, BBC and Deutsche Welle however in a sweeping wave of liberalisation many were unblocked in December 2016. And yet observers are sceptical seeing this as a temporary change. The country has also introduced some 38 state-run social media sites in past years, one in the summer of 2016. But Facebook and Russian social network Odnoklassniki remain the most popular as their users fear their data is made easily accessible to the authorities. One of the many state-run social media sites Muloqot.uz servers belong to the state telecom provider, which is an easy access point for the authorities at home to check on its netizens and their presence online.³⁴⁴

Russia introduced legislation in 2014 on data storage as part of its surveillance legislation package which allowed the country's telecommunications agency Roskomnadzor to block websites. A more recent move using this legislation was used against professional website LinkedIn as Roskomnadzor moved to block access to the page for violating the law.

But more recently, trends of cracking down and shrinking space for activists is becoming a global phenomenon and more and more counties are turning to the familiar measures used by authoritarian states to silence dissent and keep tabs on the work that is being carried out by dissident voices. The question we should be asking ourselves is whether we are ready to put on our best suit and continue the fight, or is it that time of the century when mass exhaustion, trauma and frustration will get the better of us? I think there is still some hope despite the "bigly" threats we are yet to witness.

³⁴⁴ Uzbekistan launches its 38th own brand social network, Inga Sikorskaya, June 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/17/uzbekistan-launches-state-social-networks-facebook>

Armenia's diaspora: Helpful advantage or harmful adversary?

Richard Giragosian³⁴⁵

For the Republic of Armenia, the relationship with its global Armenian diaspora has always been complex, and at times, even confrontational. Marked by misunderstanding and a deep cultural divide, this rocky relationship is natural, however. The fundamental divergence of interests between an established state and a networked diaspora has usually contributed to division and difference. But in the case of Armenia, there is an inherent consistency of commitment from its diaspora. This element of care, concern and commitment stems from a combination of the core threats facing the Armenian state and the challenge of survival. While obviously rooted in the tragic nature of Armenian history, most notably demonstrated by the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the existential threat has also been more recent, from the devastating earthquake of 1988 to the onset of war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

State vs. nation

While the origins of the Armenian diaspora pre-dated the emergence of Armenian statehood by several centuries, the Armenian Genocide of 1915 is widely interpreted as the 'starting point' of reference for the 'contemporary Armenian diaspora', as the 'dispersal of Armenians from their historic homeland in the Ottoman Empire' and the subsequent 'partial Armenian exodus from Eastern Armenia after the Soviet takeover in 1920 also contributed—albeit to a much lesser degree—to the 'diasporisation' of the Armenians in the 20th century' with a 'new exodus towards North America and Europe'.³⁴⁶ This was also driven by the underlying geographic divide between the older wave of Armenians seeking refuge in the diaspora from the Ottoman Empire, and with little or no direct link to what became Soviet Armenia. And given the seventy years of the Armenian state within the Soviet Union, bonds and links to the diaspora were only further weakened. This also served as a lingering division between both the identity and the origins of the diaspora and the re-establishment of the independent Armenian state at the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A second key turning point came in the period 1988-1991, as the diaspora's 'traditional focus on identity preservation and Genocide recognition' were 'augmented by a new concern for the survival and well-being of a new emerging state' in the wake of the 1988 earthquake and the declaration of Armenian independence in 1991.³⁴⁷ But such a crisis-driven focus has been difficult to sustain and has been largely inconsistent and sporadic. This transformation of the worldview of the diaspora was matched by a recognition of the diaspora by the new Armenian state. For example, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia officially identified 'Armenia-Diaspora relations' as a 'significant component' of national security and recognised the role of the diaspora as offering 'a serious degree of economic and cultural potential, especially as a means to promote trade, tourism, preservation, development and publicizing of the cultural heritage...to foster Armenia's global integration and consolidation of democracy'.³⁴⁸

But the relationship is essentially asymmetrical, in two contradictory ways. First, in terms of sheer demography, the diaspora is roughly double the size of Armenia. Most estimates hold that while the population of the Republic of Armenia is well below three million, over six million comprise the global Armenian diaspora. Yet conversely, a second defining element of asymmetry is the inherent difference and division between an established, recognised state with its own elected government and a disorganised, disenfranchised and diverse diaspora spanning many countries and divided between several competing power centres. This fundamental asymmetry has never been effectively addressed and has only exacerbated the natural divergence of interests between the contrasting perspectives and interests of the Armenian state and the Armenian diaspora, or 'nation'.³⁴⁹

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³⁴⁶ Policy Forum Armenia (PFA), Armenia-Diaspora Relations: 20 years Since Independence, August 2010, <https://www.pf-armenia.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/PFA%20Diaspora%20Report.pdf>

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, January 2007. http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf

³⁴⁹ Hrant Garadigian, Analyst Richard Giragosian: "Armenia looks at the diaspora with misunderstanding and sometimes skepticism," Hetq, January 2010. <http://hetq.am/eng/news/42317/analyst-richard-giragosian-armenia-looks-at-the-diaspora-with-misunderstanding-and-sometimes-scepticism.html/>

Diminished returns

Disappointment within the diaspora is also deep, despite the emotional bond and ethnic loyalty to Armenia. That sense of frustration within the Armenian diaspora is driven by a common perception that the Armenian government maintains a policy that is very welcoming to aid, assistance and philanthropy, but which is strictly exclusionary in terms of any diasporan engagement in internal domestic politics. This has bred a resentment that has only been exacerbated by the cultural divide between a post-Soviet, authoritarian government, with a disturbing lack of democratic credentials or free and fair elections, and a more Western diaspora.

As one diaspora-based group noted, ‘twenty years after Armenia’s independence and despite all its efforts, the Diaspora is yet to see a meaningful change in Armenia, one tied to, and be driven by, a modern developmental vision’.³⁵⁰ This has further contributed to a degree of ‘diminished returns’ as both sides have tended to be disappointed as their unrealistically high expectations of the Armenia-Diaspora relationship have been repeatedly dashed.

Harnessing economic potential

Despite the apparent economic advantage of a well-connected, commercially successful and innovative global diaspora, Armenia has never been able to fully harness the economic potential of engaging the diaspora. The paucity of investment by the diaspora was due to two fundamental impediments. The first, and most daunting disincentive to investment was of course entrenched corruption. In fact, corruption still dissuades many diasporan investors from engaging in Armenia.

And despite gains in regulatory reforms related to the establishment and registration of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), outside investors still face the burdens of weak contract enforcement, arbitrary tax inspection and a closed economy dominated by ‘oligarchs’ with inordinate market control over the import and export of key commodities. This set of challenges has also greatly reduced the past period of investment in the 1990s, which never recovered and has yet to return.

Against this backdrop, more recent efforts by the Armenian government to attract investment from the diaspora have been hampered by an underlying lack of trust and a disappointing investment climate. In order to overcome these shortcomings in investment, Armenian Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan has instead focused on enticing the “best practices” of entrepreneurial talent and professional expertise, calling on the diaspora to actively contribute to “the reforms underway in Armenia in order to... introduce a new culture of management, and to employ the knowledge and potential of our top-most professionals of the diaspora for achieving pan-Armenian goals,” specifically identifying the sectors of health care and education as “key areas” for achieving “immediate results.”³⁵¹

That outreach effort is also part of a broader, ambitious programme of reforms announced by the premier after his September 2016 appointment, which include efforts to more effectively combat corruption, improve tax administration and create ‘equal conditions’ for all businesses. To date, however, the prime minister has moved slowly, as his promises have generally been limited to superficial changes in personnel, rather than any demonstrable reforms targeting the sources of corruption.

Political prowess

Since independence, there have been two notable central elements of the relationship between the Armenian state and the diaspora. Over time, each issue has remained a constant, core issue of both domestic politics in Armenia as well as for identity politics within the broader diaspora. While these issues have remained unchanged and unchallenged, they have defined and constrained Armenian foreign policy, as well limiting domestic discourse and debate.

The first of these core issues is the Armenian genocide, which not only influences the country’s troubled relationship with neighbouring Turkey but also directly impacts Armenia’s relationship with its global diaspora. But it is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that, as the second essential factor of Armenian foreign policy, presents a much more

³⁵⁰ Policy Forum Armenia (PFA), “Armenia-Diaspora Relations: 20 years Since Independence,” August 2010, <https://www.pf-armenia.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/PFA%20Diaspora%20Report.pdf>

³⁵¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Armenian Service “Karapetian Appeals to Diaspora Armenians for Support,” February 2017, <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/28338325.html>

dynamic and more direct challenge. The inherent challenge of managing a stalled peace process, coupled with the ever-present threat of ceasefire violations and border skirmishes, have only elevated and exacerbated the political significance and severity of the Karabakh issue.

And at the same time, the recent surge in clashes over the Karabakh conflict has further exacerbated the closed, more one-sided nature of the Armenian state's approach towards the diaspora. While in terms of internal politics, which have been marked by an environment that has only forced out more moderate views in favour of a more militant stand within the domestic political spectrum, it has also limited diasporan engagement.

In the wake of the most serious escalation of fighting in April 2016, however, when a large-scale Azerbaijani military offensive succeeded in seizing and securing territory, there was renewed interest within the diaspora over the threat to Armenian security. This concern was driven by the realisation that the first military victory for Azerbaijan since the 1990s posed a new, elevated threat to state security. Beyond the renewed interest, however, the fact that the 'frozen' conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had entered a new, much more serious combat phase, but also posed new risks to the delicate state of regional security and stability. And this new context suggests a new period of deeper and more determined diaspora support for Armenia.

Such a new period of diaspora engagement will clearly focus on attempts to leverage the political prowess and influence of the Armenian communities in the West. Moreover, it is the Western-based communities, from the United States to Europe, which are more politicised and more deeply assimilated than the other diaspora centres in Russia or the Middle East. Although partly due to the open environment in the West, which fosters a greater and more open opportunity for local political activity, the Armenian community of Russia is the primary economic provider, accounting for the overwhelming amount of remittances or money sent to Armenia from abroad.

But in terms of political prowess in the West, the primary centre is the United States, followed by some European countries. Despite a population of only about 2 million Armenians in the United States, the Armenian-American community is politically active and sophisticated, with key constituencies in several electorally important American states (notably California, Florida, Michigan and New York) and Congressional districts. And the political prowess and influence of the community has steadily increased in the past several decades. Led by two rival political organisations, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), and the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), the lobbying and advocacy power of this segment of the diaspora has been widely recognised. In fact, many political observers in Washington rate the 'Armenian lobby' as the second most influential ethnic-based group, second only to the pro-Israel lobby, and much better organised than its Azerbaijani or Turkish counterparts.

In fact, there is a profound contrast between a well-integrated, politically active and astute Armenian-American community with a grassroots political network and the Azerbaijani and Turkish advocacy and lobbying effort dependent on their respective embassies. This also serves to inherently limit the efficacy of the lobbying efforts by Azerbaijan and Turkey, which is generally seen as a foreign government interfering in domestic American politics. Although both Azerbaijan and Turkey seek to offset this disparity by relying on well-resourced and financially impressive efforts, for the American political system, the power of grassroots constituents and voters almost always hold the upper hand in terms of political clout and influence.

This so-called 'Armenian lobby' was also able to exert its political leverage in two pivotal moments. First, in 1992 Armenian-American pressure groups were able to advocate new U.S. legislation that excluded Azerbaijan from a list of former Soviet republics available for U.S. aid. The exclusionary legislation, as part of the Freedom Support Act, imposed a punitive censure on Azerbaijan for its 'offensive use of force' against Nagorno-Karabakh and due to its imposition of a 'blockade' of Armenia. The legislation remained in force until 2002, when then-President George W. Bush granted the first in a series of annual waivers of the provision.³⁵²

And second, again in August 2006, it effectively derailed the confirmation of a new U.S. ambassador to Armenia by the U.S. Senate.³⁵³ The nominee, Ambassador-designate Richard Hoagland, was targeted due to his refusal to recognise the Armenian genocide. Although in his confirmation testimony, he did refer to the mass killings of

³⁵² Julie Corwin, "U.S.: Confirmation Row Shows Power of Diaspora Lobbies," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), August 2006. www.rferl.org/a/1070276.html

³⁵³ Ibid.

Armenians by Turks in the early 20th century, he was careful to avoid the term genocide in order to conform to the official policy of the U.S. Department of State.

What next?

Despite the rather open divide and divergence between the Republic of Armenia and its global diaspora, there is a profound change already underway. More specifically, the change consist of a new, much less tolerant perspective within the diaspora, where shortcomings in Armenia's democracy, its string of tainted elections and entrenched corruption will now serve to pose new challenges and demands for accountability. The other side of this change is also emanating from Armenia, which in the face of severe threats to its security over the Karabakh conflict, will be forced to accede to these fresh demands. This has also expanded the relationship between the Armenian government and the diaspora, as the Armenian foreign ministry has increasingly enhanced its own diplomatic strength by relying on support from diaspora lobbying groups. Beyond a reliance on those lobbying efforts in favour of the recognition of the Armenian genocide, this has more recently added an element of supportive advocacy in defending the interests of Nagorno-Karabakh.

And in response to the severity of the threats from the Karabakh conflict, as Azerbaijan has increasingly sought to settle the conflict militarily, the diaspora has been pressurising several Western nations to support Armenia. While this effort has included a campaign of recognition of the self-declared 'independence' of Nagorno-Karabakh among U.S. states and European regional governments, it has also been matched by efforts to impose punitive policies against Azerbaijan. These latter efforts have sought to leverage European disdain for disturbing trends of energy-driven corruption in Azerbaijan and moves to curtail civil society by the Azerbaijani leadership.

Thus, while Armenia has yet to become the centre of gravity for the diaspora, the future relationship between the state and its networked diaspora will only reflect a new, more mature and even more equal nature. The real question, however, is whether this enhanced engagement by the diaspora will be sustainable over the longer term.

Conclusion: Winning the battle of ideas

Adam Hug

‘For now we see through a glass, darkly.’³⁵⁴

Through increasingly sophisticated and high budget media outputs, glossy adverts, high-profile events and well connected lobbyists, authoritarian regimes from the former Soviet Union (FSU) have learned how to play the Western game, albeit with varying degrees of success. The traditional message that the governments of the FSU were sending to the world was ‘we are just like you’, arguing that they were countries on a rapid transition path to becoming liberal democracies and open market economies, despite whatever evidence to the contrary might exist. However in recent years the framing has become increasingly ‘you are just like us’, particularly from Russian sources but also too from others in the region such as Azerbaijan who chafe against EU and US criticism on human rights standards whilst Western firms continue to seek to make money from them.

Addressing the challenge of Russian backed media and online content within the Western world requires a recognition of the significant challenges facing the European and US media industries. The scale and scope of the challenges facing the media from an increasingly fragmented market of news consumers, where old models of revenue generation are dying, lies beyond the remit of this publication. However, part of the issue relevant to this publication is that Russian media is filling a number of gaps in the market. Identifying Western shortcomings and hypocrisy may flow from a rich heritage of Russian ‘Whataboutism’³⁵⁵, but there is clearly a notable section of the viewing public who yearn for more systemic critiques of Western societies, seeing traditional critical journalism as still coming from inside existing elites. RT and Sputnik provide opportunities for some of the more radical voices on the left and right who struggle to get airtime on traditional outlets dominated by voices from more ‘mainstream’ parties and perspectives. As large sections of the internet clearly show, there remains a robust market for conspiracy theory. At a time of increasing diversity of political views, Western broadcasters need to think more carefully about how to provide opportunities for new voices to be heard in debates, if they wish to be able to adequately rebut the critiques provided by RT and others.³⁵⁶

However the Russian approach goes far beyond providing platforms to outsiders and flagging up hypocrisy, both real and imagined. Its goal can be to confuse, frustrate and demoralise. Peter Pomerantsev³⁵⁷ likens it to ‘a hall of mirrors’ where reality feels ‘malleable, spongy’, where the same actors are used in a variety of different roles (‘soldier’s mother’, ‘Kharkiv resident’, ‘Odessa resident’, etc.) with broadcasts with little regard given to whether such deceptions would be identified, where the approach was not even attempting to present a different version of the truth or ‘alternative facts’ but to bury the audience in a blizzard of conflicting information. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews described the approach as the ‘firehose of falsehood’, that they say is designed to entertain, confuse and overwhelm the audience through an approach that is ‘high-volume and multichannel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacks commitment to objective reality; (and) lacks commitment to consistency’.³⁵⁸ Such outlets build on the traditional media’s approach to try and provide balance, pitting opposing views against each other irrespective of how widely held or evidence-based they are, taking it to a post-modern, ‘post-fact’ extreme.³⁵⁹ ‘Question more’, becomes ‘question everything’ including the concept of truth itself.

In a number of cases, the battle of ideas becomes an information war. Regularly the victims of Russian hacking³⁶⁰, the three Baltic States have particular sensitivities about Russia’s courting of Russian minorities that make up 25.6 percent of Latvia’s, 25.1 percent of Estonia’s and 4.8 percent of Lithuania’s population.³⁶¹ As small states they have

³⁵⁴ The Bible - King James Version, 1 Corinthians 13:12. Translated in less poetic versions as ‘What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror’ (Good News Bible).

³⁵⁵ Where any criticism of human rights standards in the Soviet Union not answered but deflected back by pointing out flaws in the West. A brief primer on Whataboutism is provided by The Economist, Whataboutism, January 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/10598774>

³⁵⁶ In this author’s view this need for greater diversity relates specifically to non-violent or discriminatory political viewpoints rather than a need for greater airtime for fringe science, academic or conspiracy theories.

³⁵⁷ Peter Pomerantsev Inside the Kremlin’s hall of mirrors, April 2015,

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology?CMP=share_btn_fb

³⁵⁸ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It, 2016, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

³⁵⁹ Peter Pomerantsev, Why we are post fact, Granta, July 2016, <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact/>

³⁶⁰ Linda Kinstler, How to Survive a Russian Hack: Lessons from Eastern Europe and the Baltics, February 2017,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/russia-disinformation-baltics/515301/>

³⁶¹ Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia, http://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/skoleniem/iedzivotaji/etniskais_sastavs.pdf; Statistics Estonia, Population by nationality, 1st January by year, <http://www.stat.ee/34267> and Alvydas Butkus Lithuanian population by nationality <http://alkas.lt/2015/12/16/a-butkus-lietuvos-gyventojai-tautybes-pozituriu/>

so far lacked the resources, and in some cases the political will, to provide programming in Russian, leaving the field open for Russian channels broadcasting across the border, though the recently created Estonian ETV+ Russian language channel has potential to partially address this. While 81 percent of ethnic Russians in Estonia say they trust information provided by Russian News Channels, only 26 percent of ethnic Estonians say they trust the same content, heightening the risk of political differences being further exacerbated along an ethnic divide. Given the state of war between Russia and Ukraine since 2014, Ukraine has banned the broadcast of Russian channels, however satellite firm compliance remains intermittent and a substantial proportion of Eastern Ukraine remains able to receive the signal. More broadly, the febrile atmosphere in European and US political culture at present, while clearly not 'created' by Russian initiatives, is clearly being exploited through the mechanisms discussed in this publication, sometimes to the extent of becoming a genuine security challenge.

The trust deficit is not going to be bridged by responding to propaganda from the former Soviet Union with propaganda from the West or its allies. A multi-level approach is needed. There is clearly an important space for myth busting, fact checking and propaganda exposing tools, to try to challenge and push back against the flood of erroneous or confusing information. A lie may still be able to get half way across the world before the truth has got its boots on but through effective use of social media, efforts to debunk obvious untruths can be disseminated swiftly. Ukrainian site Stop Fake, founded by Kyiv Mohyla Journalism School staff and students, provides one of the most effective and innovative services, casting a critical eye over some of the claims made in the Russian and Russian-backed media. Such work is now being augmented by official channels such as the work of the EU's East Stratcom Taskforce who are coordinating a network of experts in government institutions and civil society to compile the EU Disinformation Review in both Russian and English.³⁶² The involvement of such institutions does show that policy makers are beginning to take the challenge seriously but their work must not crowd out non-governmental organisations whose independence is an important weapon in the information battle. All those involved in such work need to act collaboratively to ensure that information and analysis is widely shared.

Secondly, the need for independent, evidence-based investigative journalism is extremely high given the challenges set out in this publication, yet its availability has been decreasing due to the erosion of resources in newsrooms. Filling the emerging gap is of critical importance and part of the solution has been the use of donor-supported coalitions of independent journalists who conduct the research themselves before partnering with news organisations to publish their findings. Some of the most important examples of these are the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. The donor model has its own flaws, in terms of funding stability and ensuring that they can follow their own journalistic priorities rather than focusing on the priorities of the person who pays the bills, challenges they share with colleagues in traditional media outlets.

Facts may be essential but they are not sufficient. As Natalya Antelava points out there is a need to explain the stories behind the facts. Narratives matter and for a mainstream audience often production quality matters too. Again here consortia of investigative journalists may be better placed to get to the depth and scope of story required but nevertheless pressure needs to be put on editors and proprietors to support in-depth reporting rather than simplistic pieces to camera.

Specifically looking at the media challenges in the post-Soviet Space, the European Endowment for Democracy has made a number of important recommendations in a major report entitled Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space, edited by contributor to this collection Justin Schlosberg.³⁶³ The EED recommends the creation of five new structures:

- A regional Russian language news hub (or proto news agency) to share high-quality news on a membership or affiliate basis, which also includes collecting citizen journalist and stringer material, facilitating collaborative investigations, fact checking and providing translations

Broadcasting Board of Governors, Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova, February 2016, <https://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2016/02/BBG-Gallup-Russian-Media-pg2-02-04-164.pdf>

³⁶² See both <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> and Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/2116/%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20about%20the%20East%20StratCom%20Task%20Force

³⁶³ European Endowment for Democracy, Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space, June 2016. A summary of its findings is available at <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/>

- A 'content factory' - a cooperative of regional broadcasters, jointly commissioning quality programmes in Russian that would be available to all members free of charge. Content should include quality documentaries and entertainment, including film, drama and social reality shows, focusing on local issues. Commissioning and buying content, it could be a 'marketplace' of programming for the Russian-language media
- The creation of a centre of media excellence to improve research and information
- A basket fund of governmental and private donor money to support media initiatives
- A future multimedia distribution platform, with a global brand, to ensure that the produced content reaches the widest possible audience

If properly implemented, these recommendations could help provide the architecture to help local media outlets, both public and private, develop content that viewers might prefer to the existing Russian offerings. International public broadcasters such as the BBC and PBS should consider what documentary and entertainment content could be provided at accessible rates to independent broadcasters in the region, potentially through such a content marketplace mechanism as well as providing such content to the nascent BBC World Service and BBG television services in the region. The fusion of popular entertainment and news, although in retreat on Western domestic channels, has been shown to be an effective way under other authoritarian regimes³⁶⁴ of ensuring interest in a channel and ultimately securing viewers for news and current affairs output. Further thought should also be given to the ability of such content to be provided in local languages, where feasible and necessary, to further boost the diversity of independent quality content.

Where possible, the emerging Russian language television offerings from the BBC World Service and the BBG need to obtain greater access to satellite transmission to give them a chance of reaching older viewers, in addition to growing their web presence. These organisations need to ensure that their governance structures provide them with clear independence from their home governments. The recent decision in the 2016 US National Defense Authorization Act has transformed the role of the Board of the Broadcasting Board of Governors from managing the organisation into an advisory role, with a Chief Executive directly appointed by the US President in greater control. Irrespective of any organisational advantages of having someone in operational charge, the case since 2015 when the board appointed its own Chief Executive,³⁶⁵ direct Presidential appointment could be seen to undermine the organisation's operational independence.

There is a lack of comprehensive and publically accessible region-wide data about Russian media penetration or indeed the popularity of domestic media channels. An accurate ratings system only functions in some states in the region, in others such figures do not include satellite broadcasts and in others accurate data is not accessible at all. There is a strong case for region-wide survey work that can give an accurate analysis of media reach, particularly in the South Caucasus and where possible Central Asia where information gaps exist.

When responding to the issues of lobbying, advertising and regime promotion, similar principles apply, with the need to improve transparency and public scrutiny. Human rights organisations have become adept at using major sporting or cultural events hosted by repressive regimes as a way of raising awareness about the problems that country faces. There are also opportunities for strengthening UK and EU lobbying registration, which in most cases remains voluntary.³⁶⁶ Moving this to a broader mandatory basis could help ensure that those working on behalf of foreign governments (and others) are open about their dealings with politicians and officials. Independent NGOs and donors should consider providing greater support to Parliamentarians to coordinate the activities of country interest groups and where appropriate arrange country visits for them, as otherwise this support is provided by pro-regime lobbying groups or Embassies. Increased public awareness of Russian and other government activity in the European NGO environment is important but it must not bleed into the kind of 'foreign agent' hysteria that FSU governments utilise to shut down Western and internationally supported NGOs at home. Laws must be applied effectively but equally to all groups rather than specifically targeting those supported by foreign governments or oligarchs, with

³⁶⁴ The example of the highly successful privately run independent Iranian Satellite TV station Manoto TV is a useful case study, <https://www.manototv.com/>

³⁶⁵ Ron Nixon, U.S. Seeking a Stronger World Media Voice, January 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/22/us/broadcasting-board-of-governors-names-chief-executive.html?_r=0

³⁶⁶ The UK runs a statutory scheme, the Register of Consultant Lobbyists, which only covers those who lobby Government Ministers and Civil Service Permanent Secretaries. The wider industry runs a voluntary scheme, the UK Lobbying Register (UKLR). At an EU level only registered lobbyists are given passes to the Parliament and Commission, though this can be easily worked around.

efforts to improve transparency wherever possible. As with a more effective approach to media, progress in these areas will be assisted by a healthy dose of self-criticism focused on Western organisations and institutions complicit in helping post-Soviet regimes burnish their international reputations.

In what is increasingly becoming a battle over the use of soft power and information, Western institutions have been losing ground. Western governments, NGOs, donors and the general public need to become more aware of the challenges they now face and must take action in order to protect and strengthen their domestic institutions and societies, while enhancing support for human rights in the former Soviet Union.

Recommendations³⁶⁷

To the donor and NGO community

- Fund the creation of new, independent Russian and local language news content creation, news coordination and dissemination
- Provide increased funding for independent consortiums of investigative journalists
- Support in depth independent survey work in the countries of the former Soviet Union to assess the audience reach of both domestic and Russian media outlets
- Facilitate non-partisan support of Parliamentary engagement on issues relating to the former Soviet Union, including country visits

To international broadcasters

- Expand the range of voices asked to provide comment on Western and international networks
- Collaborate with independent partners in the post-Soviet Space to develop content

To Western governments and regulators

- Track the spread of misleading and untrue content emanating from Russian sources, working with civil society to rebut it where appropriate
- Actively monitor online threats to Western-based critics of regimes in the former Soviet Union
- Strengthen lobbying registry requirements, including looking to expand the scope of the UK's statutory register and delivering the proposed formal EU lobbying register
- Re-examine the changes to the governance structures of the US Broadcasting Board of Governors

³⁶⁷ These recommendations represent the ideas put forward by the editor based on the research provided in this publication. Individual contributing authors express their own views within the publication and make further individual recommendations. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not represent the views of The Foreign Policy Centre or the Open Society Foundations.

The information battle: How governments in the former Soviet Union promote their agendas and attack their opponents abroad

The information battle examines the ways in which the governments of former Soviet Union (FSU) countries look to shape international narratives about themselves by using media, social media, advertising and supportive organisations to promote their worldview and exert pressure on the people, institutions and ideas that oppose them. The essay collection looks at the impact of this influence both within the region and increasingly across the world.

The publication contains contributions by: Natalia Antelava, Coda Story; Ana Dvali and Revaz Koiava, Caucasian House; Arzu Geybullar; Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center; Melissa Hooper, Human Rights First; Adam Hug (ed.), Foreign Policy Centre; Rasto Kuzel, Memo 98; Dr David Lewis, University of Exeter; Ben Nimmo, Atlantic Council; and Dr Justin Schlosberg, Birkbeck, University of London.

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