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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Silvan, K. (2023). Central Asia in Russian Government-Affiliated Media Discourse. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 301, 11-16. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000632641>

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Central Asia in Russian Government-Affiliated Media Discourse

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000632641

Abstract

This article contributes to the debate about Russia's past and present-day imperialism by studying the portrayal of Central Asia in expert discourse mediated by the Russian state-affiliated tabloid newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* from a critical geopolitical perspective. It argues that there are two separate discourses on Central Asia: a *foreign policy* discourse on Central Asian states and a *domestic policy* discourse on the Central Asian region. While the former narrates Central Asian states as Russia's partners, the latter constructs Central Asia as an inherently problematic region for Russia. Moreover, the term "Middle Asia" (*Sredniaia Aziia*) functions as a marker of the xenophobic domestic policy discourse, which is why those sensitive to the current decolonization imperative are triggered by its application.

On August 4, 2023, Alexei Navalny, perhaps contemporary Russia's most famous opposition politician, was sentenced to 19 years in prison on charges of extremism. A week later, he published an extended essay titled "My fear and loathing" (Navalny 2023). In this manifesto, he expresses profound disappointment with Russia's failure to democratize in the 1990s, claiming that "it was not with Putin in 2011 but with Yeltsin, Chubais, oligarchs, and the entire Komsomol-party gang that called themselves 'democrats' that we went not to Europe but to Central Asia in 1994" (Navalny 2023). Navalny's decision to juxtapose Europe with Central Asia sparked immediate outrage among the community of Central Asian scholars, experts, and activists. On her Twitter page, Nargis Kassenova (2023) interpreted Navalny's Central Asia as the "anti-Europe" — "underdeveloped, authoritarian and corrupt" — while many others (see, for example, Marat 2023) criticized Navalny's use of the term *Sredniaia Aziia* (literally "Middle Asia") instead of *Tsentral'naia Aziia* (literally "Central Asia") in the Russian-language version of the manifesto.

This was not the first time Navalny's public statements about Central Asia had been met with public criticism. However, the case illustrates the role of geographical claims and assumptions in political debates and political practice—a core focus of critical geopolitics (Kuus 2017)—and how such claims and assumptions are received in the contemporary context of both Russia's ongoing "colonial war" in Ukraine (Mälksoo 2022) and the decolonization movement in contemporary East European, Eurasian, Russian, and Slavonic studies.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it aims to respond to the collective call to decolonize the scholarly field by analyzing and deconstructing the discourse on Central Asia in expert discourse mediated by the popular Russian government-affiliated newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (*AiF*). Second, it seeks to explain why there is such resistance to using the term *Sredniaia Aziia*—or,

as Kassenova (2023) put it, "not the term we use in the region"—to refer to Central Asia. In so doing, the article aims to deconstruct and denormalize the Russian imperialist gaze toward the post-Soviet space (cf. Zayarnyuk 2022).

Analyzing the portrayal of Central Asia by those identified as "experts" in *AiF*, I argue for the construction of two separate discourses on Central Asia. On the one hand, there is a discourse about the *foreign policy* of Russia and the five Central Asian states. Although the discourse has some imperialist underpinnings (most notably the expectation of political loyalty and unity in opposition to Western influence—Kassymbekova & Marat 2022), it portrays the region in a predominantly positive light and recognizes the agency of the region's states. On the other hand, there is prominent discourse on Central Asia *in relation to* Russian domestic policy. This discourse, which narrates Central Asia as an imagined geographic and political space alien to Russia, portrays Central Asia in a very negative light, as a source of problems for Russia. Interestingly enough, these two discourses employ different terms when referring to Central Asia: *Tsentral'naia Aziia* is used in the foreign policy discourse, while *Sredniaia Aziia* is applied only in the domestic policy one.

Returning to the case of Alexei Navalny and the current political context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, I argue that it is one's (conscious or subconscious) awareness of the fact that the term "Middle Asia" belongs to the vocabulary of the domestic policy discourse on Central Asia that makes this choice of words triggering. Moreover, the debate on how Central Asia ought to be called in the Russian language is not taking place in a vacuum; rather, it is a part of a wider debate in which Russia's neighbors strive to have a say in determining how they are referred to in Russian: to be Belarus rather than Belorussia, Moldova instead of Moldavia, and Kyrgyzstan instead of Kirgizia (cf. Savchenko 2021).

Critical Geopolitical Approach to Studying Central Asia in Expert Discourse and Media

Critical geopolitics, a subfield in the study of international relations, has traditionally been focused on the study of political actors' geographical assumptions and meanings, as well as the impact these have on world politics (Dodds & Sidaway 1994). Although the maturing of the subfield has led to a plethora of approaches (e.g., "banal," "feminist," "popular," "radical," "subaltern," and "liminal" geopolitics—Nishiyama 2019), significant attention continues to be paid to the deconstruction of geopolitical representations and processes (Bachmann & Moisiso 2020). Géaroid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew's (1992) initial call to analyze the way political actors "spatialize" international politics and represent it as a "world" characterized by certain kinds of places, peoples, and dramas has remained scholarship's general goal for the field of inquiry (Kuus, 2010). In turn, scholars of popular geopolitics (Sharp 1993, Bernazzoli 2010, Szostek 2017) have underscored the role of the media in circulating geopolitical ideas from political actors to wide audiences and back, thereby causing the exclusion of some geopolitical discourses and the elevation of others to positions of hegemony. Experts and their voice of authority have a key role in this process, which is why Dodds (1993, 71) calls them the "state's privileged story tellers."

Russia's perception of its neighborhood has been a popular topic for scholarly analysis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Applying a critical geopolitical toolkit to the study of Russian foreign policy, Foxall (2019) argues that Russian politicians' narrative of the EU underwent major change in the 2010s, while Omelicheva (2012) explains contradictions in Russia's foreign policy toward Iran through the lens of Russia's "geopolitics code." Meanwhile, the interpretation of Russia as a (neo)imperialist state has traveled from the margins of the academic and policy debate to the mainstream following Moscow's increasingly assertive foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the countries of the former Soviet Union from the mid-2000s onward (Sagramoso 2020). In recognizing the independence of Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, annexing Crimea, and launching a proxy war in Ukraine's Donbas region, Russia has become, for all intents and purposes, a revisionist state (Sagramoso 2020). Yet it was not until the full-scale war in Ukraine that a consensus about Russia's current imperialist outlook emerged in the scholarly community.

The research on Russian–Central Asian relations suggests that the current Russian elite has a two-fold attitude toward Central Asia. On the one hand, the region encompassing the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan has "always mattered to Moscow" due to its pivotal geo-

political location, considerable resources, and perceived security vulnerabilities (Omelicheva 2018). On the other hand, xenophobia and racism toward people of color are deeply entrenched in Russian society and are targeted particularly toward those who appear to be of Caucasian or Central Asian origin. Eraliev and Urinboyev (2020) argue that the Russian media play an active role in reinforcing racist tropes, shaping public opinion, and intensifying xenophobic attitudes toward migrants.

This article contributes to the literature on Russia's geopolitical imaginaries by studying the portrayal of Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and their societies in the media. Empirically, the analysis presented in this article draws from news articles published in the online version of the Russian media outlet *Argumenty i fakty*, a government-affiliated but commercially operating weekly owned by *Promsviazbank*. This outlet was chosen based on its high readership rate and accessibility via the Integrum database. Recognizing the hegemonic role of experts as knowledge producers, authoritative voices that convey supposedly reliable and non-biased information, my interest was in the "expert" narrative on the Central Asian region. Thus, the Russian-language keywords "Central Asia" (*Tsentral'naia Aziia*) and "Middle Asia" (*Sredniaia Aziia*) were used in combination with the word "expert" (*ekspert*), generating a sample that was comprehensible yet manageable for thematic analysis by manual coding. A search for the time frame from January 1 to December 31, 2022, yielded a total of 89 news articles: 40 that contained the combination of "Central Asia" and "expert," and 49 that combined "Middle Asia" with "expert." As the sample suggests, the two terms are used equally on the pages of *Argumenty i fakty*.

Foreign Policy Discourse: Central Asian States and Societies in Central Asia

In the literature on Russia's foreign policy, Central Asian states (with the exception of Turkmenistan) are described as Russia's closest partners in the international arena, alongside Belarus and Armenia. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of all the Russia-led multilateral organizations: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Tajikistan is a member of the CSTO and hosts a Russian military base. For its part, Uzbekistan, while a member neither of the EAEU nor of the CSTO, has increased its collaboration with Russia significantly since President Mirziyoev's accession to power in 2016. While none of the Central Asian states have openly endorsed Russia's war in Ukraine, nor have they explicitly criticized it (Dadabaev & Sonoda 2022).

On the pages of *Argumenty i fakty*, the general tone of the interviewed experts' rhetoric on Central Asian governments is overwhelmingly positive. This is especially true in the case of Kazakhstan: president Qasym-Jomart Toqayev receives lofty praise from political commentators. Perhaps more importantly, Central Asian states are narrated as sovereign countries with their own agency and interests that might contradict those of Russia. For example, Fyodor Lukyanov, Director for Research at the well-known Valdai International Discussion Club, argues that "it is not necessary to demand of these countries [of Central Asia] that they, solely because we are allies, recognize the actions that Russia is carrying out for its own reasons" (November 21, 2022). This positive tone toward Central Asian governments is likely explainable by the official Kremlin rhetoric, which portrays the region's governments as Russia's partners rather than proxies of the West.

However, the foreign policy discourse on Central Asia also includes some elements that reflect a more imperialist view, namely that Russia is entitled to have the region as its exclusive sphere of influence, as well as that Central Asia is a zone of geopolitical contestation with the West (Omeličeva 2018). On the pages of *AiF*, Central Asia is systematically portrayed as a region that is vulnerable to exogenous threats. However, in contrast to earlier representations of this threat, which allegedly emanated from the South and the East in the form of Islamic extremism and terrorism (Omeličeva 2018), the main source of the threat in 2022 is supposedly the West, which is presumably pressuring Central Asian states to abandon their partnership with Russia (i.e., the only correct foreign policy course—Kassymbekova and Marat 2023). For instance, Sergei Karnaukhov, a pro-Kremlin TV host referred to as a "political analyst," claims that the West's goal is to turn Kazakhstan into "the new Syria" (April 23, 2022), while Sergei Stankevich, a prominent Kremlin propagandist quoted as a "political scientist," argues that "global powers" are trying to "plunge the region into chaos" (July 21, 2022).

However, the experts' statements evince neither panic nor alarmism, but rather faith in the countries' expected loyalty to Russia. Sergei Afontsev, Deputy Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow, argues:

We see unprecedented pressure from the United States and the European Union on our regional partners—the countries of Central and Southeast Asia, India, and China [...] In these conditions, from my point of view, the most important values for us are trust and solidarity, understanding the challenges facing each other, and solidarity in their solution. We believe in the solidarity of Kazakhstan [with Russia]. (October 19, 2022)

AiF reporting suggests that Central Asian governments face also endogenous threats, reportedly related to nationalism, radicalism, and "cultural degradation." Sometimes these endogenous threats mix with the exogenous threat from the West. For example, Alexei Borodavkin, the Russian Ambassador to Kazakhstan, laments the fragility of Russian and Kazakhstani youth, who are "coming under the influence of false values, confrontational provocations and brainwashing by those who wish us ill" (October 19, 2022). According to him, young people could potentially "take the path of undermining state foundations and friendly relations between our countries" (Ibid.). The statement reflects a moral panic over young people's "wrong" political choices that has a long history in Russia.

Another theme that emerges from *AiF*'s portrayal of Central Asia in the foreign policy discourse is the threat of radicalism, at times in conjunction with nationalism. Andrei Kazantsev, Leading Researcher at the Institute for International Studies at Moscow's prestigious MGIMO University, interprets Kazakhstan's January protests as a struggle between Kazakhstan's middle class and an "aggressive declaration" of "extremist marginalization" (June 7, 2022), echoing the Soviet discourse on the struggle between "modern" and "backward" forces in Central Asia. However, there is a consensus that the Central Asian regimes are—at least for the time being—able to keep "radical ethnic nationalism" (Stankevich, July 21, 2022) at bay.

Domestic Policy Discourse: Central Asian Societies in Russia

In contrast to the articles that employ the term "Central Asia," the texts that use "Middle Asia" do not cover events taking place in the region's states, but rather developments in Russia featuring Central Asians. As a result, the main topic of these pieces is Russian domestic policy, particularly issues related to immigration.

Works on Russian immigration policy highlight that due to the shrinking and aging population, the Russian economy is dependent on cheap migrant labor. At the same time, however, xenophobia and racism are not only widespread in society, but also institutionally rooted, and the public demand for restrictive immigration policies remains high. As a result, Russia's migration policy has produced a large number of undocumented migrants, particularly from Central Asian states (Schenck 2018, Urinboyev & Eraliev 2022). According to one scholarly estimate, the total number of migrants in Russia is six to seven million, with the majority coming from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 2019, there were thought to be over two million Uzbeks, one million Tajiks, and about 700,000 Kyrgyz nationals in Russia (Eraliev & Urinboyev 2022, 258).

AiF's portrayal of Central Asia in what I call the domestic policy discourse reflects the tension between Russia's need for cheap migrant labor and the anti-migrant sentiments prevalent in society. However, likely as a result of the newspaper's commercial business model, the discourse is tilted toward the preferences of the readership. As a result, *AiF*'s reporting does note the positive contribution that Central Asian labor migrants make to the Russian economy (and, to an extent, Russian foreign policy), but it argues that the costs of this immigration outweigh its benefits. For example, one of the "experts" quoted, Alexei Zakharov, General Director of the SuperJob service, contends that while "it is, of course, important for us [Russia] to maintain good relations with the former Soviet republics and the use of migrants is one of the most effective ways [to do so]," the Kremlin's current migration policy "does more harm than good" (18 May 2022).

The calculus reflects racist assumptions that are widespread in Russian society, as the comparison to immigrants from Russia's Slavic neighbors in the west highlights. For example, Vladimir Kireev, Head of the analytical department of Aleksandr Dugin's International Eurasian Movement, cited as a "political scientist," insists that "any immigration from post-Soviet countries, with the exceptions of Ukraine and Belarus, negatively affects the foundations of [the Russian] society as it lowers the cultural level" (January 26, 2022). His explanation for the difference links to the discourse on the endogenous threats Central Asian states face: "Migrants are not villains at all, but the quality of education in their countries is falling, and religious radicalization is growing" (Ibid.)

Such xenophobic rhetoric is also employed by Vladislav Sakharchuk, cited as a "political scientist," who happens to work as a newspaper editor and local MP in the Kaluga region. According to him, encouraging immigration from Eastern Ukraine was simply cost-effective, as the integration of these individuals was a lot easier than "improving the lives of labor migrants" from Central Asian countries, who were "neither religiously nor culturally close to the local inhabitants" (March 11, 2022). These findings echo those of Kuznetsova and Round (2018), who argue that Central Asians in Russia face political and everyday xenophobia and racism that are the product of deeply rooted imperial views in Russia's domestic politics.

Conclusions

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has generated new interest in Moscow's views of its neighbors, especially in the geographic area it considers its rightful sphere of influence: the countries of the former Soviet Union (apart from the Baltic States). Given that the discursive

challenging of Ukraine's sovereignty, both in nationalist circles and by President Putin himself (2021), preceded the effort to undermine it on the battlefield in a full-scale war, both experts and average citizens have become more sensitive to the word choices Russian policymakers and average citizens alike make when talking about the region. In addition, the Russian language has become one of the construction sites of the increasingly accepted decolonization movement within East European, Eurasian, Russian, and Slavic studies. Deconstructing patterns of (geographic) knowledge produced in Russian is a part of this undertaking, and the debate regarding the Russian-language discourse on Central Asia is not taking place in a vacuum. Instead, it is a part of a broader trend in which both governments and citizens of states neighboring Russia seek to push for their right to determine how their countries are called in Russian. However, the process is facing resistance from the government of the Russian Federation, which continues to refer to Belarus (Ru. *Belarus*) as *Belorussia* and Kyrgyzstan (Ru. *Kyrgyzstan*) as *Kirgizia*.

This article has argued that the Russian expert statements on Central Asia quoted in the popular low-brow weekly newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* demonstrate the existence of two separate discourses on the region. The article highlights the gap between the foreign policy discourse and the domestic policy one. The former mostly concerns Central Asian *states*, while the latter concerns Central Asians living and working in Russia. The article suggests that while the first discourse does have some imperialist underpinnings—namely the claim that the region's countries can only choose to ally with Russia—the second discourse portrays Central Asia in a xenophobic and racist manner, as an inherently problematic imagined geographical space. Whereas the foreign policy discourse refers to Central Asia using the term "Central" Asia, the domestic discourse employs "Middle" Asia. While a discussion of the cited experts' credibility lies beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that some of those commenting on Central Asia in the foreign policy discourse are actually based in the region, which might contribute to this discourse being more nuanced and more attuned to local agency.

The second argument put forward in this article is that Russian-speakers sensitive to the current decolonizing movement, whether they are aware of it or not, feel uneasy with the term "Middle Asia," just as they probably would with the preposition "in *the* Ukraine" (Ru. *na*, rather than *v*, *Ukraine*). While some have argued that "Middle Asia" is nothing but an outdated term rooted in the Russian imperial and Soviet era (Rusakova 2021), others have pointed out that the term is Russocentric, implying Russia's political control over the region (Gorshenina 2019, Akanaeva 2023). When he argues

that Russia's path in the 1990s was not toward "Europe" but "Middle Asia," Navalny is rhetorically tapping into the negative connotations that Russian-speakers attach to Central Asia, as demonstrated by the article's brief overview of the domestic policy discourse. While that

is regrettable (even if possibly unintended), the outcry that his word choice has triggered demonstrates that the ongoing decolonization movement is starting to bear some fruit.

About the Author

Dr. *Kristiina Silvan* is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Russia, EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Eurasia research program at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Her current research focuses on Russian–Central Asian relations and authoritarian politics in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

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