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ANALYSIS

Russian Propaganda in the Near and Far Abroad: A Comparison of Kyrgyzstan and Germany

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Abstract
The Russian regime's propaganda strategy reaches far beyond the country's borders. Tailored narratives and influence operations target different audiences. This article looks at two cases of Russia's influence operations: one in Kyrgyzstan, a country with a Soviet past, and the other in Germany, a NATO member country. The article spotlights key instruments and narratives in Russian propaganda tailored to specific audiences.

For years, the Russian regime has been investing in its domestic and international media strategies. Over time, domestic media censorship has entailed appropriation of key television channels by the state or state-loyal corporations, showcase murders of investigative journalists, retaliation against social media users, and the adoption of strategic legislation for media manipulation, among other tactics. In the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, objective reporting in Russia became virtually impossible, leading to a mass exodus of media outlets and journalists (Venkina 2023). Much like in Soviet times, the state has taken steps to isolate Russian audiences from messages that are not state-approved.

Parallel to these domestic control strategies, the regime has established international broadcasters such as *RT* and *Sputnik*, which deliver their messages globally and in a variety of languages. The lines between traditional and digital media have begun to blur due to the state propaganda machine's heavy reliance on the Internet to spread information. *Sputnik*, for instance, is primarily an online news agency that is also active on social media. In addition to these official outlets, the regime has relied on a troll army to sway online discussions (Doroshenko and Lukito 2021) and instrumentalized informal leaders such as artists and influencers to support the official agenda and to distract audiences (Biasioli 2023). In this regard, propaganda cannot be understood simply as something news-related—it is multimodal and multisemiotic. Propaganda is embedded in the cultural code, permeating movies, public art, songs, proverbs, humor, etc.

Russia's international propaganda strategy can be roughly divided into two parts: efforts targeting the so-called "near abroad" (former Soviet republics) and efforts directed at the "far abroad" (global audiences). When targeting audiences beyond the country's borders, Russian media aim to reach Russian citizens living abroad, ethnic Russians, and Russophones more broadly, while also delivering news in the local languages of target states and pitching across the entire political spectrum.

A stream of Russian propaganda narratives focuses on the amoral nature of the collective West. The West is accused of destroying traditional values, being promiscuous, and spreading the LGBT agenda globally. In contrast, Russia is portrayed as the defender of traditional values. As is often the case in the Russian media, there are contradicting lines of argumentation here. On the one hand, the West is accused of being too tolerant and foolishly open to multiculturalism, which is destroying it. The word "tolerance" in this case is used as something between naivety and political incompetence. This narrative aligns with the far-right nativist voices that advocate for border closure and the preservation of ethnocultural homogeneity. On the other hand, the West is accused of Islamophobia and racism, which resonates with minorities and liberals. This combination of seemingly contradictory narratives contributes to the central goal of undermining the West in the eyes of divergent audiences, be they Eurosceptics or defenders of European values. Contradictions and narrative inconsistencies are not erroneous, but rather part of a strategy to persuade wide audiences and undermine the enemy from multiple angles.

In what follows, the article will explore Russian propaganda strategies through two cases representing the "near" and "far" abroad. First, the article describes the impact of Russian propaganda on Kyrgyzstan, a country in the "near abroad," where traditional Russian media are dominant due to habit and a relative lack of competition (Gabdulhakov 2023). This is followed by the "far abroad" case of "Russia Germans," in which the propaganda machine relies on social media to reach and influence a specific group of people in Europe with cultural and linguistic ties to Russia. In conclusion, the article discusses potential strategies for combating Russian propaganda.

Targeting the Near Abroad: The Case of Kyrgyzstan[1]

Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan is massive. It penetrates in a variety of formats and in a volume with which domestic and Western media outlets cannot compete. Central narratives of Russian propaganda focus on the demonization of the "collective West," the demonization of Ukraine, the glorification of Russia, and the portrayal of Kyrgyzstan as a state dependent on Russia (Gabdulhakov 2023).

There are several narrative strands that demonize the West. One stresses the idea that the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine, as it left Russia no choice. In this narrative, Europe is portrayed as a puppet in the hands of the United States, whose core mission is to conquer the world and destroy Russia. The central argument in this narrative is that countries such as Ukraine fall victim to manipulation. Ukraine is accused of stepping down the path of Nazism and killing its own people in the pursuit of false promises made by the West. Russia is thus saving itself from Western aggression, saving Ukraine from the Nazis, and saving the world from capitalist colonizers.

Cold War-era narratives on the "decaying West" and the inability of capitalists to sustain their people are back. Russian media report on severe food shortages and poverty across Europe and the United States. At the same time, the reports make the case that the West is after global dominance. Here, Russian media take advantage of the anticolonial narratives that are gaining momentum in public discourse in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. While it views post-Soviet states as de facto part of the "Russian world,"[2] Russia denies its colonial past. In a way, Russia hijacks decolonization discourses and deploys them against the collective West, which is deemed the true colonizer. At the same time, any attempt to de-Sovietize on the part of Kyrgyzstan leads to a harsh reaction and threats from Moscow (Najibullah 2022).

Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan is available in both Russian and Kyrgyz. Sputnik.kg is a prominent example of a bilingual platform: the home page is entirely in Kyrgyz and users can use the menu to opt for Russian. Both versions of the website run a thematic block dedicated to Russia's war against Ukraine—or, as the agency describes it, Russia's "special operation for protection of Donbas." Kyrgyz citizens—and Central Asian labor migrants more broadly—are actively recruited to fight in Russia's war against Ukraine. This is done through both gratification and enforcement. In the gratification scenario, labor migrants are promised high monthly payments and a simplified pathway to Russian citizenship. In the enforcement scenario, people are either abducted or are threatened with deportation and loss of citizenship should they refuse to go to war (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2022).

In reporting on the war itself, Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan plays on World War II references and sentiments. For years, the annual victory celebrations on May 9 have been accompanied by such slogans as "we can repeat this," hinting at the idea that war might recur. These sentiments are coupled with the broader mythology of a lost paradise. In this narrative, the USSR is portrayed in the most positive light, as a country where everyone was socially and economically protected, that was a world leader in education and medicine, and of which everyone was afraid. The "evil West," meanwhile, is portrayed as the serpent that destroyed this paradise. Now, in order to restore paradise, Russia must reclaim its lands. This propaganda seeks to persuade its targets that even if the USSR will not be restored per se, countries in the "near abroad" must be oriented toward Russia for their own good. If you are on good terms with Russia, the narrative goes, it will protect you from invaders of all kind, be they Western colonizers, the Taliban or China—but if you turn away and become "Russophobic," the fate of Ukraine awaits you.

Targeting the Far Abroad: The Case of "Russia Germans"[3]

Having settled in the Russian empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, ethnic Germans *(Russlanddeutsche*, lit. "Russia Germans," sometimes called Russian Germans) were exiled to Central Asia during World War II.[4] As the USSR dissolved, they were invited to resettle in the historical motherland—the reunited Federal Republic of Germany. Facing integration issues, these ethnic Germans (who often refer to themselves as *Rusaki*[5]—Rus-

1 The information in this section is based on the author's ongoing research, as well as a published report to which the author contributed. The full report is available at "Narratives and Perceptions of Russian Propaganda in Kyrgyzstan," Institute for War and Peace Reporting (July 2023), https://iwpr.net/global-voices/print-publications/russian-propaganda-kyrgyzstan.

2 "Russkii Mir" is a political doctrine encompassing Russia's political and cultural sphere of influence. In 2007, Vladimir Putin established the Russian World Foundation to promote Russian language and culture. For more on the Russian World, see Kudors 2010.

3 The information in this section is based on the author's ongoing research, as well as a published forum to which the author contributed. The forum is available at: A. Mahon et al., "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: What Did We Miss?" International Studies Perspectives, May 10, 2023, doi: 10.1093/isp/ekad006.

4 For a detailed account of Russia Germans, see L. Isurin and C.M. Riehl, eds., Integration, Identity and Language Maintenance in Young Immigrants: Russian Germans or German Russians (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2017).

5 According to field interviews with Russia Germans. The use of the term is informed by Russia Germans being both Russophones and descendants of Germans who lived in Russia.

sians) maintained cultural and ideological ties with Russia. Amid Russia's global disinformation strategy and influence operations, this group is actively targeted by pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The impact of Russia's influence operations targeting Russia Germans first became vividly apparent during the "European refugee crisis" of 2015–2016, when anti-refugee sentiments reached a tipping point. When a Russia German girl named Lisa claimed to have been abducted and raped by refugees, Russia used the story to undermine the credibility of the German establishment, stressing that the welcoming culture advocated by Angela Merkel was threatening the security of German citizens. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov even referred to the girl as "our Lisa." While the story turned out to be made up, the "Lisa case" sparked outrage and protests across Germany (Rinke & Carrel, 2016). Arguably, these events and the surrounding anti-refugee/anti-EU narratives helped the far-right AfD party (Alternative für Deutschland, Alternative for Germany) gain popularity. Russia Germans tend to be prominent supporters of the party (Golova 2017).

While Telegram is certainly gaining momentum in spreading Russian propaganda, having transformed from an enemy platform (Akbari & Gabdulhakov 2019) into a go-to milieu for Russian propagandists (Akbari & Gabdulhakov forthcoming), among Russia Germans a special role is played by the social network Odnoklassniki (Classmates). Odnoklassniki is poorly regulated and is anarchical when it comes to access to unmoderated hate speech, pirated movies/music, pornographic content, etc. This platform's popularity among Russia Germans can be explained by two factors: time and affordances. Time-wise, Odnoklassniki was established in 2006, when there were few other social media platforms. Those who had repatriated to their historical motherland embraced the network to find friends and neighbors they had left behind. Odnoklassniki was and remains popular due to its simple interface in Russian as well as other affordances that have evolved along with the platform, including convenient tools for streaming, chatting, and even transferring money. Over the years, due to the number of people already present on the platform, especially among the older generation, Odnoklassniki has become THE platform for finding former neighbors and childhood friends.

Amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, anti-Ukraine, anti-EU, and pro-Russian narratives have flooded social media groups designed for Russophones in Germany. These groups[6] are attractive to Russophones seeking assistance with practical matters: one can advertise products and services or inquire about mundane topics such as public transport, the education system, visas for relatives, etc., etc. Yet the feeds in these groups are also flooded with politicized content and propaganda. Group admins become the rulers of these online communities: they set the agenda and moderate the discussions. If someone dares challenge the set agenda, they are at best removed from the group, losing access to thousands of community members. In severe cases, those who challenge the admin are declared "enemies of the people" and publicly shamed in the group, with relevant screenshots and personal information shared.

Netnographic observations revealed that there is an active influence operation taking place on the Odnoklassniki groups designed for Russia Germans. Posts shared across these groups demonize Ukraine, its people, and its political leadership. Ukraine is framed as an artificially created Nazi state that requires liberation. Much like other refugees, Ukrainians fleeing war are portrayed as invaders who put pressure on the German economy while not genuinely requiring protection. Volodymyr Zelensky is ridiculed as a homosexual and a drug addict. The shared content also systematically undermines German policies in support of Ukraine; it is Eurosceptic and openly pro-Kremlin. The persona of Vladimir Putin is elevated to the status of a superhero fighting global evil. Some of the shared content is openly racist, using derogatory terms for Ukrainians, but due to the anarchic moderation on Odnoklassniki, it can actively reach out to audiences in Europe.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's propaganda machine is massive, multifaceted, and far-reaching. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian media are omnipresent and active in influencing people's perceptions of the West, Ukraine, Russia, and themselves. The West is portrayed as evil, Russia is portrayed as a security guarantor, and war is framed as an opportunity. In Germany, the target audience is actively reached out to online and persuaded that Ukraine is an artificially created Nazi state, that the German establishment and the EU are dysfunctional, and that Russia is saving the world. In both cases, the "lost paradise" myth about the glory days of the USSR is promoted to draw historical parallels and to persuade audiences that friendship with Moscow will lead to security and prosperity.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian media have built on their historical presence, adding new formats and news in the local language. To succeed in countering Russian propaganda here, significant resources will have to be poured into alternative content creation. Not only are such resources nowhere on the horizon, but the situation is further eroded by the repressive legislation that

6 There is a plethora of such groups. Only groups open to the public (those that do not require an administrator's approval to join) were studied.

the current political leadership in Kyrgyzstan has been adopting to silence civil society and critical voices (Cabar. Asia 2023).

When it comes to active recruitment of Kyrgyz citizens to serve in the Russian army and fight in Ukraine, it is not enough to just remind citizens that becoming a foreign combatant is illegal. There must be active counter-campaigns to discourage people from falling for this offer. However, the state has no capacity to protect its citizens or to employ them at home—and a few thousand visas for seasonal work in Western countries cannot significantly reduce Kyrgyzstan's dependency on Russia for remittances.

In Germany, citizens fall prey to Russian propaganda and choose candidates during elections on that basis. It is no longer possible to draw a clear line between traditional and social media, as traditional media products penetrate the digital domain, making measures such as restricting access to *RT* and *Sputnik* in the European Union hardly effective. Here, resources should be directed to countering Russian propaganda on the same platforms where it penetrates. These measures should go hand in hand with calling group admins to account for what they spread online. It does not help that opportunistic politicians in Europe itself build campaigns on those narratives pitched by Russian propaganda that are anti-EU and anti-Ukraine.

The strength of Russian propaganda is in its flexibility. Naturally, therefore, any attempts to resist the propaganda machine also require a certain departure from conventional approaches. However, it is important not to fall into the trap of becoming the enemy during the fight.

About the Author
Dr *Rashid Gabdulhakov* is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies of the University of Groningen.

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