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***Eurosodom: Examining Weaponized Sexuality and Gender-Based
Narratives in Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation***

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Abstract

Eurosodom: Examining Weaponized Sexuality and Gender-Based Narratives in Russian and Pro-Russian Disinformation

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The Kremlin, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, has sponsored a resurgence of political warfare against Western targets. This analysis will focus on a particular aspect of Kremlin-sponsored political warfare: sexuality and gender-based narratives in Russian and pro-Russian sponsored disinformation campaigns targeting EU and aspiring members from 2014-2020. The potency of these narratives arises from the emotional and cognitive load that they elicit. Their significance is often overlooked in security, intelligence, and communication studies.

In order to alleviate this gap, this thesis consists of a mixed-methods analysis in order to analyze the role and function of these narratives within the larger body of Russian disinformation and the intended effects of targeted demographics' consumption of these narratives. This research shows that sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives are designed to target basic human emotions, such as fear, anger, hostility, confusion, and disgust by exploiting existing cognitive biases within the targeted population. These narratives are a useful and effective political and propaganda tool meant to elicit support for a specific brand of traditional values that furthers the Kremlin's geopolitical aim of creating an alternative to Western liberal hegemony. These metanarratives designate the West as a bastion of moral and material decadence and deviance, and Russia as the savior of traditional Christendom because of its adherence to traditionality and rejection of liberal multiculturalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, disinformation has come to feature heavily in American political discourse. In recent years, scholars and policy practitioners have recognized the global drift towards “post-truth politics” or a “post-truth era” for some time now.¹ In Germany – postfaktisch, in China – *hòu zhēnxiāng*, in Brazil – *posverdad*, in Turkey, India, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other countries, fear of decreasing adherence to truth and fact have driven political and cultural conversations. Simultaneously, the last ten years have been marred by the global rise of right-wing populism. The past decade has brought the ascent of populist parties in Austria, Brazil, Germany, Italy, India, Indonesia, and Poland, the election of Donald J. Trump, the Brexit vote in Britain, and the rise of at least 20 populist leaders in executive office around the world.² The roots of this populist growth date back to the early 21st century; however, “what the 2010s did... was give populist parties the ecosystem they needed to thrive,” partly due to the digital revolution and the rise of alternative media platforms.³

¹ Schwartz, Ian (28 November 2016). "George Will: "Post-Factual Politics" From Campaign Still Exists, Nixon More Of A Statesman Than Current Leadership". *RealClearPolitics.com*. Retrieved 8 November 2017.

² Yasmeen Serhan, “Populism is Morphing in Insidious Ways,” *The Atlantic*, 2020.

³ Serhan, “Populism is Morphing in Insidious Ways.” See also: Bertin Martens, et al., “The digital transformation of news media and the rise of disinformation and fake news,” *JRS Technical Reports: European Commission*; April 2018.; Jennifer Curtis, “Fake News and Anthropology: A Conversation on Technology, Trust, and Publics in an Age of Mass Disinformation.” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (blog), February 16, 2020.

The advent of new digital media has allowed for increasingly democratized and decentralized news content at all levels of creation and dissemination, changing the shape of both legitimate news and propaganda. Older media platforms, such as cable news, have also adapted to the Digital Age. The American media infrastructure has begun to focus on performativity to satiate the attention economy, leading to a monopolization of news with high emotional content and headline grabbing stories. In the past 20 years, the 24-hour news cycle, focusing on constant coverage rather than the quality of coverage, has created a system that allows for easier manipulation and inclusion of unverified information into the mainstream.⁴

These changes in the information system have combined with factors such as socioeconomic polarization and inherent characteristics of cognitive processing, especially cognitive biases, to drive increasing mistrust in institutions and conspiratorial thinking in the U.S. The RAND Corporation defines “truth decay” as consisting of four characteristics: 1) increasing disagreement about the facts and analytical interpretation of facts and data; 2) a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; 3) the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and 4) declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.⁵ The U.S. has seen “truth decay” in three other historical eras beyond today: 1) the Gilded Age and the rise of yellow journalism; 2) the 1920s and 1930s known for “jazz journalism,” the mass

⁴ Dominc Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, “American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010).

⁵ Jennifer Kavanaugh and Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” *RAND Corporation* (Santa Monica, 2018).

dissemination of radios, and the birth of the tabloid; and 3) the era of the Vietnam War, with “New Journalism” and increased concerns about government and media propaganda. These three eras and the current day saw a blurring of the line between opinion and fact and the increasing volume of opinion and personal experience over fact. However, the level of distrust in institutions is more pronounced today than in the past.⁶ In the United States, public trust in the federal government, media, and other important institutions has continued to move to a historic low in recent decades. In 2019, PEW estimated that only 17% of Americans say that they can “trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (3%) or ‘most of the time’ (14%).”⁷ Today, with an increasing number of high-level officials in the US Government espousing conspiratorial thinking over data, falsities over truth, and opinion over fact, the need to understand the cultural structures and emotional logic that allow disinformation to flourish in society has never been greater.

Although the phenomenon of “post-truth” and the popularity of conspiracy theories have been a long-standing aspect of American history, advances in technology in the Digital Age have altered the way that foreign adversaries conduct influence operations—bringing them out from the shadows and onto social media feeds.⁸ The changing information ecosystems in Europe and the U.S. have become ripe for foreign

⁶ Kavanaugh and Rich, “Truth Decay,” 2018.

⁷ PEW Research, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019,” PEW (Washington D.C., 2019). <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

⁸ John Keane, “Post-truth politics and why the antidote isn’t simply ‘fact-checking’ and truth,” *The Conversation*, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/post-truth-politics-and-why-the-antidote-isnt-simply-fact-checking-and-truth-87364>

interference during our era of resurging near-peer competition and “return to great power politics,” a revitalization of a multipolar system similar to that that preceded the Cold War two power system.⁹ The modern international system is often described as experiencing a Although it was predicted that the 21st century would be the era of American predominance, powers such as China, Russia, and European Union member states have equalized this order. For the Russian Federation under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, non-military activities, especially operations in the information space, are an effective force multiplier that can even the international playing field as the Kremlin attempts to reassert itself as a major global power.

Indeed, it has been well established that the Kremlin has sponsored a resurgence of political warfare against Western targets as a factor of ‘hybrid warfare’ that attempts to alter world power structures to create a multipolar world.¹⁰ Typically, ‘hybrid warfare’ is understood to combine both kinetic military and non-kinetic non-military activities, ranging from traditional covert action such as propaganda, information influence activities, political and economic activities, and sabotage, to paramilitary and military intervention.¹¹ This thesis focuses on the non-kinetic aspects of Russian ‘hybrid warfare,’ which will be referred to as political warfare.

⁹ Idrees Ali, “U.S. military puts ‘great power competition’ at heart of strategy: Mattis,” *Reuters*, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-china-russia/u-s-military-puts-great-power-competition-at-heart-of-strategy-mattis-idUSKBN1F81TR>; Elbridge A. Colby and A. Wess Mitchell, “The Age of Great Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition>

¹⁰ Kevin N. McCauley, *Russian Influence Campaigns Against the West* (North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 325; Christopher S. Chivvis, “Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” and What Can Be Done About It,” *RAND*, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html>.

¹¹ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 257.

Policymakers and academics in the United States have focused almost exclusively on one factor of Kremlin-sponsored political warfare: Russian interference in the 2016 American Presidential Election. However, Europe, and in particular the European Union and its aspiring members, has been the perennial target for the Kremlin in the post-Soviet era.¹² These countries have been targeted since as early as 2007 and have become saturated with the non-kinetic instruments of hybrid warfare. This analysis will focus on a particular aspect of Kremlin-sponsored political warfare in Europe: Russian and pro-Russian sponsored disinformation campaigns. Disinformation is specifically tailored for each target, manipulating, distorting, dismissing, or fabricating locally relevant information to substantiate some broader metanarrative that serves Russian interests. Russian and pro-Russian disinformation has become a popular topic in the news and academia, and scholars have focused on several elements of disinformation ranging from the role of advertising, to the technology used to disseminate false stories, to the motivations of threat actors, to the narrative content of disinformation. This analysis will consist of a content analysis of sexuality and gender-based narratives in Russian disinformation from a set time period and database.

In this thesis, I will survey the narrative landscape of Russian disinformation in Europe from 2015 to present from a database of proven disinformation managed by the European External Action Service. This database, *EU vs. Disinfo*, is “the only searchable, open source repository of its kind—which currently comprises over 6,500 samples of

¹² McCauley, *Russian Information Campaigns Against the West*, 383; 384.

pro-Kremlin disinformation” in 32 languages.¹³ In scrutinizing this larger body of disinformation, an interesting trend emerged of false stories built on sexuality and gender-based narratives targeting the West that were reminiscent of classic atrocity propaganda that has characterized political warfare for centuries. This thesis focuses on those pieces of disinformation characterized by sexuality and gender-based narratives. In order to analyze these narratives, I conduct a mixed-methods analysis of this topic from this particular subsample, relying on qualitative methods, as well as feminist IR theory, rumor theory and theories of disgust, and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This thesis focuses on the three research questions:

- What the role and functionality of sexuality and gender-based narratives are within the larger body of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation from 2015-2019?
- What are the intended effects of targeted demographics’ consumption of sexuality and gender-based narratives?
- Are the stories contained in these narratives heterogeneous or do they comply with a common prototype?

My hypotheses are three-fold. First, sexuality and gender-based narrative are a kind of classic atrocity propaganda. They focus on the most intense of natural human emotions, such as fear, anger, hostility, confusion, and disgust, in order to exploit existing cognitive biases and create efficient cognitive shortcuts that can elicit desired behavioral or

¹³ EU vs. Disinfo, “About,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

cognitive change in the targeted population.¹⁴ As a result, sexuality and gender-based narratives, especially those that utilize language of atrocity, are potent psychological weapons in the Kremlin’s information warfare toolkit.

Second, the intent of the utilization of these narratives is to sow confusion and incite moral panics in the targeted populations. Sexuality and gender-based narratives are not unlike other forms of disinformation in this way; their emotional load is so high that the target population is often overwhelmed with strong emotion, as mentioned above, which can lead to the classic “4D” effect of disinformation: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay.¹⁵ However, I hypothesize that sexuality and gender-based narratives serve Kremlin interests in another significant way. These narratives are employed to support broader geopolitical aims of the Russian Federation, namely increased distrust in the ideas of multiculturalism, tolerance, feminism, and liberalism expressed through an overall Eurosceptic worldview. Furthermore, these narratives create a real political and cultural alternative to Western liberal democracy that is modeled after Putin’s Russia, focusing on traditional imaginings of masculinity and femininity, the family unit, and other conservative Christian imagery.

Third, stories that are characterized by sexuality and gender-based narratives are not random but conform to a common storyline pattern. They can typically be distilled down to one storyline with a perennial cast of characters that is easily recycled and adapted over time. This storyline is replete with dual imagery and binary oppositions that

¹⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

¹⁵ Gourley, Seran, “To fight disinformation, we need to weaponize the truth, *Wired*, 2020, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/fix-disinformation-facts>

seem to be contradictory, but that actually represent broad narratives that support one another. In this thesis, these broad narratives will be referred to as metanarratives, which are cross-cultural narrative systems that frequently reappear over long stretches of time, providing an explanatory framework that can be applied to a population's interpretation of information.¹⁶ These metanarratives are meant to illicit emotional and cognitive support for Russian foreign policy and security objectives. When taken together, these images paint a complete picture: the West is a decaying power, a kind of 'Eurosodom' that has become a bastion of material decadence and moral deviance, which is now at the mercy of a resurgent Russia that is destined to rise up from historical tragedy to be the savior of "true Christian European" civilization.

This analysis seeks to contribute to the existing research on Russian and pro-Russian disinformation in three ways: First, by showing that sexuality and gender-based narratives in Russian disinformation target emotions such as fear, anger, hostility, confusion, and disgust. These narratives should be considered a geopolitical threat because they are designed to create confusion and incite moral panic in the targeted population, with the intended goal of advocating for a specific brand of traditionality and social structure which define the current worldview of the Kremlin. Central to this analysis is an understanding of the cultural and historical foundations that support the Kremlin's use of othering discourse in their information operations. These 'Others' are remnants of an Imperial and Soviet past, frameworks of discrimination against Jews and

¹⁶ Daniel Leonard Bernardi, Pauline Hope Cheong, Chris Lundry, and Scott W. Lundry, *Narrative Landmines* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

Muslims and an idea of a conspiring West that inform the Kremlin's political rhetoric today. However, unlike in the past, the Kremlin today is predominantly relying on gender discourse and a scapegoating of LGBTQ+ populations in tandem with these older forms of othering to legitimize and reinforce the rule of President Vladimir Putin.

This thesis proceeds by overviewing the theoretical devices from five fields of study – historical foundations of active measures, propaganda and disinformation studies, feminist IR theory, rumor theory and theories of disgust, and critical discourse analysis – in order to analyze disinformation characterized by sexuality and gender-based narratives. Through this analysis, I expect to confirm my hypotheses that: a) sexuality and gender-based narratives are designed to target basic human emotions, such as fear, anger, hostility, confusion, and disgust, in order to exploit existing cognitive biases within the targeted populations; b) the majority of the stories that utilize a sexuality or gender-based narrative in my dataset can be distilled down to one easily adaptable and reusable storyline; and c) sexuality and gender based narratives are employed in order to shape understanding and support for a specific brand of traditional values that serve the Kremlin's greater geopolitical aims. Following this theoretical background, I will describe the methods utilized for the analysis of my sample. This will include a quantitative analysis of the sample and a narrative content analysis of the stories within the sample. Following methods, I will provide description and analysis of the seven metanarratives detected in the sample of disinformation from 2015 to present. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses will then be discussed separately. I will conclude by providing substantive policy recommendations for policymakers and

intelligence practitioners, with the aim of outlining the vital national security significance of sexuality and gender-based narratives in Russian and pro-Russian disinformation.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

HISTORICAL SCAPEGOATING AND INFORMATION WARFARE

From the Imperial Era through the Soviet Union to today, scapegoating or ‘othering’ has been a constantly present political and propaganda tool of Russian leadership. Of course, this phenomenon is in no way unique to Russian history and can be found at some time in nearly every country around the world; however, the Russian state does have a unique history of the phenomenon, in which the existence of these ‘Others’ has central importance to the formation of the Russian national identity. Throughout history, the groups that serve as the primary ‘Other’ for Russian leadership have shifted, evolved, and merged, but have predominantly focused on Muslims, Jews, and the West. Russian leadership has exploited the existence of these ‘Others’ for political legitimacy and to boost internal cohesion.

Early understandings of an “Other” in the Russian imagination were centered around religious differences, Islam or Judaism as opposed to Orthodoxy. Throughout modern history, Russia has been at war with the Ottoman Empire more than any other power. This series of twelve wars between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire between the 17th and 20th centuries were instrumental in the forging of the Russian national identity in opposition to an Eastern, Islamic “Other,” especially as Russian leadership emphasized its “unique position as the only Christian Orthodox Empire.”¹⁷ The wars were largely setbacks for the Ottomans, with the Russians gaining control of

¹⁷ Kirill A. Fursov, “Russia and the Orthodox Empire: The Geopolitical Dimension,” *Russian Studies in History* 57, no. 2 (2018), 99.

the northern rim of the Black Sea and parts of the Balkans. Both the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire saw themselves as the bearers of true civilization, as seats to two great religions: Islam and Orthodoxy.¹⁸ Once the Russians gained control over parts of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, pan-Slavism in the form of a united Orthodox, Slavic-speaking sphere became popular in the Russian imagination empire, encouraging anti-Western sentiment and the beginnings of the West as an ‘Other’ in the Russian imagination.

During the reign of Peter the Great, he sought to “impose Western ways” on the empire and to return the Russian Empire to the European fold.¹⁹ However, Peter came up against resistance from the clergy and conservative groups, who saw the West’s culture as a threat to their Orthodox tradition. By the 19th century, some members of the educated elite, known as Slavophiles, began to argue that Russia’s place was not with the West, but was in fact “fundamentally distinct from the sterile materialism and rationalism of the Latin World.”²⁰ The Slavophiles believed that Russia’s identity lay in Eastern Europe, with those of a similar Orthodox religion. This debate over continental identity persists today.

Another central ‘Other’ for the Imperial Russian regime were Jewish populations. Anti-Semitism was “the dominant modality of racialized Othering” in the Imperial

¹⁸ Ishaan Tharoor, “How the rivalry between the Russians and the Turks shaped the world,” *Washington Post*, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/10/09/how-the-rivalry-between-russians-and-turks-shaped-the-world/>.

¹⁹ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 4.

Russian state.²¹ Jews were believed to allies of the West, purveyors of radical leftism leading up to the revolution, and were of course a religious ‘Other.’ The most famous embodiment of official state-sponsored anti-Semitism was disinformation and fabrication operation that published the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The *Protocols* were a highly successful and effective political forgery, translated into multiple languages, that claimed to show a Jewish plot to take over the world.²² Although the Russian Revolution was officially meant to end the embedded anti-Semitism of the Imperial Regime in the name of an international and cosmopolitan revolution, the Soviet state invariably continued the legacy of anti-Semitism, especially under Joseph Stalin.

The othering present during the Soviet period was a direct legacy of the frameworks established by the Tsarist regime, with some important distinctions. The Soviet Union was officially built on a non-religious, international movement, so the same kind of religious-based othering that existed during the Russian Empire was officially diminished. In practice however, official state atheism led to discrimination against religious groups, especially Muslim and Jewish communities who were forcibly assimilated and integrated into a common Soviet culture.

Most significantly during the Soviet Era, the West became an even more principal ‘Other,’ especially post-WWII. The idea of a Western ‘Other,’ who was conspiring to infiltrate and overthrow the Soviet state, was central to Soviet identity and provided

²¹ Brendan McGeever, “Revolution and antisemitism: the Bolsheviks in 1917,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, no. 3-4 (2017).

²² Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elder of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 32–36.; Hadassa Ben-Itto, *The Lie that Wouldn't Die: The Protocols of The Elders of Zion* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005), 280.

legitimization of harsh political repression under Stalin. A distinctive feature of Stalinist repression were “conspiratorial witch hunts” that focused on “Jews as supposed agents of the West.”²³ The idea of an internal enemy conspiring with the an external enemy (the West) was not new to the Soviet period, but had deep legacies during the Imperial Era, in which the Tsarist regime also considered Jews to be conspiring with revolutionary forces. During the Soviet Union, these frameworks were simply extended, and a “conspiring West” became an even greater embedded trope in the national identity and state-making.²⁴

At the end of the Soviet period, the othering of the West began to abate as young people became more open to Western influences and Gorbachev pushed for more open and free governance.²⁵ However, with the fall of the Soviet Union, a resurgence of Russian nationalism emerged, accompanied by the “enshrining of the belief of Russia’s right to protect the Russian minorities in the ‘near abroad;’ and subsequently, during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the revival of traditional notions of protecting Russia’s Orthodox “brother Serbs,” and Russia’s hostility to the expansion of NATO.”²⁶ As a result, many young people began “renegotiating their attitudes with the West” in the mid-90s, increasingly coming to believe that “Western cultural forms and lifestyles” were an “alien imposition.”²⁷ In this post-Soviet era, with increased Russian nationalism and anti-

²³ Ben-Itto, *The Lie that Wouldn't Die*,” 280.

²⁴ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*.

²⁵ Rosalind Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity: The Theme of “Russia and the West” in Post-Soviet Culture,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 3 (2007).

²⁶ Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity,” 560

²⁷ Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity,” 561.

Western sentiment, the West was often depicted in a similar manner to that during the Imperial Era: as “capitalist exploiters, political enemies, or purveyors of decadent Western culture.”²⁸ One significant Imperial-based ideal that reemerged during this time was the “traditional messianic view that Russia is a unique country which must pursue its own path of development that is necessarily different from that of the West, and that will have a special, distinctive role to play in the future.” (Marsh, 562). With the rise of Vladimir Putin, there has been a heightened awareness of the malign presence of “Others,” in the in the form of Westerner, Jew, or Muslim. Contemporary Russian politics “suggests that conventional views of a homogenized West as Russia’s ‘Other’ are by no means outdated” – indeed, they are becoming more prevalent in the 21st century with the ideals of Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism.²⁹ Official values that have emerged in Putin’s Russia – autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationalism – have deep roots in both Imperial and Soviet Russia.³⁰

GENDER RELATIONS IN RUSSIAN HISTORY

When the Soviet Union fell, the former gender order came under attack. Leaders and citizens alike began to interpret the collapse of the USSR as “collective demasculinization” as the country lost its former status in the international system. Seeds of feminist thought started to emerge in the early years of the Soviet Union, after the first Soviet Constitution formally proclaimed gender equality in 1917. However, the

²⁸ Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity,” 561.

²⁹ Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity,” 561.

³⁰ Marsh, “The Nature of Russia’s Identity,” 561.

Bolsheviks never officially embraced the feminist movement. By the 1930s, the state apparatus began claiming that “women’s issues were largely solved.”³¹ Legally, the Soviet Union attempted to fulfill communist aspirations of equality: giving women access to jobs and encouraging their participation in the political process. During World War II, women were mass mobilized to take the place of men in the industrial economy. Although women’s employment expanded significantly, and women’s roles began to include work outside of the home, the overall balance of power in the gender hierarchy remained unchanged. Due to the “double burden” that women experienced, their inclusion in the wage economy provided an improvement in the status of women at a great cost.³² The dominant position of men in the social structure was never reconsidered. This illusory sense of equality led to feminist rhetoric and policies controlled by the state, who, in practice, often still advocated traditional views of family and motherhood and declared unsanctioned feminism as “bourgeois.”³³

During perestroika, the feminist movement that had been growing underground for decades was brought into the public sphere. Awareness of gender equality, women’s double burden, and the exclusion of meaningful inclusion of women at the decision-making level became more widespread. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, women’s movements were once again marginalized, as increasingly patriarchal political

³¹ Alexandra Orlova, “Russian Politics of Masculinity and the Decay of Feminism: The Role of Dissent in Creating New ‘Local Norms,’” *Power and Identity Politics: The intersection of Marginalization and Social, Economic, and Political Ascension* 25, no. 1 (2019).

³² Thomas G. Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution,” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. B.E. Clements (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

³³ Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin* (Oxford University Press: 2015), 49.; Orlova, “Russian Politics of Masculinity,” 63.

structures took hold.³⁴ There was a strong backlash against state-sanctioned feminism and female emancipation that occurred during the Soviet period, especially as the collapse of the Soviet Union was depicted as the ultimate form of emasculation.

During the 1990s, calls to restore “collective male dignity” were actively utilized by anti-Communist political opposition groups. Yeltsin often feminized (demasculinized) his political opponents, but by the end of his tenure was considered to be old, “gut-boasting, boorish, [and] boozy.”³⁵ As a result, Putin’s remasculinization strategy was two-fold. First, he sought to craft a new national identity defined by performances of strength, masculine political positioning for foreign and domestic audiences, and the reinforcement of traditional family and gender systems in order to reverse the demasculinization of Russia that accompanied the fall of the USSR. Second, he sought to differentiate himself from Yeltsin’s old and drunken performance of manhood by appearing youthful, athletic, and attractive, all while remaining a true man, or “*muzhik*.”³⁶

The revitalization and redefinition of the term *muzhik* has become central to the Russian national identity during Putin’s tenure. In Imperial Russia, the term *muzhik* was used to designate a male peasant, with different connotations from *muzhchina*, the standard word for man. During the Soviet Era, *muzhik* became a somewhat derogatory term for a “backward, ignorant, and potentially counterrevolutionary” man, defined in

³⁴ Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen, “Twenty-First Century Feminisms under Repression: Gender Regime Change and the Women’s Crisis Center Movement in Russia,” *Signs* 38(3) (2013): 545.

³⁵ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 61.

³⁶ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, pg. 36.

opposition to the celebrated Soviet worker.³⁷ However, during the Post-Soviet period, and especially during Putin's rule, the term has been revitalized and has gained a new positive definition as a way to define a "real man."³⁸ The term and the idea of a "real Russian man" has become part of Putin's political legitimization strategy.³⁹ Putin has molded his own public image to align with that of a *muzhik* and the Kremlin takes an "active role in reproducing it and promoting it" among the Russian population.⁴⁰ In this way, Putin was able to strategically redeploy gender discourse in a way that portrays a return to traditionality, while really serving as an important vector of new ideological goals.

Gender and Political Masculinities in Contemporary Russia:

Gender is a crucial element of the social order. Ideas of masculinity and femininity overlay all aspects of public and private life and organize ideas of nation, class, and culture. ⁴¹ As Riabova and Riabov (2019) state, gender discourse has "broader relevance and significance beyond the scope of sexual relations, because [gender] contributes to maintaining the collective identity, establishing social inequality, and providing political mobilization." The gendered political performance of right-wing populist leaders such as Vladimir Putin, Recep T. Erdogan, and Jair Bolsonaro have been extensively studied by

³⁷ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, pg. 36.; Riabov and Riabova, "The Remasculinization of Russia."

³⁸ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, pg. 37.

³⁹ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, pg. 38.

⁴⁰ Riabov and Riabova, "The Remasculinization of Russia.;" Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 37.

⁴¹ Carol Cohn, "Wars, Wimps, and Women," in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woolacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pg. 228.; Riabova & Riabov, "The 'Rape of Europe: 2016 New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cogone in hegemonic discourse of Russian media," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52 (2019).

scholars. Reliance on gendered discourses and paternalist metaphors is increasingly common in right-wing populist parties around the world.⁴² The relationship between gender and right-wing populism is central to understanding the ways that male populist leaders posture themselves both domestically and on the international stage.

As critical discourse analyst Teun A. Van Dijk has shown, “ideologies seldom express themselves directly in text and talk; rather, they work indirectly, often concealing both their origins and effects.”⁴³ As Eksi and Wood (2019) argue, it is likely no accident that so many right-wing politicians engage in masculine, “macho,” and strongman approaches in their public discourse and actions.⁴⁴ Eksi and Wood describe these behaviors as “political masculinities” — “the conscious or unconscious (often semi-conscious) performance of masculine stereotypes by individuals operating within the political sphere.”⁴⁵ Right-wing populist political masculinities are distinct from other displays of masculinity in the political sphere because of their explicit goal of undermining democratic infrastructures. As Eksi and Wood argue, these masculine performances can be “designed to create spectacle” in order to distract the populace from serious economic problems. However, these performances are often central to the legitimacy of right-wing

⁴² Betül Eksi and Elizabeth Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance: Janus-faced masculinity in the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan,” *Theory and Society* 48 (2019).

⁴³ Eksi & Wood, “Right wing populism as gendered performance,” 2.; Teun A. van Dijk, “Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis,” in *Language and Peace*, ed. Christina Schäffner and Anita Wenden (Brookfield: Dartmouth Publication Company, 1995), 33.

⁴⁴ Eksi and Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance.”

⁴⁵ Eksi and Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance.”; Kathleen Starck and Birgit Sauer, “Political masculinities: Introduction,” in *A man’s world? Political masculinities in literature and culture*, ed. Kathleen Starck & Brigit Sauer (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).; Kathleen Starck and Russell Luyt, “Political masculinities, crisis tendencies, and social transition: Toward an understanding of change,” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 3 (2019).

populist leaders, where a cult of masculinity is built at the top of the power structure which creates a necessity for a strong, sometimes openly aggressive, masculine leader.

Since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, scholars have recognized a "remasculinization" of Russian domestic politics and in the state's international posturing and version of national security.⁴⁶ Issues of gender and nationalism are often utilized in "legitimizing the transition from one social system to another," and gender discourse has long played a significant role in the way that the Russian state and leadership construct national identity.⁴⁷

In the specific case of President Vladimir Putin, gender discourse and masculine imagery has been an explicit strategy of the Kremlin to legitimize both Putin and his regime as a defender of the Russian state and people, living inside and outside Russia.⁴⁸ The images of Putin are well known around the world: shirtless on a horse, surrounded by women declaring their love for him, shooting guns and hunting, and partaking in a plethora of athletic events. Vladimir Putin has effectively created what Eksi and Wood describe as "Janus-faced masculinity," where he is an "outsider-yet-insider and a bad-boy-yet-good-father."⁴⁹ Putin is simultaneously an everyman and unlike any other man. His form of masculinity is not just one of heightened superficial machismo performances, but a more diverse repertoire of behaviors that combine bullying, masculinity,

⁴⁶ Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, "The Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimization of Power Under Vladimir Putin," *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 2 (2014).

⁴⁷ Riabov and Riabova, "The Remasculinization of Russia," 25.

⁴⁸ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 201.

⁴⁹ Eksi and Wood, "Right-wing populism as gendered performance."

paternalism, and deeply conservative messaging.⁵⁰ Putin has been both overly aggressive abroad, and paternalistic and protective of the Russian people.

As part of this image, Putin has created a position for himself as the “savior of the nation for whom intermediate institutions are only a hinderance.”⁵¹ Putin’s reliance on nationalist rhetoric has meant establishing a strong state that carries the appearance of direct communication between the ruler and the ruled. Putin demonstrates his personal connection to the Russian people through radio programs and television broadcasts where he speaks directly to the people, omitting any intermediary institution. One example of this is the annual “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin” (*Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным*)⁵² These kinds of activities have legitimized the top-down breakdown of intermediate, mediating institutions between President Putin and the people.⁵³

Scholars such as Riabov and Riabova (2017) and Sperling (2015) argue that the “re-masculinization of Russia” is central to Putin’s political legitimacy and is largely the reason that Kremlin, and Putin himself, have remained popular with domestic audiences.⁵⁴ In contrast, Novitskaya (2017) argues that his specific brand of political masculinity is a reflection of “deeper anxieties and vulnerabilities that result in political

⁵⁰ Eksi and Wood, “Right wing populism as gendered performance,” 735.

⁵¹ Eksi and Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance,” 14.

⁵² Catherine Schuler, “Reinventing the Show Trial: Putin and Pussy Riot,” *The Drama Review* 57, no. 1(2015).

⁵³ Sean Cannady and Paul Kubicek, “Nationalism and legitimization for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014).; Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).; M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

⁵⁴ Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin.*; Riabov and Riabova, “The ‘Rape of Europe,’” 23

overcompensation.”⁵⁵ This research assumes that both of these understandings can be true at once. Clearly, Putin has crafted his image and masculine performance as a legitimization strategy since returning to power for the second time. This strategy has bled over from politics into Russian popular culture, playing a vital role in regard to “nationalism and how ‘the nation’ is constructed with the aid of ideas of masculinity and femininity.”⁵⁶ As Valerie Sperling argues, this kind of legitimization tactic is not unique to Russia, but is in fact a widespread, universal phenomenon: the use and abuse of the power of gender norms and sexualization as a means of political legitimation.⁵⁷ In this way, “the cultural framing of masculinity under patriarchy makes the assertion of masculinity a vehicle for power,” thereby enabling male political leaders to “assert their power over others who can be identified or characterized as traditionally feminine.”⁵⁸ This allows traditionally masculine leaders to rely on the use of gender discourse and norms, including “machismo, homophobia, and gay-baiting,” as a way to delegitimize their political adversaries, both domestic and foreign.⁵⁹

This strategy has been central to Putin’s domestic positioning, which relies on a traditional binary of masculinity and femininity, in which each sex has specific and distinct roles and non-heterosexual individuals are marginalized if not nonexistent in Russian society.⁶⁰ Putin has effectively combined gender discourse, as thinly veiled

⁵⁵ Novitskaya, “Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria.”

⁵⁶ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*.

⁵⁷ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*.

⁵⁸ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 3.

⁵⁹ Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 4.

⁶⁰ Eksi and Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance.”

xenophobia, with nationalism to embolden the latent populist sentiments in the general population against out-groups that do not fit into the new national identity. Putin often makes broad pronouncements about the “real Russians” who are depicted as brave and masculine, contrasting them with those who are cowardly and emasculated (i.e. feminine or semi-feminine).⁶¹ Sexual and gender minorities in particular have become an outgroup that the Kremlin depicts as foreign, as not emerging from Russia, but as being corrupted and immortalized by the West as a way to weaken Russia from within. This allows the Kremlin to not just discriminate against sexual and gender minorities, but to depict them as a threat to national security.

The clearest example of this the so-called ‘gay propaganda’ law. In 2013, the national legislature dominated by United Russia passed the law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values,” which bans “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” in the presence of minors – “a reference universally understood to mean a ban on providing children with access to information about the lives of LGBT people.”⁶² Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen argues that Putin relies on non-heterosexual individuals to mobilize against in order to legitimize his own heavy hand.⁶³ Similarly, Fierstein (2013) describes this as a scapegoating strategy of “making-you-visible-so-we-could-hate-you,” and

⁶¹ Eksi and Wood, “Right-wing populism as gendered performance,” 14.

⁶² RFE/RL, “‘A Living Hell’: Russia’s ‘Propaganda’ Law Damaging LGBT Youth, HRW Finds,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-gay-propaganda-law-rights/29651416.html>.

⁶³ Alexandra Novitskaya, “Patriotism, sentiment and male hysteria: Putin’s masculinity politics and the persecution of non-heterosexual Russians,” *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* (2019).; Harvey Fierstein, “Russia’s Anti-Gay Crackdown,” *New York Times*, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/opinion/russias-anti-gay-crackdown.html>.

argues that Russian leadership's attack on non-heterosexual citizens is an attempt to distract and divide the citizenry's attention from the real problems of corruption and economic woes. Most importantly though, Putin's attack on sexual and gender minorities as a Western phenomenon allows the Kremlin to have a constant enemy conspiring to undermine the country. As a result, the Kremlin has described most democratic opposition groups, in the entire post-Soviet space, as being feminine, gay, and funded by the West.⁶⁴

Putin's performative masculinity has transformed Russian foreign policy in recent years, as Russia's foreign policy is increasingly categorized as 'masculine' or 'aggressive.' This has especially been the case when considering Russia's posturing towards NATO and the Ukraine crisis.⁶⁵ This strategy has allowed the Kremlin to weaponize gender norms as a way to weaken the legitimacy of the West in the eyes of both Russian domestic audiences and foreign audiences that believe in a return to a traditional gender and family order. In Ukraine, gender discourse has encouraged the integration of the "true Slavic family," juxtaposing it with the immoral practices of Europe.⁶⁶ At the same time, Putin's overreliance on so-called Western 'gender ideologies' can be understood as a reflection of his own anxiety and insecurity on the international stage as he attempts to rebuild Russia to the global power that the Soviet Union was.

⁶⁴ Novitskaya, "Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria," 2.

⁶⁵ Ammon Cheskin, "Russian soft power in Ukraine: A structural perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 50, no. 4 (2017).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Propaganda, Modern Hybrid Warfare, and Heuristics

PROPAGANDA

Propaganda has traditionally been viewed as a psychological weapon meant to influence the views of a targeted population in order to benefit the propagandist in some way—a policy change at a governmental level or a behavioral or cognitive shift on societal or individual levels. Jowett and O’Donnell define propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate conditions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁶⁷ In his book *Influence: The Psychology of Perception*, Robert Cialdini outlines six universal principles of influence: 1) reciprocation; 2) commitment and consistency, 3) social proof, 4) liking, 5) authority, and 6) scarcity.⁶⁸ Pratkanis and Turner emphasize the use of cognitive tools and exploitation of cognitive biases to effect change, defining propaganda as “attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate thought by playing on prejudices and emotions.”⁶⁹

In recent years, academics have begun to define a form of “new propaganda” that is not only meant to “alter people’s views in support of certain policies, but to induce them into a state of self-defeating and endemic skepticism by undermining the very criteria on the basis of which they develop their cognitive abilities to make sense,

⁶⁷ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, “Propaganda and Persuasion (Sage Publications: 2006), 215.

⁶⁸ Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (HarperCollins, 2007).

⁶⁹ Anthony R. Pratkanis and Marlene E. Turker, “Persuasion and Democracy: Strategies for Increasing Deliberative Participation and Enacting Social Change,” *Journal of Social Issues* 52, no. 1 (1996), 190.

interpret, and shape social reality.”⁷⁰ This “new propaganda” consists largely of online information influence operations in the form of mis- or disinformation emerging from both politically and financially motivated actors. Constantly emerging and evolving digital media platforms have influenced the form and function of disinformation in the 21st century and have led to an increasingly democratized and decentralized propaganda machine, effecting its creation and dissemination at all levels. The nature of this system is instrumental in the formation of so-called Russian hybrid warfare.

MODERN HYBRID WARFARE, SOVIET ACTIVE MEASURES, AND DISINFORMATION

Russian hybrid warfare has dominated international discourse and academic study of Russia’s role on the world stage since 2014, following the Russian invasion of Crimea and increasing notoriety of Russian information operations in Ukraine.⁷¹ Today, the resurgence of modern political warfare in the Russian toolkit should be understood as a legacy and direct continuation these Imperial Era operations and Soviet active measures (*активные мероприятия*). Soviet active measures included actions designed to “deceive the target (foreign governmental and non-governmental elites or mass audiences), and to

⁷⁰ Corneliu Bjola and Krysianna Papadakis, “Digital propaganda, counterpublics, and the disruption of the sphere: the Finnish approach to building digital resilience,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2019).

⁷¹ Sam Sokol, “Russian Disinformation Distorted Reality in Ukraine. Americans Should Take Note,” *Foreign Policy*, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/02/russian-disinformation-distorted-reality-in-ukraine-americans-should-take-note-putin-mueller-elections-antisemitism/>; Ulises A. Mejias and Nikolai E. Vokuev, “Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine,” *Media Culture and Society* 39, no. 7 (2017).

distort the target's perceptions of reality to affect decisions that serve Soviet interests.”⁷²

Historically, active measures were both covert and overt and included:

- *Maskirovka* – military deception in its totality;
- *Provokatsiya* – the use of provocations;
- *Proniknoveniye* – penetration;
- *Fabrikatsiya* – fabrication and forced documents;
- *Agent vliyaniya* – agents of influence;
- *Konspiratsiya* – clandestine work;
- *Dezinformatsiya* – disinformation;
- *Mokryye delo* – “wet jobs” such as assassinations, eliminations, and kidnappings;
- *Kombinatsiya* – a combination of operative methods to achieve a given objective.

According to Thomas Rid, “active measures are contradictory: they are covert operations designed to achieve overt influence, secret devices deployed in public debates, carefully hidden yet visible in plain sight.”⁷³ Active measures were not “spontaneous lies by politicians,” but the “methodical output of large bureaucracies.”⁷⁴ They were designed to produce a specific result, often the weakening of an adversary by stoking existing divisions within their society, worsening ethnic strife, or undermining trust in institutions among a specific subset of a population.⁷⁵ Active measures, especially in the form of

⁷² U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns Panel I*, 115th Congress, 1st session, March 30, 2017.

⁷³ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: A Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2020), 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Rid, *Active Measures*.

disinformation, can be designed to fulfill a broad range of objectives, from a single, narrow and specific political objective to a broad campaign meant to slowly erode the legitimacy of a government in the eyes of its people.

Similarly, the more modern term ‘hybrid warfare’ combines both kinetic and non-kinetic activities, ranging from traditional covert action such as propaganda, information influence activities, political and economic activities, and sabotage, to paramilitary and military intervention.⁷⁶ Hybrid threats present the “perfect conundrum” because they are designed to appear as a “random sequence of improvisations,” when in fact they are quite strategic in nature.⁷⁷ Hybrid tactics can indeed be opportunistic in nature and can appear to be one-off events; however, Russian hybrid tactics are actually part of a larger foreign policy and geopolitical strategy.⁷⁸ Hybrid warfare tactics are meant to target a wide range of vulnerabilities across society in non-traditional ways, exploiting ambiguity, creativity, and conventional definitions of warfare in order to avoid detection and response thresholds.⁷⁹

The West’s understanding of hybrid tactics is defined by the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine. This doctrine emerged after General Valery Gerasimov published an article in

⁷⁶ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 257.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ng and Rumer, “The West Fears Russia’s Hybrid Warfare. They’re Missing the Bigger Picture,” *Carnegie Endowment*, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/03/west-fears-russia-s-hybrid-warfare.-they-re-missing-bigger-picture-pub-79412>; Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, “MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project: Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” *Multinational Capability Development Campaign*, 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf.

⁷⁹ Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, “MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project: Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” *Multinational Capability Development Campaign*, 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf.

1999 titled “*The Value of Science is in the Foresight*” in the relatively obscure Russian journal *Military-Industrial Kurier*.⁸⁰ Gerasimov described a theory of total and constant war, a “new, whole-of-government-style of warfare—one that transcends boundaries between peace- and wartime, best described as a fusion of various elements of soft and hard power across various domains.”⁸¹ Since this publication, Western policymakers and academics have classified hybrid warfare as a “distinct, special form of warfare... reforc[ing] the perception that Russian foreign policy is entering a new chapter of bold and risky adventurism, guided by the Gerasimov doctrine.”⁸² However, this understanding is not sufficient. The Gerasimov Doctrine is a strategy and “operational concept,” rather than the “driver of Russian foreign policy.”⁸³ The actual driving ideology of the Russian military stems from the Primakov Doctrine, named after former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. This worldview strives for a truly multipolar world in which Russia is viewed as a major power rather than a unipolar world dominated by the United States. The Primakov Doctrine calls for resistance to NATO and Western expansion, while advocating Eurasian integration, and Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space.⁸⁴ Hybrid warfare, as defined by the Gerasimov Doctrine, is simply a means to this end.

⁸⁰ Molly McKew, “The Gerasimov Doctrine,” Politico, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538>.

⁸¹ Eugene Rumer, “The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine,” Carnegie Endowment, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>; Nicole Ng and Eugene Rumer, “The West Fears Russia’s Hybrid Warfare. They’re Missing the Bigger Picture,” Carnegie Endowment, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/03/west-fears-russia-s-hybrid-warfare.-they-re-missing-bigger-picture-pub-79412>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Rumer, “The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Although the vocabulary of hybrid warfare has been adopted widely by governmental and international organizations, academics and policymakers have debated the meaning of the term. Some, such as Christopher Paul, argue that concepts such as ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘gray zone’ warfare are simultaneously too “insufficiently distinct... covering too many situations that are too different,” and as highlighting differences that are not actually significant.⁸⁵ It is true that hybrid warfare seems like an impossibly broad term, but when considered as a legacy of active measures, it becomes a bit clearer. As described above, Soviet active measures were extremely broad in their instrumentation, and hybrid warfare is a revitalization of those very operational tactics. In our increasingly digital age, one kind of active measure is particularly useful as a field equalizer due to its relatively cheap yet effective and plausibly deniable nature: disinformation.

According to Bitman, disinformation is a “carefully construed false message leaked into an opponent’s communication system to deceive the decision-making elite or the public.”⁸⁶ To be successful, he argues, “every disinformation message must at least partially correspond to reality or generally accepted views.”⁸⁷ Disinformation is a purposeful and strategic attempt to advance a certain policy goal in a covert or plausibly deniable manner. It is often designed to appeal to human emotions in order to achieve influence and persuasion.

⁸⁵ Christopher Paul, “Confessions of a Hybrid Warfare Skeptic,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2016, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/confessions-of-a-hybrid-warfare-skeptic>.

⁸⁶ Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation* (Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, 1985), pg. 49.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

In the emerging field of disinformation studies, there are three distinct categories of academic scholarship. According to Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen (2018), the first centers upon strategic narratives and disinformation discourses developed by propagandists. The second category of academic scholarship focuses on the specific techniques used by the propagandists and their allies to spread disinformation: bots, botnets, trolls, hacking and smear campaigns, forgeries, etc. The third category, including Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen, focuses on the role of citizens in the spread of disinformation and misinformation online.⁸⁸ While these schools of thought often overlap, my research best fits within the analysis of strategic narratives utilized by propagandists. In this thesis, I will focus on narratives utilized by the Kremlin and Kremlin allies. In addition, I analyze the cognitive and emotional foundations behind a particular kind of narratives spread among citizens. By focusing on this aspect, this research seeks to better allow policymakers and security practitioners to recognize and address narratives that could be most potent and effective in spurring behavioral or cognitive change in a targeted population.

HEURISTICS AND COGNITIVE BIASES

Although most forms of propaganda, and disinformation in particular, exploit biases and shortcomings in human cognition, sexuality and gender-based narratives rely extensively on heuristics because the content is so emotionally charged and connected to ideas of culture, religion, and family. Sexuality and gender-based narratives are a useful

⁸⁸ Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, Rebecca Adler-Nisse, “State media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 979-980.

cognitive tool for the Kremlin in its attempt to increase anti-Western sentiment and legitimize the Kremlin's specific worldview. These narratives are cognitive munitions which seek to change perception and cognition and modify behavior of targeted populations by exploiting heuristics, the cognitive shortcuts and problem-solving strategies that streamline human decision-making. Heuristics, however, create "blind spots" in the ways that human respond to information encountered, especially if that information has negative content or consequences.⁸⁹ Cognitive biases, then, are "mental errors" caused by heuristics, "our simplified information processing strategies."⁹⁰ Inherently, human cognition has fundamental errors that are ripe for exploitation by propagandists. Sexuality and gender-based narratives in disinformation are prime examples of the way that emotional content, inciting fear, anger, disgust, etc., can limit targeted population's ability to think critically about the information they encounter. Just a few of the cognitive biases that the Kremlin utilizes in information operations includes anchoring, priming, and selective perception (for a full list, see Figure 1).⁹¹

⁸⁹ Judith Rosenbaum and Jennifer Bonnet, "Looking inward in an era of 'fake news:' Addressing cognitive bias," *Young Leaders of America Initiative*, <https://ylai.state.gov/looking-inward-in-an-era-of-fake-news-addressing-cognitive-bias/>

⁹⁰ CIA, "What are Cognitive Biases?" 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/art12.html>

⁹¹ Wikimedia, "Cognitive Biases Codex,"

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ce/Cognitive_Bias_Codex_With_Definitions%2C_an_Extension_of_the_work_of_John_Manoojian_by_Brian_Morrisette.jpg

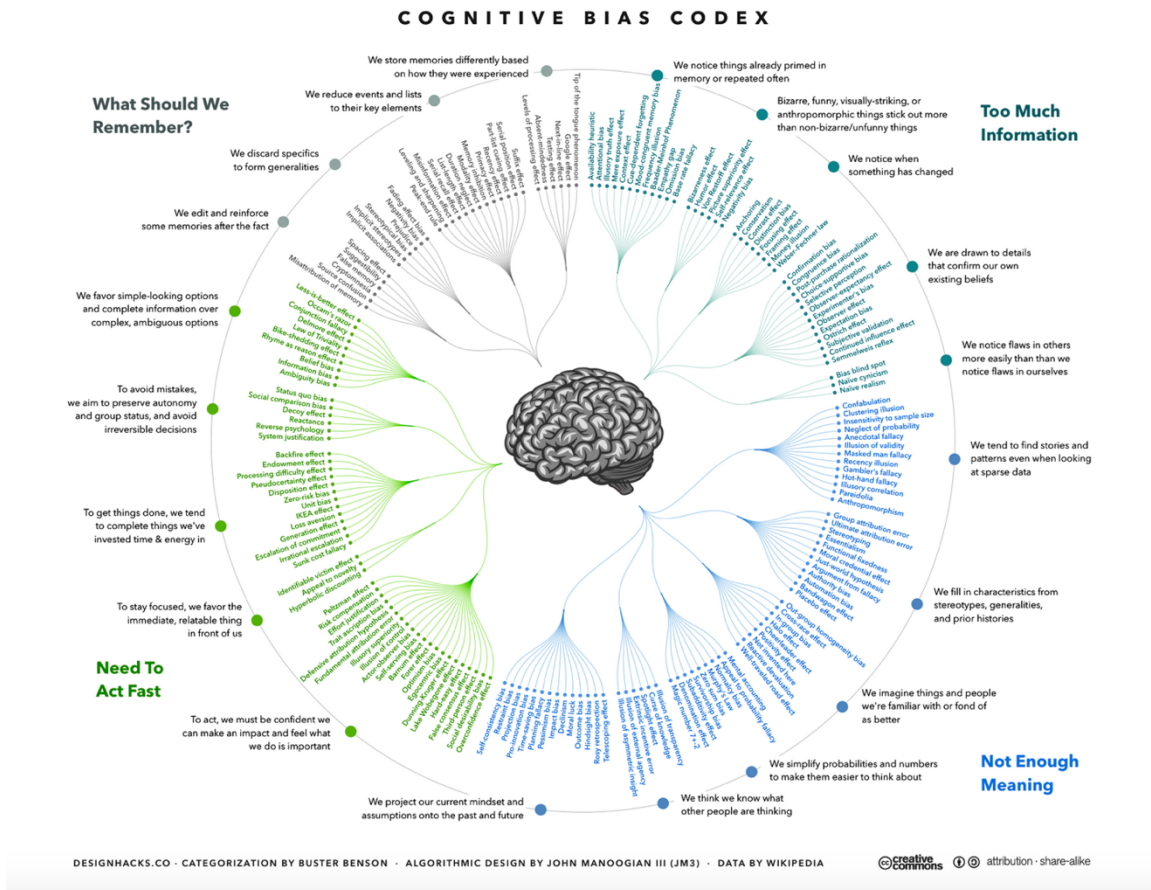


Figure 1: Cognitive Bias Codex

Anchoring is a cognitive bias where an individual relies on one piece of initial information to make decisions. Sexuality and gender-based narratives in disinformation rely heavily on this cognitive cue. With anchoring bias, the first piece of news we read about an event serves as an ‘anchor’ with which we judge other pieces of information we

encounter.⁹² People tend to consider the first piece of information they receive as the most reliable. Therefore, propagandists work hard to ensure that their false or misleading information is the first information encountered, and that it is so emotionally charged, that it guides the audiences thinking about the next information encountered. Sexuality and gender-based narratives thrive on emotions such as fear, anger, disgust, and hostility, and false headlines and stories that exploit these emotions are more likely to be shared on social media, amplifying the message and creating more instances for anchoring bias to take hold.⁹³ Semantic priming is related to anchoring bias, but on a larger scale. Priming works by activating an association or memory right before another piece of information is introduced, influencing how someone responds to the given information. This technique, common in advertising, is also common in disinformation: the introduction of one stimulus influences how people respond to subsequent stimuli. This is a very common technique in sexuality and gender-based disinformation, as will be evident in further analysis.

Rumor Theory and Conspiracy

Rumors are a collective effort on behalf of a group or a subgroup to make sense of or explain some uncertain or ambiguous event with limited information. This thesis primarily utilizes the work of DiFonzo and Bordia, who define rumors as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of

⁹² Kahneman, *Thinking Fast, and Slow*.

⁹³ Lars Kai Hansen, et al., “Good Friends, Bad News – Affect and Virality in Twitter” *Future Information Technology* 185 (2011).

ambiguity, anger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk.”⁹⁴ This definition focuses on the contexts in which rumors flourish and the content of rumor statements. According to most basic rumor theory, there are three core motivations that drive people to rumor discussions: 1) rumors allow people to cope with uncertain and threatening circumstances; 2) rumors allow people to build relationships with others in their group; and 3) rumors can assist in self-enhancement, creative positive emotions in individuals or groups about themselves.⁹⁵ According to DiFonzo & Bordia, the first motivation, to give explanation and bring sense to uncertain, ambiguous, or potentially threatening events, has traditionally been believed to be the most common function of rumors.

According to this understanding, rumors arise when there is an information gap or ambiguity where the meaning or significance of an event is unclear. According to sociologist Tomotsu Shibutani (1966), when “formal information is absent, people compensate by informally interpreting the situation,” in order to fulfill a basic human core motivation: to make sense and understand.⁹⁶ Rosnow (1974) and DiFonzo & Bordia (1998) describe the significance of the group in crafting informal understanding through rumor. According to Rosnow, “rumor discussion is a process of group interpretation,

⁹⁴ Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2007).

⁹⁵ Gary Alan Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath, *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 81.

⁹⁶ DiFonzo and Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 13-14; Tomotsu Shibutani, *Improvised news: A sociological study of rumor* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1966).; Raymond Bauer and David Gleicher, “Word of mouth communication in the Soviet Union,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 17 (1953): 297-310.; Ralph H. Turner & Lewis Killian, *Collective behavior* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).; Susan Fiske, *Social beings: A core motives approach to social psychology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2004).

[and] rumor is a product of that process.”⁹⁷ Although norms for verification of rumors and their sources are typically more relaxed, the information must still “pass some group norm of plausibility.”⁹⁸ When group standards of plausibility are high, rumor discussions function more like fact finding. When group standards of plausibility are low, rumor discussions appear more like panic.⁹⁹ As DiFonzo and Bordia state, though “rumor may also fulfill other functions such as entertainment, wish fulfillment, alliance making and maintenance, and enforcement of communal norms, these are secondary.”¹⁰⁰

Much of the traditional literature on rumor dissemination has focused on the “fact-finding motivation” that stems from uncertainty or ambiguity.¹⁰¹ This traditional research on rumors neglects an important subtype of rumors: those that are meant to *increase* social uncertainty. These kinds of rumors are especially common in the disinformation cases found in my sample of pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-sponsored disinformation campaigns that target Western audiences. This kind of rumor will be discussed at length in this analysis because rumors that are designed to induce confusion or chaos are often characterized by sexual violence, cultural decay, and other fear-based narratives. Furthermore, traditional definitions of rumor put natural community transmission at the center, defining rumor most often as a natural phenomenon that occurs when people are searching for answers among ambiguity. In contrast,

⁹⁷ DiFonzo & Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 14; Ralph L. Rosnow, “On rumor,” *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 3 (1974): 26-38.; Nicholas DiFonzo & Prashant Bordia, “A tale of two corporations: Managing uncertainty during organizational change,” Special Issue: Employee Communications 37, no. 3-4 (1998).

⁹⁸ DiFonzo & Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 14, 15.

⁹⁹ DiFonzo & Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ DiFonzo & Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 15.

¹⁰¹ Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath, *Rumor Mills*, 89.

disinformation is often the purposeful implantation of rumor into a population. This means that not all rumors are natural and spontaneous in their creation. However, the conventional definition of rumor and rumor theory are still applicable to rumors created by propagandists because planted information is still adapted on a local level and disinformation spreads in a similar way to rumors: through information cascades.¹⁰² Information cascades occur when a group of ‘early believers,’ often called bellwethers, believe something that influences others to follow suit. Rumors typically spread because people tend to believe what those around them believe. Today, these cascades are best seen on social media, especially as platform algorithms increase polarization of content on feeds.¹⁰³

Also significant to this study is the “crisis rumor,” which is endemic in situations in which there is a dearth of or ambiguity about information about an important topic.¹⁰⁴ The Kremlin’s propaganda machine aims to create a sense of constant crisis among both foreign and domestic populations, creating in effect a culture ripe for crisis rumors that can be exploited for political gain. Timothy Snyder coins this a “politics of eternity,” where Russian leadership has placed the country at the “center of a circle of eternal victimhood” through a “continuous sense of crisis.”¹⁰⁵ This kind of identity of crisis often gives rise to conspiratorial thinking. De Benoist suggests that “conspiracy theories arise from human aversion to uncertainty,” so if “everything can be explained as the outcome

¹⁰² Cass Sunstein, *Risk and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ DiFonzo and Bordia, *Rumor Psychology*, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, and America* (New York: Crown Publishing Company, 2018).

of the human desires of powerful actors, then this leaves less of a role for random, unpredictable change.”¹⁰⁶ Fenster argues that conspiracy theory “operates broadly as a political and cultural practice that longs for a perfectly transparent, accessible democracy.”¹⁰⁷ Conspiracy theory “preys on believers’ weakness, including their excessive distrust or cynicism about powerful institutions.”¹⁰⁸ Fenster, as well as Jesse Walker, argue that conspiracy theories are not necessarily the insidious force that they are oft portrayed as. Rather, they are “an integral aspect of American, and perhaps modern and postmodern, life.”¹⁰⁹ This diverges from the traditional view, most known from Richard Hofstadter’s the “paranoid style in American politics,” which has dominated academic discourse for decades. Hofstadter’s article states that the “paranoid style” “is the preferred style only of minority movements.”¹¹⁰

Conspiracy theories are often an integral feature of disinformation campaigns, though they require a more thorough analysis. Conspiracy theories are a larger construction, with detailed, fabricated plans, rather than a one-off false news story. Conspiracy theories are integral to understanding global populist movements and populist leaders on the far-right, as contemporary movements in the West that are aligned with and find support from the Kremlin. The Russian state has a long history of exploiting conspiratorial thinking as a political tool, and Putin’s Russia is no exception. The legacies

¹⁰⁶ Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath, *Rumor Mills*, 83.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 2008), ix.

¹⁰⁸ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (Harper Collins: 2013), 9.

of Imperial and Soviet Russia, where “constant purges of enemies and spy battles – both real and fictional” – were part of everyday life, have contributed to the spread of conspiracy fears among the general population.¹¹¹ The “pervasive image of an internal, conspiring enemy” has had a deep effect on Russian national identity that is evident in common assumptions today that negative socio-economic or political events are the result of conspiracy.¹¹² As Ilya Yablokov argues, “two hundred years of conspiracy mythmaking have been decisive in shaping the notion that the West is the ultimate Enemy. The emergence and proliferation of anti-Western attitudes in the Post-Soviet Era have, then, a solid and well-developed foundation.”¹¹³

In modern Russia, Aleksander Dugin has become a critical source of anti-Western conspiratorial thinking. He contends that Russia is the “Christian country which will save the world from Apocalypse” and the “axis of Eurasian civilization.”¹¹⁴ However, he has also been instrumental in the creation of a concept of an undifferentiated West – the Anglo-Saxon, Western world as a collective entity that attempts to create a New World Order at the expense of Russia.¹¹⁵ The notion of the collective West as a “conspiring other” has been instrumental in Russian state-making since the mid-2000s, and the gender-discourse emerging from the Kremlin has been a key feature of the Kremlin’s attempt to legitimize heavy-handed rule and the idea of “sovereign democracy.”¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 23.

¹¹² Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 23.

¹¹³ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 23.

¹¹⁴ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 34.

¹¹⁵ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*.

¹¹⁶ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 81.

Defined by Vladislav Surkov, “sovereign democracy” became a one of the central “discursive instruments invented by the Kremlin to insulate Russian from democratization and to facilitate an authoritarian backlash in the 2000s.”¹¹⁷ However, the conception of the idea of ‘sovereign democracy’ also came to depend on the Kremlin’s creation an weaponization of ‘gender ideology,’ especially as Putin has begun to increasingly emphasize Russia’s role as the protector of ‘traditional values,’ family, and Christianity. Of course, “the tendency to define a country’s place in the contemporary world by counter-posing gender norms” is not unique to Russia; however, Putin’s Russia has become known for the promotion of a “particularly sexualized form of nationalism” in which Russian leadership has “used a norms- and values-based argument” to frame the imposition of foreign ‘gender ideologies’ into the country by conspiring others.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The analysis in this thesis is primarily conducted through a narrative discourse lens, utilizing the framework set out in *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamic Extremism, and the Struggle for Strategic Influence*, by Bernardi et al. (2012). By utilizing narrative theory, each publication that is marred by disinformation can be treated as “micro-story” that can be sorted into “rumor families” and “rumor mosaics.” Rumor families are clusters of disinformation micro-stories that share a common subject or focus

¹¹⁷ Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 81.

and can be traced to a common antecedent.”¹¹⁸ Rumors mosaics are clusters of “complementary” pieces of disinformation that “collectively and collaboratively reinforce a common narrative.”¹¹⁹ Some aspects of rumor mosaics may explicitly or implicitly vertically integrate with common metanarratives. This vertical integration, defined by Betz as “vertical narrative coherence,” “rests largely on the ability to link narratives across a vertical spectrum from the cultural eschatological at the top to the local or individual at the bottom.”¹²⁰ The “quality and persuasiveness” of a disinformation micro-story “inheres from being able to logically connect” through a series of narratives vertically.¹²¹ These vertically aligned narratives then produce a metanarrative, which are deeply embedded broad ‘truths’ that typify a set of cultural beliefs. Examples of common metanarratives in the Russian discourse space include:

- Moscow as the Third Rome, which defines a unique “messianic role” for Russia in world history.¹²²
- Russia as a ‘besieged fortress,’ under constant threat from outside enemies that are determined to use Russia as a scapegoat in the event of world crisis, creating a constant sense of crisis among citizens and an identity of eternal victimhood.¹²³
- Russia as the center of the Slavic universe.

¹¹⁸ Bernardi, et al., *Narrative Landmines*, 170.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ David Betz, “The virtual dimension of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (December 2008): 515.

¹²¹ Betz, “The virtual dimension,” 522.

¹²² Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*, 97-98.

¹²³ Yablokov, “*Fortress Russia*,” 31.

- Russia as the torchbearer of a particular brand of non-Western enlightenment and social progress, a merging of both Soviet and Imperial Russian imagery.
- The collective West as a conspiratorial and insidious “Other,” that depicts the West as a collective entity that is ambiguously conspiring to “undermine the progress of the Russian nation towards its glorious future.” This narrative has been used to facilitate social cohesion and oppress opposition domestically.¹²⁴
- The Kremlin as a global underdog, positioning according to the ideas of populist theory of power.
- The uniqueness of Russia and of the Russian soul (*русская душа*), with a unique destiny to bridge Europe and Asia.

Utilizing this narrative framework, I will critically interpret the disinformation micro-stories that make up my sample. In the sample, I detected seven metanarratives defined by 25 narratives that vertically integrate to convey one singular message: that the West is a decaying power that has become ripe with immorality and sexual deviance because of its straying from traditional, conservative values defined by the worldview of the Kremlin. The stories in my sample range from targeting LGBTQ+ individuals in Western Europe, to NATO soldiers in Lithuania, to migrants from the Middle East in Europe. However, all of these seemingly unrelated stories vertically integrate to support the same worldview.

124 Yablokov, *Fortress Russia*.

The disinformation micro-stories in my sample are diverse and open-ended, and the five theoretical underpinnings I will utilize in this analysis are necessary for gaining adequate understanding of this complex phenomenon. The sample gathered for this analysis contains stories that are simple examples of disinformation to broad conspiracy theories and everything in between, requiring an understanding of the history of Soviet active measures, propaganda and disinformation, and classical rumor theory. The content of the stories I have collected require a deep understanding of gender discourse and political masculinity in Russia under Vladimir Putin, and the framework applied to the sample for analysis leans on narrative theory and critical discourse analysis.

METHODS

This thesis primarily utilizes narrative theory derived from Bernardi et al.'s *Narrative Landmines* to answer three questions: 1) What is the role and functionality of sexuality and gender-based narratives within the larger body of contemporary pro-Russian and Russian disinformation from 2015-2019?; 2) What are the intended effects of targeted demographics' consumption of sexuality and gender-based narratives?; 3) Are the stories contained in these narratives heterogeneous or do they comply with a common prototype?

To analyze Russian and pro-Russian disinformation that focuses on sexuality and gender-based narratives, from 2015 to present, I utilized the *EU vs. Disinfo* database, a project managed by the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force.¹²⁵ The project was established in 2015 to “better forecast, address, and respond to the Russian Federation’s ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union, its Member States, and countries in the shared neighborhood.”¹²⁶ *EU vs. Disinfo*'s core objective is to increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations in order to help European citizens develop societal resilience

¹²⁵ Although I relied on the *EU vs. Disinfo* database, I have several misgivings regarding the means of collection, classification, and disapproval process of stories included in the database. In particular, too many opinion pieces or blog posts are classified as disinformation and are presented as news. In addition, outlets are all treated as pro-Kremlin, or Kremlin sponsored outlets, without serious discussion as to their independence. I tried my best to avoid including opinion pieces in the sample I collected from the database. Despite these critiques, the *EU vs. Disinfo* database is the most accessible and user-friendly database of already proven disinformation.

¹²⁶ *EU vs. Disinfo*, “About,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

against disinformation and media manipulation.¹²⁷ To date, the database houses 8,820 disinformation cases in 31 languages, as well as disproofs for each story, similar to fact-checking.

Because the sample for this analysis came from already disproven stories in the *EU vs. Disinfo* database, disproving the information was not an aspect of this thesis. In order to find cases useful for this analysis, I conducted keyword searches within the EU vs. Disinfo database for stories published from January 2015 to March 2020. Keywords used include:

- European values
- Moral decay/moral decline
- Gayropa
- Western values
- Family values
- EU disintegration
- Chaos
- Anglo-saxon
- Christianity/Christian values
- Migrant
- Sexual assault/sexual violence
- Semi-men
- LGBT

Because of the relatively niche content matter and the design of the disinformation micro-stories in my sample, the geographic scope of this thesis is broad.

This thesis then presents a two-fold task. First, I operationalize the concepts in the disinformation micro-stories contained in my sample by conducting a quantitative

¹²⁷ EU vs. Disinfo, "About," <https://euvdisinfo.eu/about/>

analysis of certain characteristics in the sample. This coding schema includes the following elements:

- Date of Publication
- Metanarrative detected
- Narrative detected
- Primary Motivation
- Secondary Motivation
- Target Audience
- Language
- Primary Institutional-Level Target
- Secondary Institutional-Level Target
- Primary Country-Level Target
- Secondary Country-Level Target
- Primary Individual Target
- Secondary Individual Target
- Source of Authority

Second, I analyze the actual content of the narratives in my sample with the five theoretical frameworks described above. In order to better understand the content of the stories in my sample, I deconstructed each to a few characteristics to sort them into 7 metanarratives and 25 narratives based on the model presented by Bernardi et al. The 7 metanarratives and corresponding 25 narratives detected in the sample include:

- 1) Western perversion of traditional morals and resulting collapse
 - Collapse of traditional values in the West
 - Abandonment of Christianity in the West
 - Extreme sexual deviance in the West
 - Extreme adolescent empowerment
 - The disintegration of the family unit in the West

- 2) Disintegration of Traditional Gender Roles in the West
 - The rise of “semi-men” in Europe
 - Rising imperial “gay dictatorship” in Europe
 - There exist no gender differences in the West
 - Women are masculinized in the West
 - Dictatorial feminism
- 3) Western subversion via “gender-based ideology”
 - Homosexuality is forced by Western on the Russian sphere of influence
 - Weaponization of “gender-based ideology” by non-governmental organizations and philanthropic individuals
 - Weaponization of “gender-based ideology” by governmental institutions
 - Legal enforcement of “gender-based ideology” by international institutions
 - Western & LGBTQ+ plus funding of pro-Western opposition groups in Russia and Eastern Europe
- 4) Sexual predation by an ‘Other’
 - Muslim men as perpetrators of sexual violence in the EU
 - Ukrainian men as perpetrators of sexual violence
 - NATO servicemembers are perpetrators of sexual violence
 - Jewish men as perpetrators of sexual violence
- 5) Complicity of western elites, media, and judicial systems

- Impunity in western judicial systems for sexual and gender-based violence committed by Muslim men
 - Willful Western media blindness to sexual and gender-based violence committed by Muslim men
 - Western elites and governments disregard sexual and gender-based violence committed by Muslim men
- 6) Extreme tolerance in the West
- Extreme levels of tolerance in the West as a result of a skewed understanding of reality
- 7) Russia as the savior of traditional Christendom
- Russia as the savior of traditional, Christian values as Europe flails

Although these categories are non-exhaustive and relatively subjective, there are characteristics of each that separate them from another. These categories are explained in detail in the next section.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER-BASED NARRATIVES:

In the disinformation I analyzed, seven metanarratives emerged as the themes most prevalent in the sample. These seven metanarratives can be categorized into two even broader themes. The first contains the stories that allege a collapse of traditional religious, family, and gender values in the West. This theme contains four metanarratives: 1) Western perversion of traditional morals and resulting collapse; 2) disintegration of traditional gender roles in the West; and 3) Western subversion via “gender-based ideologies,” and 4) Russia as the savior of traditional Christendom. The second major theme is centered upon alleged sexual violence in European countries and the reactions of those states’ governments, media, police, judiciary, and citizens. This theme contains three metanarratives: 1) Sexual predation by an ‘Other;’ 2) Complicity of Western elites, media, and judiciary; and 3) Radical tolerance in the West. Western perversion of traditional morals & resulting collapse

1. Western perversion of traditional morals and resulting collapse
2. Disintegration of traditional gender norms in the West
3. Sexual predation by an ‘Other’
4. Complicity of Western elites, media, and judicial systems
5. Extreme tolerance in the West
6. Russia as the savior of traditional Christendom

This list of metanarratives is not exhaustive, and each metanarrative contains several rumor families that describe similar events or events with the same antecedent. However, they can fit into different rumor mosaics depending on the focus of the story.

Each narrative vertically integrates to support one another, meaning that their boundaries are somewhat fluid.

However, each metanarrative is distinct and is defined by certain characteristics that are described below. All of the metanarratives are meant to convey an ultimate message: that the West, led by the EU and Western military institutions, brings moral perversion in the form of violence and sexual vices to populations that embrace the principles of liberalism, tolerance, and multiculturalism.

Western Perversion of Traditional Morals and Resulting Collapse:

This metanarrative centers around these depictions of purportedly declining European societies due to an abandonment of traditional cultural and religious orders. Accusations of sexual deviancy, a rejection of the family unit, an overall decline of morality, and an overall Western “decadence” are the most common characteristics in stories that fall into this narrative family. In 2013, Putin spoke at the Valdai Discussion Club, a forum that “aims to promote dialogue of Russian and international intellectual elites” as an alternative to Western platforms, stating that “the Euro-Atlantic countries were rejecting their roots, including that Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization.”¹²⁸ Consistent with this message, disinformation stories from this metanarrative range from the broad accusations of an abandonment of traditional values

¹²⁸ Peter Rutland, “The Pussy Riot Affair: Gender and National Identity in Putin’s Russia.” *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 4 (July 2014).; Article 7

and of decay in morality,¹²⁹ to allegations of sexual deviancy, with descriptions of the legalization of bestiality and pedophilia, as well as hypersexualization in the West.¹³⁰ In addition, there are descriptions of the material decadence of the West, including descriptions of Westerners as “worshipping money,” “amorphous consumers,” and as a “cult of freedom at any cost.”¹³¹ Finally, this metanarrative contains stories that focus on the abandonment of Christianity in Europe. Prevalent in this metanarrative are stories that focus on the West’s, and especially of the European Union’s, “abandonment of Christianity.”¹³² These kinds of stories include rumors of marginalization of Christians in European Union policy,¹³³ a genocide of Christians in Europe,¹³⁴ and conspiracy theories about Europe’s increasing distance from Christianity causing the fire at Notre Dame.¹³⁵

Depictions of Western Europe as morally decadent or sexually deviant are not new to modern Kremlin-sponsored disinformation. Rather, these kinds of narratives have a long academic history among Slavophiles. Imagery of a “Decadent West” and moral superiority of the Russian cultural understanding of family and gender were popular in Imperial Russia as well as the Soviet Union.¹³⁶

¹²⁹ Article 1; Article 2.

¹³⁰ Article 3; Article 4.

¹³¹ Article 5; Article 6.

¹³² Article 8.

¹³³ Article 9.

¹³⁴ Article 10.

¹³⁵ Article 11; Article 12; Article 13; Article 14.

¹³⁶ Article 14.

Disintegration of Traditional Gender Norms in the West

This metanarrative expands on the now well-known “gayropa” trope created and utilized by Russian authorities as a disparaging reference to Europe that signifies both “Russia’s lack of acceptance towards LGBTQ+ people and to distinguish between the values of East and West, particularly when it comes to the rights of sexual minorities.”¹³⁷ The term “gayropa” has been utilized as a kind of cognitive device in Russian media as a catchall term for the what the Kremlin sees as an abandonment of traditional gender and sexual norms, as well as a representation of the decline in relations between Russia and the West since the annexation of Crimea.¹³⁸ Since Putin’s return to power in 2012, the gender dimension has been one of the most significant aspects of allegations directed at the West by the Kremlin.¹³⁹

The stories contained in this metanarrative focus on what the Kremlin’s worldview positions as non-traditional gender and sexual norms. This definition expands on the classic understanding of ‘gayropa’ by focusing on all stories that allege a “feminization” of European society. A prominent theme in this metanarrative is the feminization, clearly used a synonym for “weakening,” of European men, who are oft referred to as “semi-men” in Kremlin-sponsored disinformation.¹⁴⁰ The implication of the claim of “semi-men” is that European men are unable to fulfill their gender duty in

¹³⁷ Bradley Secker, “In pictures: The new faces of ‘Gayropa,’” *Politico*, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/in-pictures-the-new-faces-of-gayropa/>.

¹³⁸ Andrew Foxall, “From Evropa to Gayropa: A Critical Geopolitics of the European Union as Seen from Russia,” *Geopolitics* (2017).

¹³⁹ Riabov and Riabova, “The ‘Rape of Europe,’” 147.

¹⁴⁰ Article 15.

protecting European women from “foreign invaders,” often the imagery that the Kremlin utilizes when describing Muslim refugees in the EU.¹⁴¹ Often, the feminization of men is portrayed in tandem with the purported “masculinization of women” in the West.¹⁴² Often, these stories would target “post-modern feminism” as being synonymous with the “destruction of men” as women “behave like men in their quest to gain total power.”¹⁴³ Alternatively, many stories allege that there are “no gender differences” in the West, as radical liberalism and feminism have made it “illegal” to acknowledge differences between genders.¹⁴⁴

Additionally, this metanarrative contains stories that claim a “gay dictatorship” seeks world domination and that “gay fascism” is the ideology of Europe.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, many stories targeted the first openly gay high-level politicians of several countries, including Serbia, the United States, and Luxembourg, among others, as well as female leaders from numerous European and Central Asian countries and the United States. These stories are meant to implicate the West, and especially Europe, in the disintegration of traditional gender norms and as engaging in dangerous transgressions of gender boundaries. On the other hand, Russia and state leadership are depicted as a bastion of real women and real men and a protector of the traditional gender order.

¹⁴¹ Article 16.

¹⁴² Article 17.

¹⁴³ Article 18.

¹⁴⁴ Article 19.

¹⁴⁵ Article 20; Article 21.

Western Subversion via ‘Gender Based Ideology’

As Putin embraces traditional, conservative values since his return to the presidency in 2012, he has also crafted a narrative that warns of the exportation of this liberal, Western model to Russia and the Near Abroad. With this narrative, Putin creates a reason for aggressively anti-Western, anti-liberal cultural growth, and positions Russia as constantly in danger of falling subject to this immoral order. Therefore, this narrative family includes descriptions of forced homosexuality by Western and international powers. This force occurs through both hidden subversion and legal mechanisms and descriptions of an enforcement of a “liberal gender order” through “radical feminism and gender theories” by Western powers, powerful philanthropic donors and non-governmental organizations, and international institutions.¹⁴⁶

The most prominent narrative in this metanarrative is the weaponization of gender-based ideology by Western powers and international institutions, predominately the United Nations. Here, a large conspiracy theory also reigns, claiming that the world’s “liberal-globalist elites” are attempting to dominate the world to implement a “liberal gender order,” often described as being under the leadership of George Soros and the Clintons.¹⁴⁷ According to the Kremlin and its allies, Western powers attempt coups and bring down governments by weaponizing “gender ideologies” and feminism in countries that are not aligned with the liberal West.¹⁴⁸ In my sample, this narrative was highly

¹⁴⁶ Article 22.

¹⁴⁷ Article 23.

¹⁴⁸ Article 24.

targeted towards post-Soviet states in the South Caucasus, especially Georgia and Armenia. Stories alleged that the “Soros Army” sends “Soros spies” to Armenia to force them to ratify the Istanbul Convention, which they claimed sought to undermine Russo-Armenian relations to force Armenia to become the “Netherlands of the South Caucasus.”¹⁴⁹ In Georgia, the storyline followed that Soros and the Open Society Foundation meant to disrupt the “traditional gender order” in Georgia, which would cause an eruption of violence.¹⁵⁰

Stories alleging forced homosexuality in Europe, in which the European Union forces potential member states to “propagate” or celebrate homosexuality, were also common in the sample. Often, these stories center upon international institutions, such as NATO and the UN, forcing countries to legalize same-sex marriage before gaining membership. One story in the sample claimed that NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg was going to force Georgia to recognize gay marriage in order to become a member of NATO.¹⁵¹ These stories also largely target countries in what the Russia considers its near abroad, backing up Kremlin interests in dissuading these countries from seeking membership in Western-led international institutions. Another variation of this story in my sample told of Belarus being punished by the EU, usually through large Schengen Visa fees, for not having a large enough LGBTQ+ community.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Article 25; Article 26; Article 27.

¹⁵⁰ Article 28.

¹⁵¹ Article 29.

¹⁵² Article 30.

Sexual Predation by an ‘Other’

Stories within this metanarrative depict an ‘Other’ engaged in sexual violence, usually against ethnically Russian or Russian-allied women, and as purveyors of immorality in Europe. All of the stories in this metanarrative consist of a common storyline filled with familiar archetypes: a hero in the form of the Russian government, a villain in the form of an “Ultimate Other,” a victim in the form of an ethnically Russian or pro-Russian helpless woman, a non-responsive bystander, a witness, and a complicit police force and state apparatus. This metanarrative has four distinct narratives, classified by types of “Ultimate Other” that are targeted: 1) NATO troops, 2) Islamic men in the EU, 3) Ukrainian men, and 4) Jewish men.

MUSLIM MIGRANTS AS THE ULTIMATE OTHER:

In 2015, FRONTEX registered 1.8 million refugees entering Europe and 1.3 million applied for asylum in an EU state.¹⁵³ Nearly half of those who applied for asylum were from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Since 2012, Germany had been the primary destination of those seeking asylum from the Middle East; however, Hungary, Sweden, and Austria had the most asylum applications per capita in 2015.¹⁵⁴ From 2014 to 2016, European publics grew increasingly dissatisfied with governments’

¹⁵³ PEW Research, “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015,” 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/> ; Greenhill, “Migration in the Kremlin’s Strategic Disinformation War,” 7.

¹⁵⁴ PEW Research, “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015,” 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>.

handling of the ‘migrant crisis:’ the majority of people in Greece, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Poland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands disapproved of their government’s handling of the influx of refugees.¹⁵⁵ As unrest grew, the Kremlin increasingly exploited the political situation in Europe, and used the events as evidence that multiculturalism in Europe was failing, that accepting refugees from Muslim-majority countries led to the collapse of ‘law and order’, that the EU was plagued by inefficiency and “extreme tolerance.”¹⁵⁶ In this narrative family, the “Ultimate Other” is a Muslim man, often a recent refugee from the Middle East, and the witness is of Eastern or Central European origins living in Western Europe. This archetype is significant because their legitimacy is drawn from their national origins, while they maintain authority to discuss the West because of their place of residence.

RT, Sputnik and Russian-aligned outlets in the West have featured numerous articles about the violence that has come to Europe as a result of migration. The most famous of these stories is that of Lisa, a 13-year-old German citizen, a girl of Russian descent who had claimed that she had been kidnapped and assaulted for 30 hours by three men of Middle Eastern origin. The story was first reported by a small website meant for Russian expats living in Germany. Soon, a journalist from Channel 1 in Russia picked the story up, amplifying it to a broader European audience as more mainstream media

¹⁵⁵ PEW Research, “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015,” 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>.

¹⁵⁶ Article 31; Article 32.

platforms took the story.¹⁵⁷ Using data from her cell phone, the German authorities were able to determine that she had been at a 19-year-old male's house.¹⁵⁸ The incident triggered tension between Russian and German authorities. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claiming that the case had been covered up by the German authorities, adding that he hoped that "migration problems" would not "drive authorities to 'paint over reality with political correctness.'"¹⁵⁹

Additionally, the 2015-2016 New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne, Germany are central to this narrative. The Cologne attacks are a prime example of one of the Kremlin's most utilized disinformation tactics: manipulation of truth. On December 31, 2015, large-scale sexual assaults and burglaries were reported in several German towns. Over 1,200 criminal charges were made, approximately 500 of which pertained to sexual assault.¹⁶⁰ In this case, the Kremlin degraded the poignancy of the attacks that did occur and contributed to the lack of an appropriate response by dramatizing the events, perpetuating false narratives about subsequent sexual violence by Muslim men or the legal protection of attackers by European governments for years to come, and creating a kind of "censorship through noise."¹⁶¹ Russian media refers to the Cologne Attacks as the "Night of Long Arms," comparing it to Kristallnacht as a coordinated, extreme violence on a

¹⁵⁷ Article 33.

¹⁵⁸ Article 34.

¹⁵⁹ Deutsche Welle, "Prosecutors conclude Russian-German teen rape allegations were false," 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/prosecutors-conclude-russian-german-teens-rape-allegations-were-false/a-19012239>.

¹⁶⁰ Deutsche Welle, "Report: Cologne New Year's Eve attacks 'could have been prevented,' DW, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/report-cologne-new-years-eve-attacks-could-have-been-prevented/a-37979296>.

¹⁶¹ McKay Coppins, "The Billion Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President," *The Atlantic*, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/>.

massive scale, with widespread inability or unwillingness of police and policymakers to stop the attacks.¹⁶² Following the 2015-2016 NYE attacks, Russian and pro-Russian outlets have published stories that claim there to be high levels of sexual violence in EU member states, especially in Germany and Sweden, greatly overestimating those numbers.¹⁶³

WESTERN SOLDIERS AS THE ULTIMATE OTHER:

The stories in this narrative family are nearly the same in substance and function as the stories of alleged sexual assault by Muslim migrants in Europe; however, the “Ultimate Other” in this case is a NATO soldier. Often, the soldier in these stories is Western European and the place of the attack is a former Soviet Republic or Eastern Bloc country. One example comes from Lithuania, where a story emerged that alleged that a German member of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence stationed in Rukla had assaulted an underage Lithuanian girl.¹⁶⁴ Another is set in Ukraine, where Lithuanian NATO soldiers were accused of assaulting underage Ukrainian girls.¹⁶⁵ In these stories, the implication is that if you are a member of NATO and have soldiers stationed on the ground, they bring violence and moral degradation. In another example, American NATO

¹⁶² Riabov and Riaboval, “The ‘Rape of Europe,’ 149.

¹⁶³ Article 35; Article 36; Article 37.

¹⁶⁴ Article 33.

¹⁶⁵ Article 38.

soldiers were rumored to be involved in a sex trafficking ring in the Romanian towns of Caracal and Deveselu.¹⁶⁶

Complicity of Western Elites, Media, and Judicial Systems

This metanarrative alleges that Western elites, media, and judicial systems are unwilling or unable to address sexual and gender-based violence in Europe when those crimes are committed by a Muslim man, especially with refugee status. It contains stories that range from alleged judicial reform in Western Europe, to leaders who refuse to denounce sexual or gender-based violence if the perpetrators are immigrants, to Western media that actively covers up and refuses to report on sexual violence in Europe. These narratives primarily target Germany and Sweden, as well as the European Union as an institution. The most prevalent storyline in this metanarrative alleges legal impunity for Muslim men who commit sexual violence in Europe. This focus attempts to implicate Western governments and individual leaders, especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in the crimes themselves and to allege that liberal governments are unwilling to protect their own citizens. One story in the sample claimed that “not a single criminal case has been opened in Germany” for more than 500 sexual assault cases perpetrated by refugees.¹⁶⁷ In a similar vein, another story claimed that the “Feminist Government of

¹⁶⁶ Article 39.

¹⁶⁷ Article 40.

Sweden” ordered police not to investigate sexual violence when the attack was committed by a refugee.¹⁶⁸

In addition, this metanarrative contains rumors that protests against sexual violence were shut down in Germany, alleging a crackdown on free speech and a national cover-up of sexual and gender-based violence in the country.¹⁶⁹ Finally, another storyline consisted of tales of false judicial reform that was meant to protect perpetrators of sexual violence. In one such story, it was claimed that a new law was passed in Germany that made it illegal to prosecute someone of sexual assault if they were a refugee. In fact, after the 2015-2016 NYE Cologne Attacks, the German Parliament passed a stricter sexual assault law.¹⁷⁰

Radical Tolerance in the West

This narrative family contains stories that allege that European society and governments are so “radically tolerant” that they allow failed multiculturalism and violence to destroy their countries. In his annual address on December 12, 2013, Vladimir Putin “lambasted ‘so-called tolerance’ as ‘sexless and infertile’ and fundamentally unnecessary for Russia with its great history and culture.”¹⁷¹ He finished by advocating an adherence to conservative values as a defense against “moving backward and down

¹⁶⁸ Article 40.

¹⁶⁹ Article 41.

¹⁷⁰ Kate Connely, “Germany toughens rape laws after New Year’s Eve attacks in Cologne,” *The Guardian* (2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/07/german-mps-back-stricter-rape-laws-after-cologne-attacks>.

¹⁷¹ Eksi and Wood, “Ring wing populism as gendered performance,” 742.

toward chaotic darkness.”¹⁷² This metanarrative is defined by a focus on so-called “radical tolerance” in the West, often portrayed as leading to a collapse due to the inefficacy of multiculturalism. Clearly, this serves as a defense for the Kremlin to not adhere to a goal of liberal multiculturalism. In many of the stories in this metanarrative, the sexual assault and other violence in Europe is blamed on the West’s misguided embrace of “tolerance.”

With headlines such as “Tolerant Sweden Fed Up with Migrants,” several rumors in our sample described the way that radical tolerance has caused European countries, most commonly targeting Scandinavian countries and Germany, to accept sexual violence, despite the grievances from their citizens.¹⁷³ Similarly, one of the most striking storylines in this metanarrative alleged that victims of sexual assault in Europe are forced to apologize to their assailants. The “Forgive Me Flash Mob” was described in my sample several times, in which European women are forced to “repent” to their rapist, apologizing for their “depraved behavior and clothes” that “forced” the migrant men to assault them.¹⁷⁴ The message of this rumor is two-fold. First, that the EU has become so ‘tolerant’ that it has begun to embrace sexually deviant illegal behaviors as normal and welcomes those that are immoral and violence as a result. Second, this rumor targets European women as a form of victim-blaming, insinuating that their embrace of liberalism led to hyper-sexualization and deviance that can be blamed for their assault.

¹⁷² Eksi and Wood, “Ring wing populism as gendered performance,” 743.

¹⁷³ Article 42.

¹⁷⁴ Article 43

Other rumors in our sample describe European men as “emasculated...by cultural codes of tolerance, political correctness, and compulsory kindness.”¹⁷⁵

Other stories in this sample took another direction with a criticism of ‘radical tolerance,’ claiming that European states had become so concerned about violence against women that they have passed laws requiring all parties to sign a “contract of consent” before engaging in any sort of sexual activity or the man could be charged with assault.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, other stories claim that it is illegal for men to “even think about women” in Europe, as heterosexual white men have become “villains” in the West.¹⁷⁷

Russia as the Savior of Traditional Christendom and “True Europe”

In his annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, Putin “went ‘global’ with his moral agenda,” criticizing the West’s abandonment of morality and positioning Russia as a “guardian of traditional values worldwide.”¹⁷⁸ The stories within this metanarrative align with this self-prescribed status for Russia as the savior of traditional society. This metanarrative includes stories that, while also focusing on the decaying and failing West, center upon a kind of messianic role of the Russian Federation under the rule of Vladimir Putin. Some of these narratives explicitly state that the Russian political and cultural system is “one to be sought,” in contrast to “dangerous Western ‘liberal

¹⁷⁵ Article 43

¹⁷⁶ Article 44

¹⁷⁷ Article 45

¹⁷⁸ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin’s demarche from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 4 (2014).

democracy,’ that... puts all efforts in degrading and discrediting traditional values.”¹⁷⁹

Another variation alleged that Russia was the “global protector of free speech” as the West continues to “censor” non-liberal voices.¹⁸⁰ Other stories described Vladimir Putin himself as the savior of the Russian state, as the only guard against Russia falling for the “trap of hedonistic liberalism.”¹⁸¹ The most prevalent story in this metanarrative focused on the image of Russia as a savior of Christendom, as the “preserve[r] of the original Christian spirit.”¹⁸² In this same theme, stories alleged that religious leaders from around the world, but mostly Slavic countries, believed Putin to be the only man who could defend the Christian world from the dangers that liberal modernity poses.¹⁸³

Taken together, all of these metanarratives and sub-narratives create a unified message: that Western governance systems, and in particular their values of multiculturalism and tolerance, will lead to moral perversion and deviance, especially in the way of sexual vices and a corruption of ‘traditional’ femininity and masculinity. The West presents two kinds of threats: a physical one and a spiritual one. In this story, Russia, only under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, is the one and only savior for traditional Europe and Christian civilization.

¹⁷⁹ Article 46.

¹⁸⁰ Article 47.

¹⁸¹ Article 48.

¹⁸² Article 49.

¹⁸³ Article 50.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER- BASED NARRATIVES:

Frequency of Metanarratives and Sub-Narratives:

In the sample of disinformation gathered from the *EU vs. Disinfo* database, several key findings emerged. First, the most common metanarrative was ‘Western perversion of traditional morals,’ which is consistent with the Kremlin’s overall worldview and geopolitical goals (See Figure 2). While some of the most shocking stories in my sample contained graphic descriptions of sexual assault, those stories remained something of a supportive side-story to these broader metanarratives that seek to undermine Western legitimacy. We can also see this trend in the frequency of the sub-narratives. Four of the five most common narratives are broad in scope, targeting the entire collective West as hosts and exporters of immorality. Two of these, “collapse of traditional values” and “abandonment of Christianity,” fit into the ‘Western perversion of traditional morals metanarrative. The other two, “weaponization of ‘gender-based ideology by Western Governmental Institutions and “legal enforcement of ‘gender-based ideology by international institutions” fit into the “Western subversion via ‘gender-based ideology”” metanarrative.

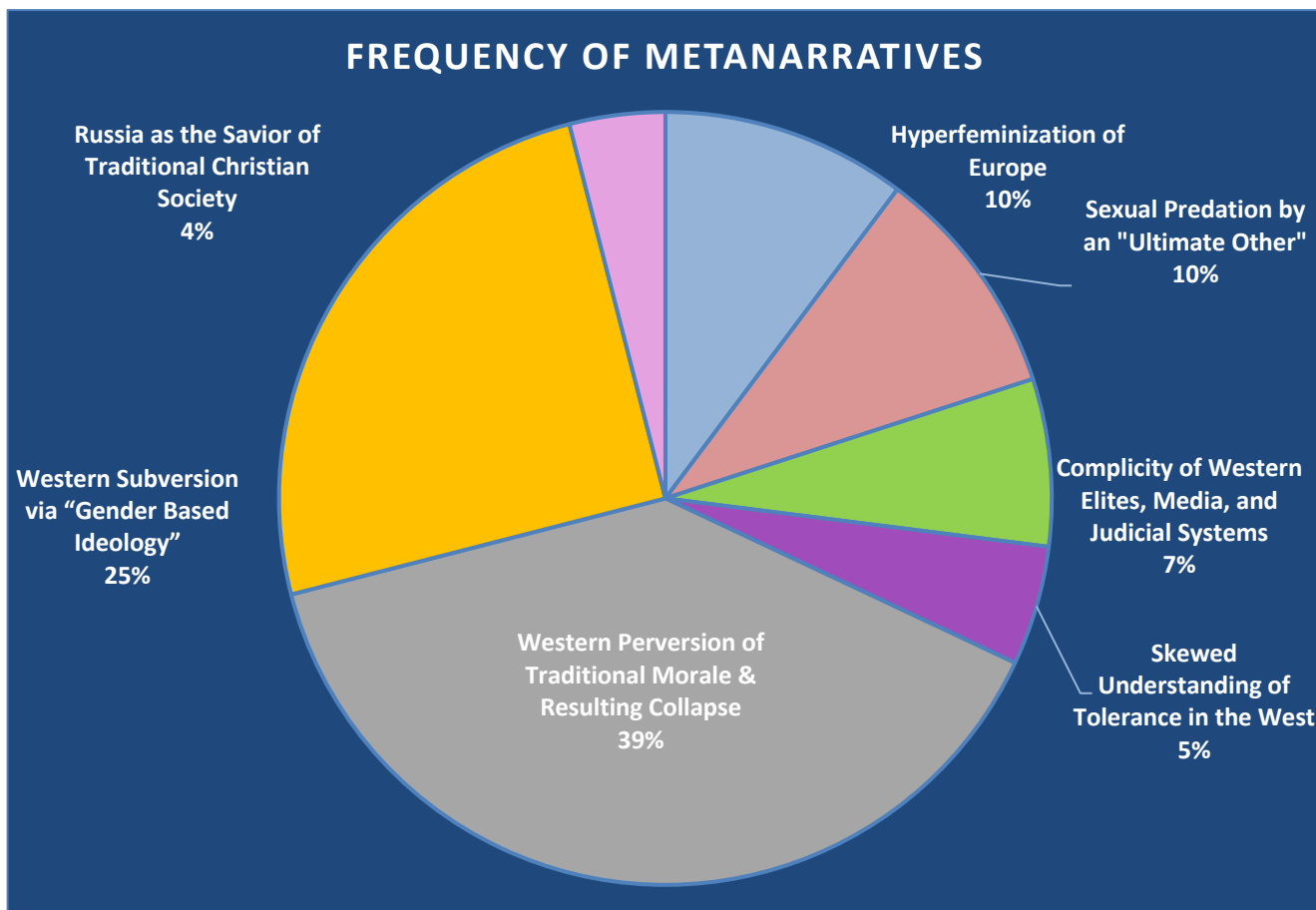


Figure 2: Frequency of Metanarratives

Frequency of Subnarratives

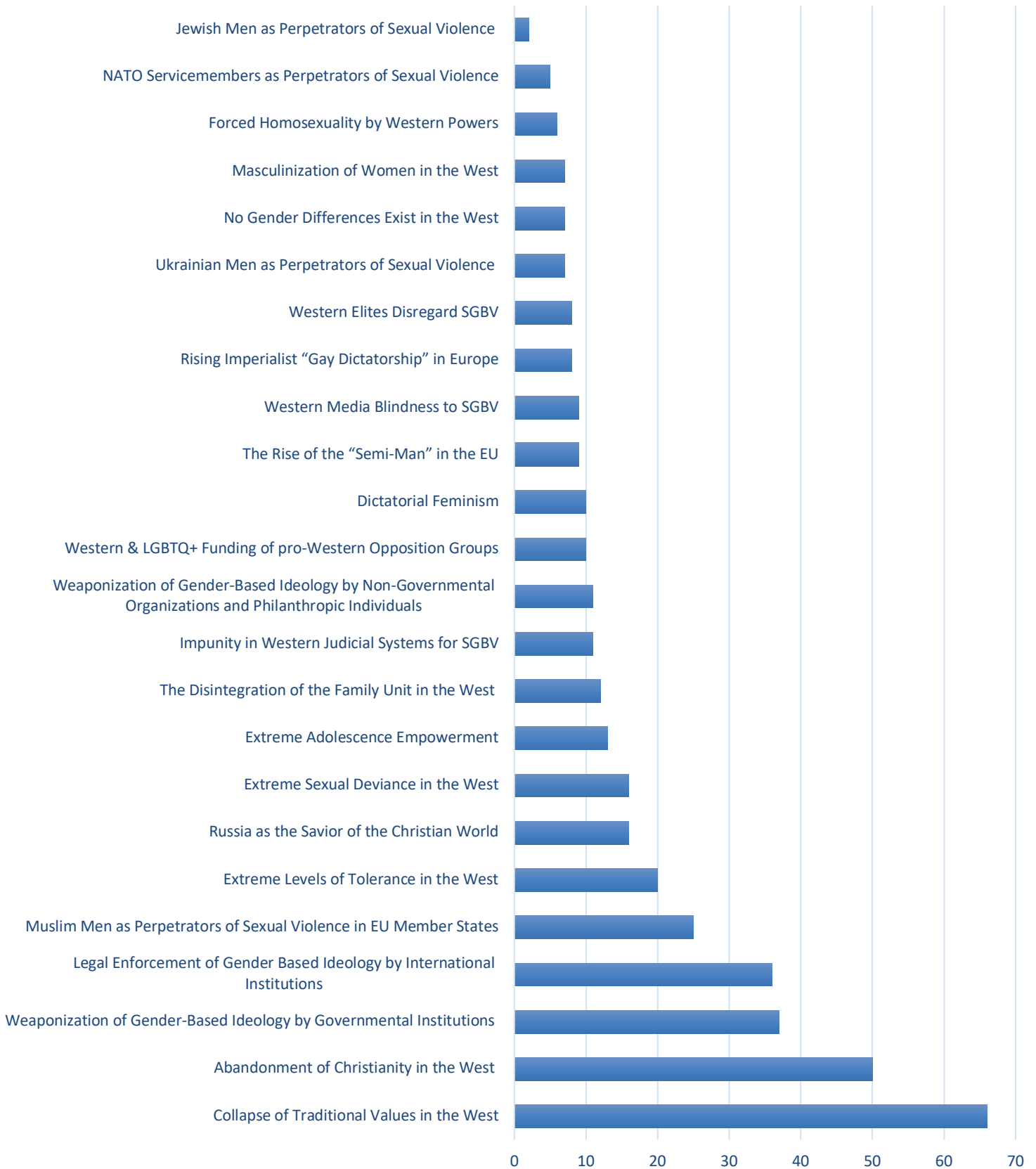


Figure 3: Frequency of Subnarratives

However, the fifth most common narrative contains stories alleging sexual violence in the European Union by refugees from the Middle East, mostly during the migrant crisis. These stories are in the “sexual predation by an “Other” metanarrative. That metanarrative contains four sub-narratives, each with a different ‘Other:’ refugees, NATO servicemembers, Ukrainian soldiers, or Jewish men. By and large, the most common storyline in this metanarrative alleges that refugees in Europe from the Middle East were perpetrators of widespread sexual violence in Western European countries, especially Germany and Sweden. The Russian media’s coverage of this issue is a perfect example of the way that disinformation functions. On New Year’s Eve 2015-2016 in Cologne, Germany, scores of women reported being assaulted or sexually harassed. Following this event, propagandists exploited the fear and anger that many people in Europe felt, and pushed disinformation meant to impact Europeans’ perceptions and beliefs regarding the acceptance of refugees from the Middle East, especially Syria and Afghanistan. The utilization of truth that occurs in this metanarrative is central to the legitimacy that the target audiences assigns the information.

Overall Frequency of Target Audience and Source Language

Overall, the most common source language was Russian, followed by Georgian and Italian. In accordance with this, the most targeted audience of the disinformation in my sample was Russian speakers. Georgian, Italian, Belarusian, and Armenian populations followed next. These results are as anticipated because the Kremlin's primary target of disinformation is in fact their own citizens. The Kremlin and Vladimir Putin rely on propaganda and sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives to build political legitimacy and ensure national cohesion. Georgia, Armenia, and Belarus are common targets because they lie in Russia's claimed near abroad and sit at the junction of geopolitical tension between Russia and the West. Interestingly, Italy was the most commonly targeted Western European country. This is likely because of the country's large devout Catholic population and conservatism, which primes the population for gender-based narratives. Compared to Poland, another strongly Catholic and conservative country, Italy would be more receptive to Russian information because of the historically acrimonious relationship between Poland and Russia.

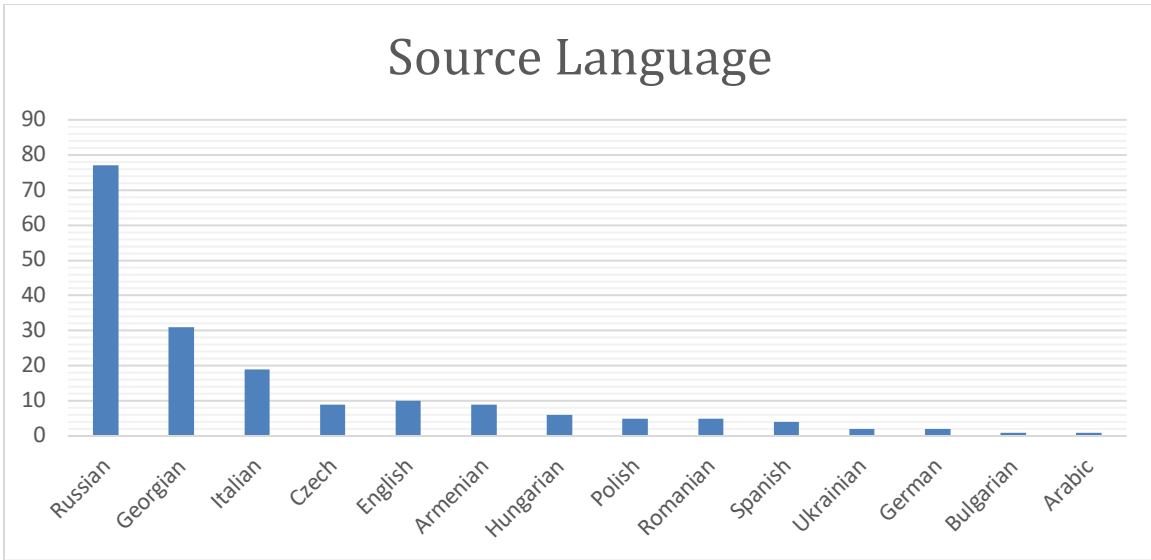


Figure 4: Frequency of Source Language

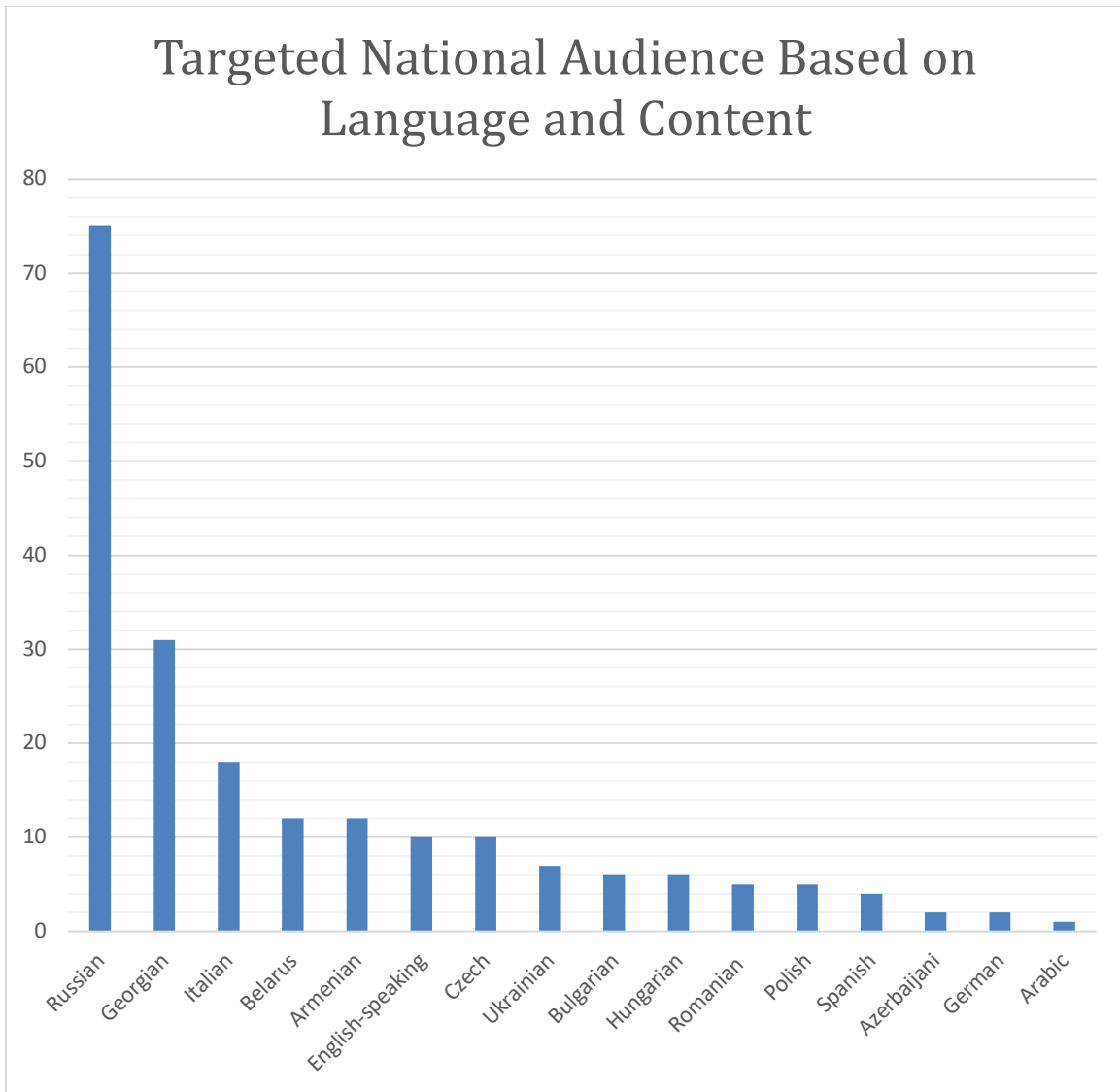


Figure 5: Frequency of Targeted National Audience

Primary and Secondary Targets

Overall, the disinformation in my sample targeted the countries and institutions that are most expected. These targets are the subjects of the false stories and includes institutional-level targets and country-level targets (see Figures 6, 7, and 8). I also distinguished between primary targets and secondary targets. Primary targets are the primary subject of the disinformation, meaning the institution or country meant to be maligned by the included false information. Secondary targets are countries or institutions that were also mentioned in the false story but are more marginal in the storyline. The most common overall target, of primary or secondary nature, was the European Union, followed by a target of the collective West and liberalism more generally (See Figure 6). The countries most targeted were the United States, Germany, Sweden, Ukraine, and France.

Total Institutional and Country Level Targets

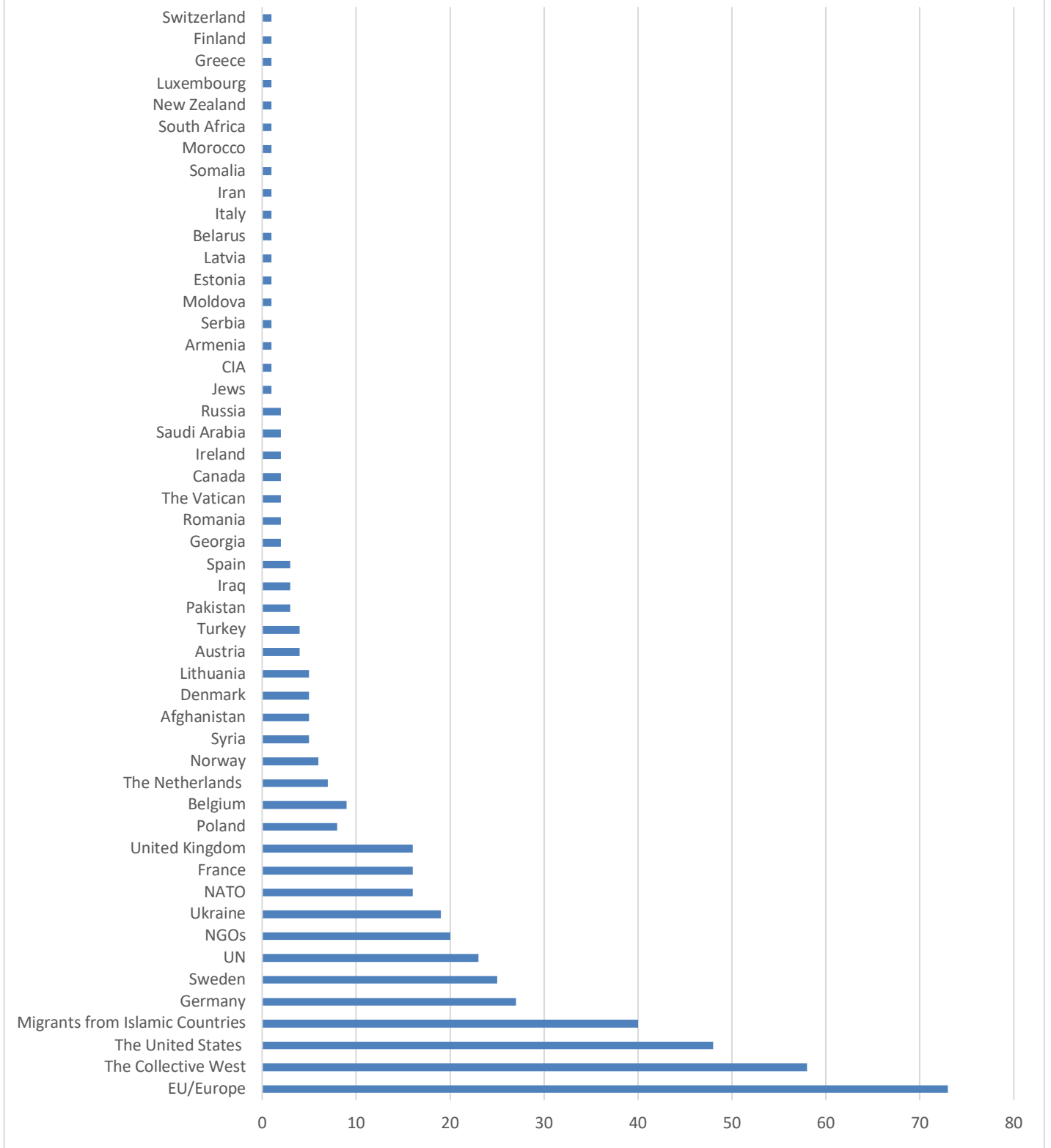


Figure 6: Total Frequency of Institutional and Country Level Targets

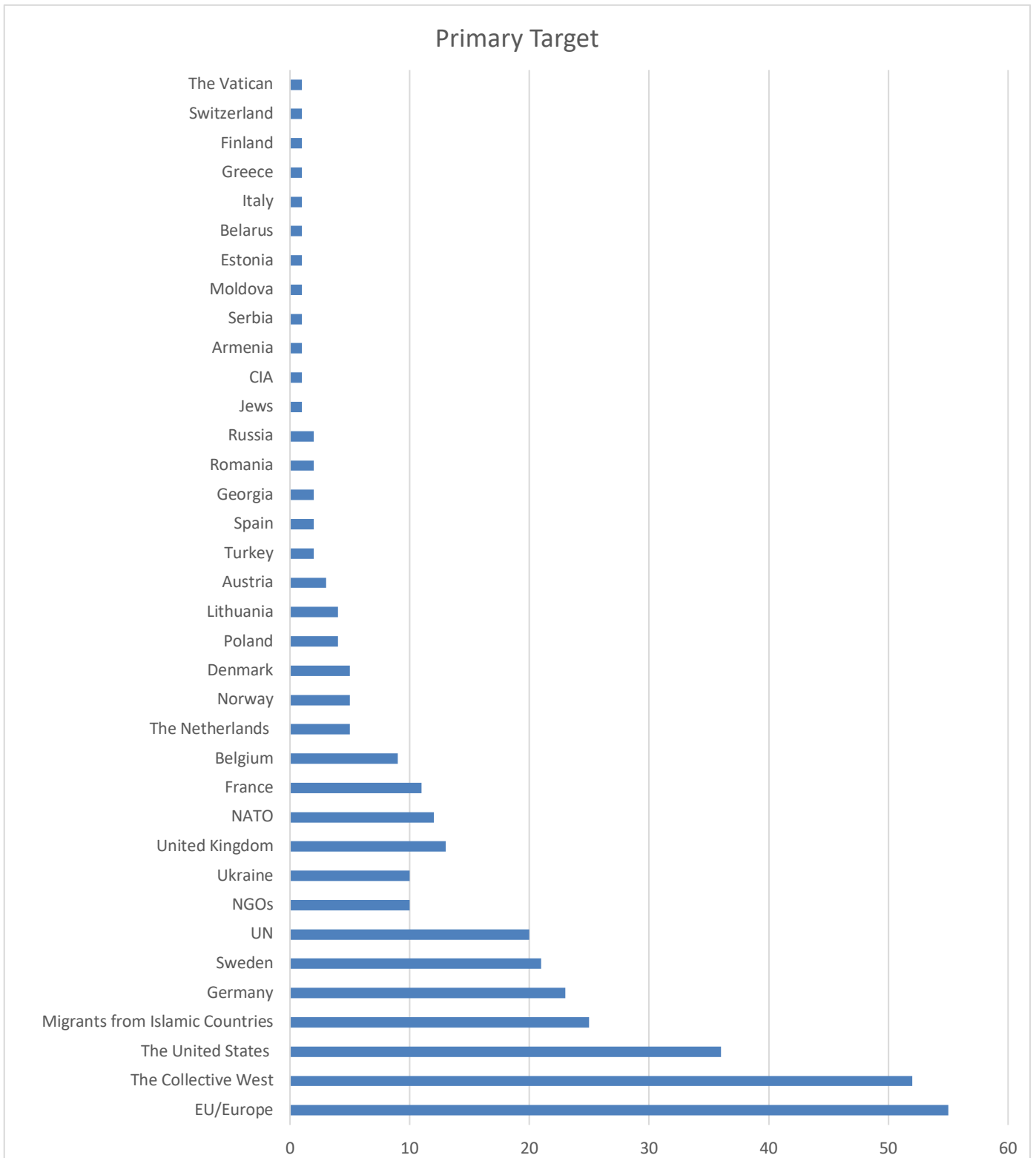


Figure 7: Frequency of Primary Targets

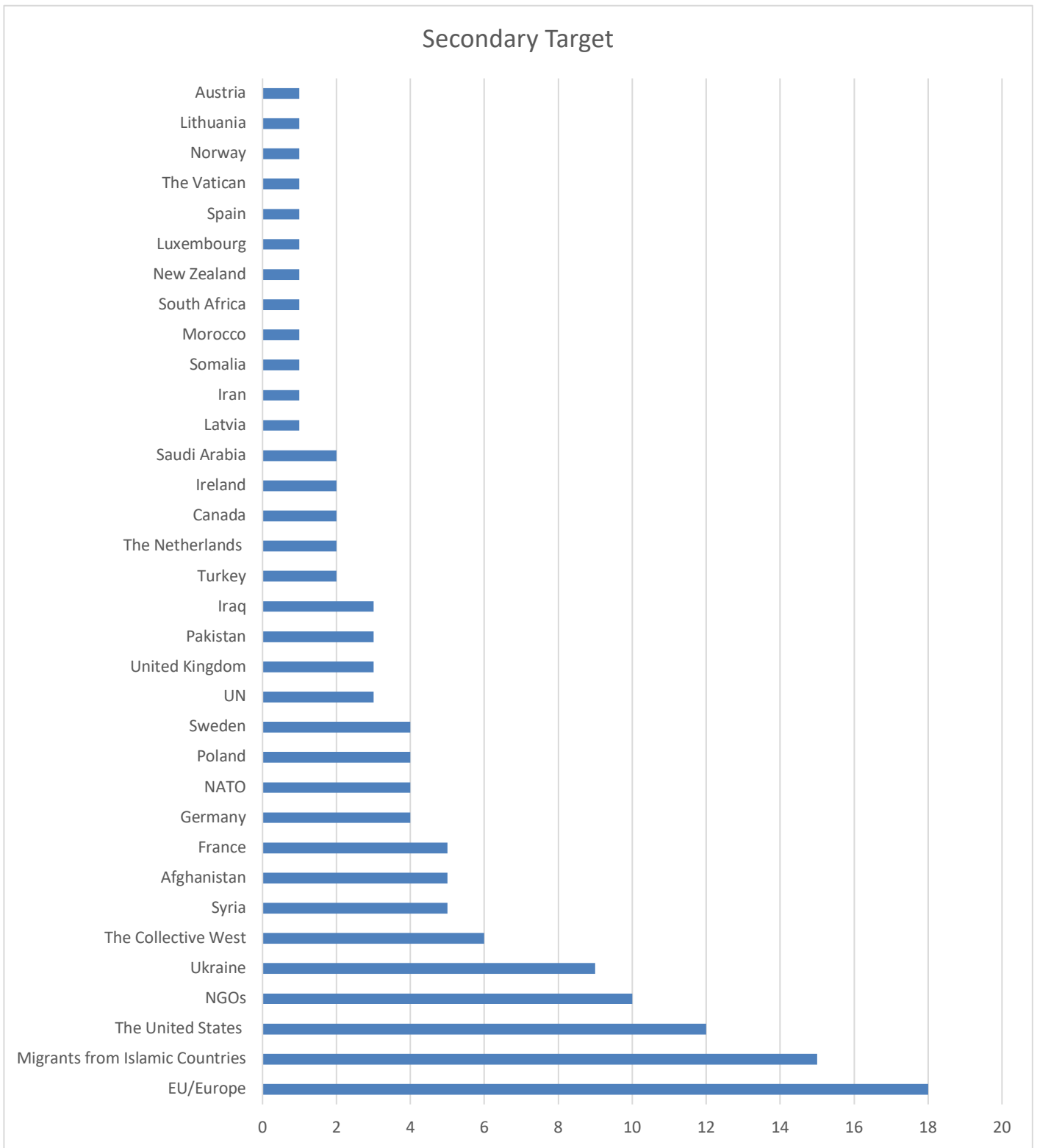


Figure 8: Frequency of Secondary Targets

The most common secondary targets, meaning the disinformation story had another more primary target, were the EU, migrants from the Middle East, the US, Western NGOs, and Ukraine (see Figure 8). When compared to the primary targets, Western NGOs, Ukraine, migrants from Middle Eastern countries, and Afghanistan moved much higher on the list. This is telling because these secondary targets are the institutions or countries that are easy to throw into a story that is not actually originally about them. We see this in the form of a story targeting Sweden, and it's easy and convenient to simultaneously mention George Soros or Western-funded NGOs. Often, these secondary targets are included as a kind of cognitive device that frames the way that the reader should view the story.

Individual Targets

The disinformation in my sample targeted a wide range of individuals, from Western political leaders, to opposition leaders in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, leaders of the EU and NATO, Western academics, as well as cultural figures and well-known figures in Western news and in recent years (see Figures 9 & 10). Most of the most targeted individuals are very expected: George Soros, Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel, Pope Francis, and Jens Stoltenberg. Most leaders of Western countries are targeted, as well as military leaders. Most interesting though, are the targeted individuals who are seemingly less important and somewhat random. Most of these targets are LGBTQ individuals on city councils in the US, in state level governance, or in a national

government. Some of these examples include: Eva Brunne, the first openly gay bishop in the Church of Sweden, and her partner who is also a religious leader, Gunilla Lindon; Eric Fanning, the first openly gay Secretary of the Army in the United States; Roy Ashburn, an openly gay State Senator from California; and Georgina Beyer, the first openly transgender member of parliament in New Zealand.

Overall, the most targeted group of individuals were national-level politicians, followed by public figures and cultural icons, and local-level politicians. Consistent with the Kremlin’s use of religion and ‘traditional values’ in these kinds of disinformation narratives, the only religious leader targeted was Pope Francis, considered to be a more ‘liberal’ religious leader. Interestingly though, he is also referred to as a source of authority in the section below.



Figure 9: Targeted Individuals

Figure 10: Type of Targeted Individual

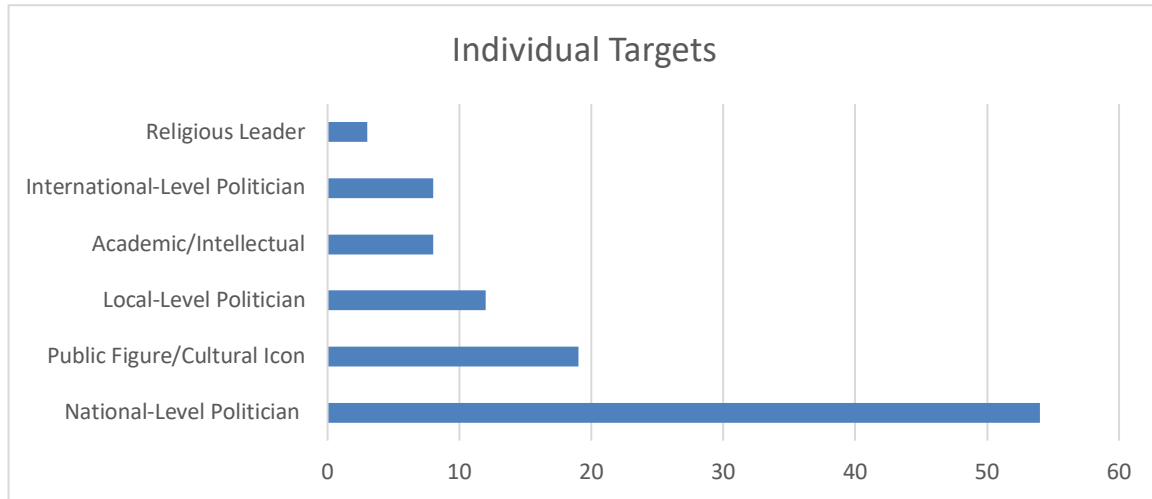
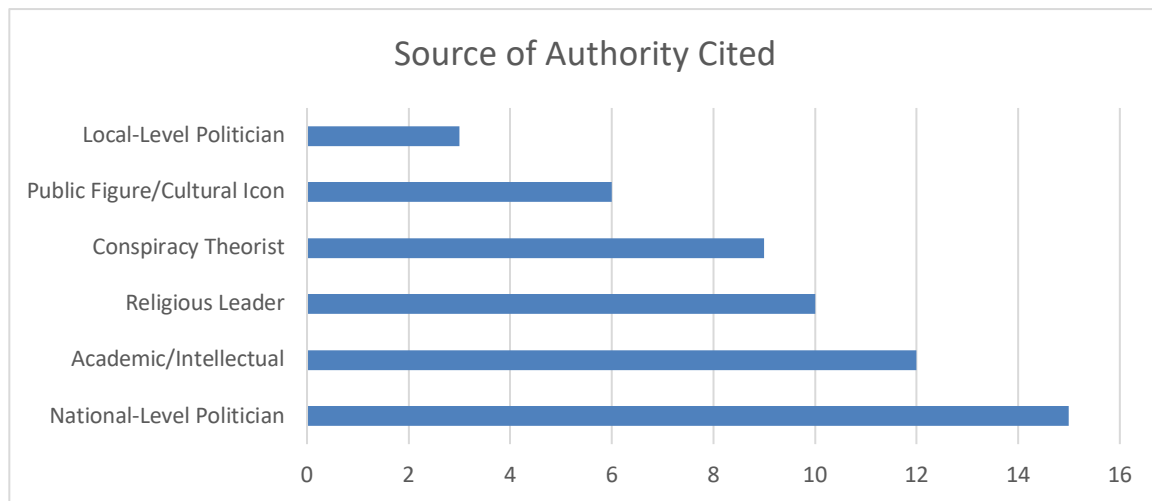


Figure 11: Type of Authority Figure Cited



Sources of Authority Cited:

Consistent with the Kremlin's utilized narratives are the sources of authority that they cite in them. These sources of authority are politicians, public figures, religious leaders, and known conspiracy theorists whose words they use as a kind of validation of the false information contained in the disinformation stories in my sample. Most common, of course, were Vladimir Putin himself; Alexander Dugin, one of Putin's favorite right-wing intellectuals and known conspiracy theorist; Sergei Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia; Ilia II, the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church; Patriarch Neophyte, the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; and Patriarch Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow.

More national-level politicians and academics or intellectuals were cited as sources of authority that religious leaders, but those national-level politicians or academics were often cited only a few times. Religious leaders such as the leaders of Orthodox Churches were cited over and over as proof or validation of the claim in the story. This is expected when considering the content of sexuality and gender-based narratives, which often rely on religious arguments when claiming the immorality of the West and the superiority of the Russian state.

Case Studies

In my sample, I saw that certain primary and secondary targets were often paired together: Germany or Sweden and Syria or Afghanistan, the US and Ukraine, NATO and Ukraine, Georgia and the United Nations, or Armenia and Western funded NGOs. These patterns are evidence of specifically manufactured content and targeted disinformation for different intended audiences. The metanarratives and narratives that are locally salient are not going to be effective in another. As the following cases will demonstrate, metanarratives and narratives are often purposefully selected by propagandists in order to be historically and culturally resonant in a particular context.

ARMENIA

When the target audience of the disinformation in my sample was Armenian, the frequency of narratives shifted to focus more on foreign interference through weaponized ‘gender-based ideology’ (See Figure 13). This narrative is especially potent in the Armenian context, where a crisis of national identity has plagued the country since the Velvet Revolution in 2018. Since protests forced then prime minister Serzh Sargsyan to resign in favor of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian system of governance and the media landscape have been in a transitional period. As the new government attempts to build legitimacy and consolidate power, conditions are ripe for foreign interference in the country’s political system.

The former ruling government’s value system was based on ‘traditional values,’ where the “traditional family was considered the core structure of society.”¹⁸⁴ Very often, this framework of traditionality was openly discriminatory and violent towards LGBTQ+ populations and women in Armenia. Before the Velvet Revolution, the old regime actively subjected its own population to “propaganda of traditional values.”¹⁸⁵ This was often based in religion, as 93% of the Armenian population belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁸⁶ With the installation of the new government, foreign-sponsored disinformation has increased as both citizens and the regime attempt to negotiate the future path of the country and navigate their changing national identity.

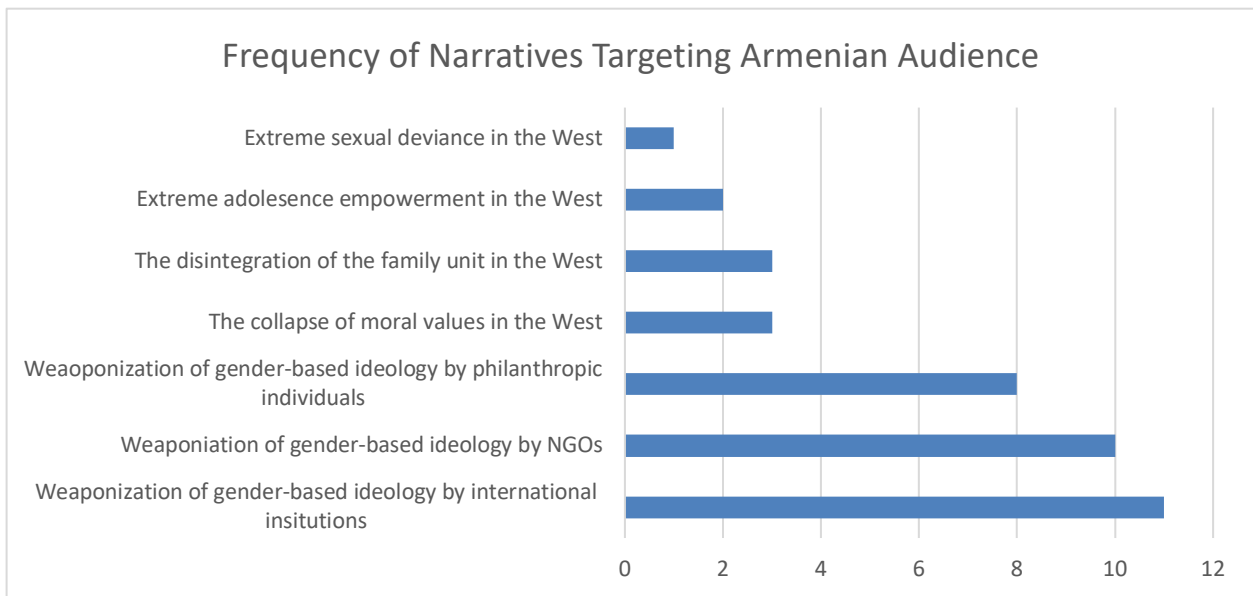


Figure 13: Frequency of Narratives Targeting Armenian Population

¹⁸⁴ Anna Pambukhchyan, “Propaganda and Human Rights Discourse in Armenia,” *EVN Report*, 2018, <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/propaganda-and-human-rights-discourse-in-armenia>.

¹⁸⁵ Pambukhchyan, “Propaganda and Huamn Rights Discourse in Armenia.”

¹⁸⁶ Pambukhchyan, “Propaganda and Human Rights Discourse in Armenia.”

In my sample, the most common narrative was the idea that gender and sexual minorities have been purposefully imported into the country from Western powers in the form of international institutions mandating gender equality, to George Soros and Open Society Foundation funding the importation of LGBTQ+ populations, as a way to destabilize the country and undermine its national security.¹⁸⁷ By pushing social conservative narratives and building fear of Western interference, the Kremlin is hoping to stoke anti-Western, and especially anti-European Union, sentiment. These narratives are especially potent in the Armenian context because of the past regime's reliance on rhetoric on 'traditional values' rhetoric to build legitimacy and national cohesion.

GEORGIA

Georgia is a key target for Russian information influence operations. The 2017 report of the Georgian State Security Service describes extensive problem that the country faces against disinformation and information influence operations, often conducted by the Russian Federation. According to the Security Service, the main objectives are “instigating anti-western sentiments in Georgian society; undermining the image of Georgia as a reliable partner in the international area; establishing distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness, and nihilism in the public; creating destabilization... in order to cause disintegration processes and polarize the Georgian society.”¹⁸⁸ The Georgian Government's Communication Strategy on Georgia's Membership to the EU and NATO

¹⁸⁷ Article 51.

¹⁸⁸ Kremlin Watch, “Georgia: Relations with the Russian Federation,” 2020, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/georgia/>.

for 2017-2020 also describes the extensive information operations that are actively targeting the country in an attempt to deter membership in the two organizations. The document notes that the Kremlin's information war aims at "weakening societal resilience, discrediting anti-Western values, and reducing trust towards EU and NATO."¹⁸⁹ In addition, the Georgian Defense Ministry named hybrid warfare as one of the country's top security challenges.

There are two distinct threads of anti-Western disinformation targeting Georgian populations in my sample: anti-EU and anti-NATO. Russian information operations seek to influence Georgian citizens by weakening state institutions and overall levels of trust, discrediting Euro-Atlantic integration and cooperation, and building support for pro-Russian worldview that is inherently anti-Western. Most importantly, Kremlin sponsored disinformation targeting the country seeks to discredit membership in or cooperation with EU and NATO as a viable path for Georgia.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

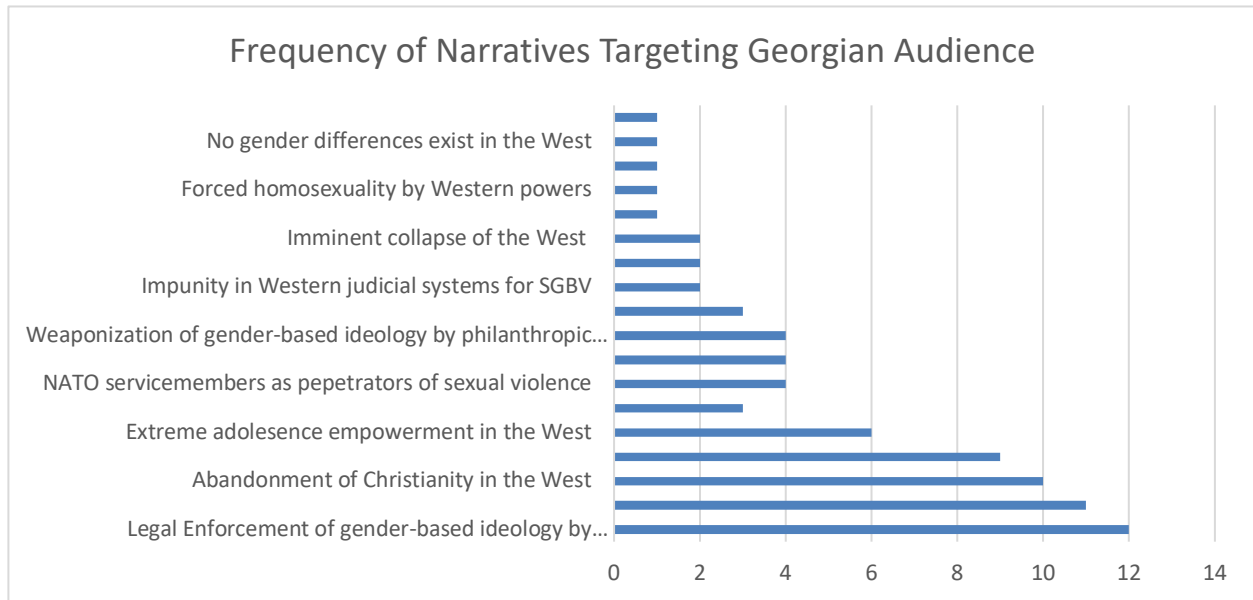


Figure 14: Frequency of Narratives Targeting Georgian Audience

Because of this difficult geopolitical positioning, the most common narratives targeting Georgian populations are diverse. They include similar narratives to Armenia, warning of Western interference through gender-based ideology, to narratives that align with the ‘Gayropa’ trope claiming erasure of family and gender in the EU, to disinformation that depict NATO servicemembers as sexual predators and occupiers (see Figure 14).

ITALY

Disinformation targeting Italy centers heavily on the ‘Gayropa’ trope, claiming a collapse of traditional and moral values in the West and especially the E.U., often in the form of erasure of traditional family and gender structures. This kind of narrative would be more potent in Italy than other countries because of Italy’s recent shift towards social conservatism and increasing Euroscepticism and popularization of far-right movements, as well as its largely Catholic population. According to the EU Parloimeter in 2019, Italy is in the top four countries that believe EU membership is overall negative.¹⁹⁰ In addition, less than 50% of Italians believe that Italy has benefitted from EU membership.¹⁹¹

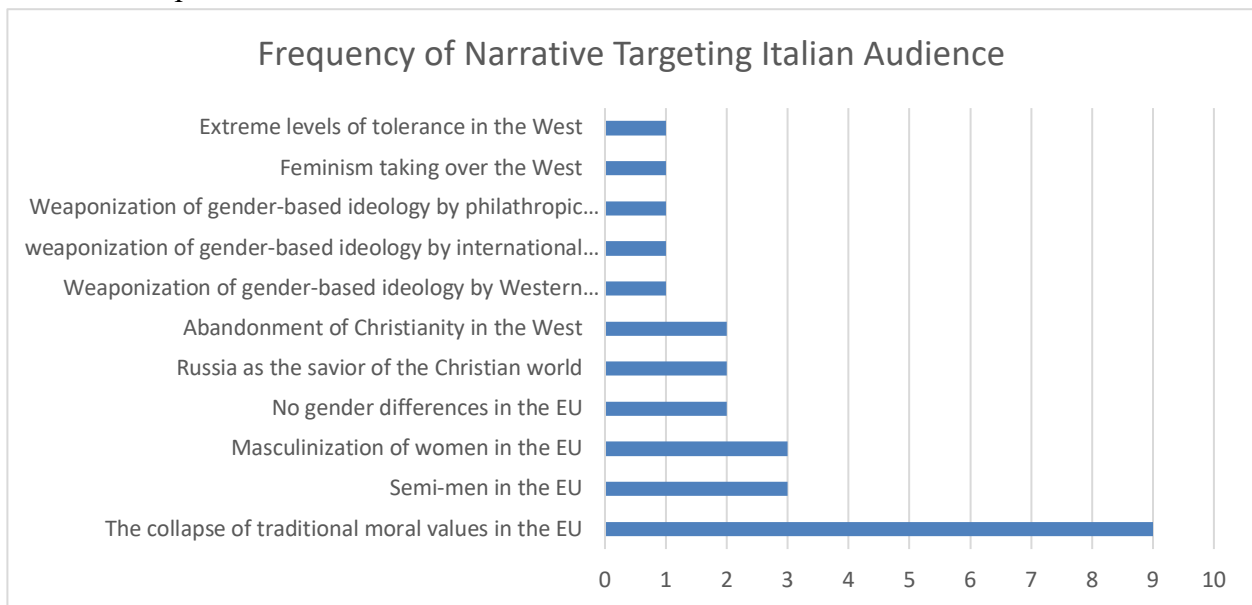


Figure 15: Frequency of Narratives Targeting Italian Audience

¹⁹⁰ European Parliament, “Heeding the Call Beyond the Vote: A Stronger Parliament to Listen to Citizens Voices,” 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2019/parlemeter-2019-heeding-the-call-beyond-the-vote/report/en-report.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ European Parliament, “A Stronger Voice: Citizens’ Views on Parliament and the EU,” 2017, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/external/html/parlemetre/eb88_v2.pdf.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The stories from my sample that target Czech audiences revolve exclusively around the 2015-2016 Migrant Crisis in Europe. These narratives focused on the alleged ineptitude of the EU at handling the influx of migrants or the impunity that Muslim men were allegedly granted by European leaders, media, and judicial systems (see Figure 16). Germany was often portrayed as the leader of the EU's migration policy, and Angela Merkel was targeted specifically by several of the disinformation stories in my sample. These narratives were particularly potent in the Czech Republic in the years following the migration crisis because of the Czech public's and leadership's response to the influx of migrants into Europe.

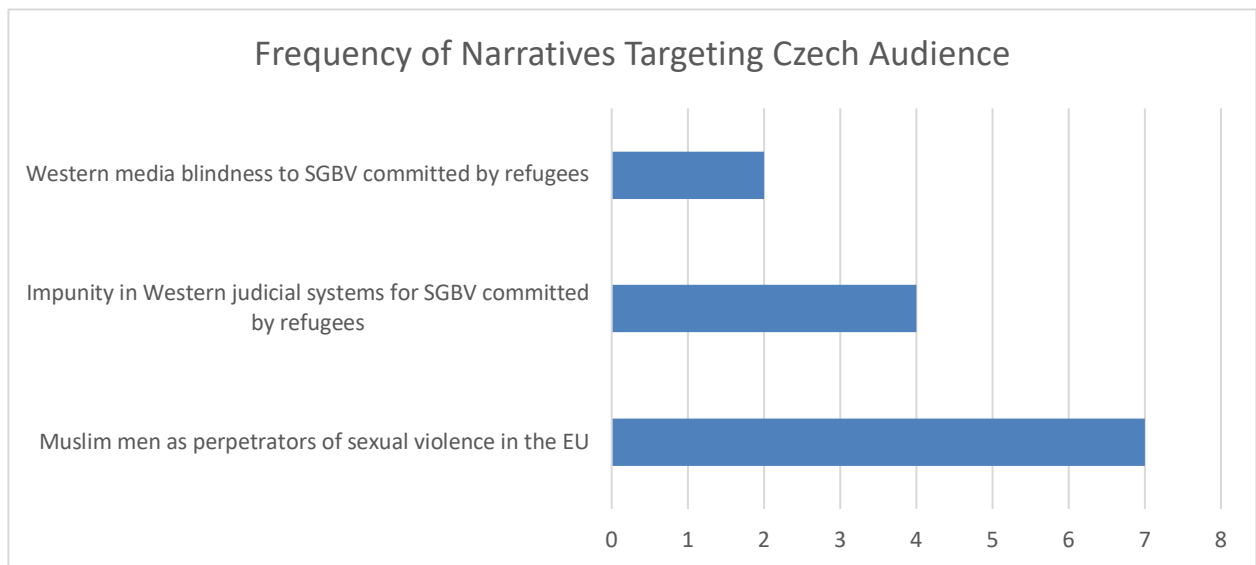


Figure 16: Frequency of Narratives Targeting Czech Audience

The Czech Republic, along with Hungary and Poland, was charged by the European Court of Justice for violating their obligations by refusing to take in their share of asylum seekers at the height of the crisis in 2015.¹⁹² During the migrant crisis, the Czech public and political leadership expressed negative attitudes towards refugees and a wave of Islamophobia, polarizing society and putting the country at odds with the EU. President Miloš Zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš were both outwardly hostile to Islamic migrants entering the country and utilized the crisis as a political tool domestically. As a result, the topic of Islamic migration became a useful narrative tool for anti-EU and Islamophobic disinformation emerging from the Kremlin. These narratives would encourage both anti-migrant sentiment, furthering the chasm between the Czech Republic and the EU, and increase distrust in the EU among the Czech public. These narratives, then, served as a way for the Kremlin to undermine internal cohesion within the EU during and after the migrant crisis, furthering their own geopolitical aim of weakening the European Union by fostering internal dissent.

RUSSIA

Most of the stories in my sample were actually meant for consumption within a Russian speaking audience, often those living within the Russian Federation (See Figure 4). The narratives targeting the Russian population were extremely diverse, representing the Kremlin's multifaceted intended objectives from the weaponization of sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives (see Figure 17). Narratives targeting Russian

¹⁹² Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Monika Pronszuk, "E.U. Court Rules 3 Countries Violated Deal on Refugee Quotas," *New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/world/europe/european-court-refugees-hungary-poland-czech-republic.html>.

populations included depictions of the EU as abandoning traditional values and Christianity, relying on both themes of sexual violence and erasure of traditional gender and family structures. The aim of the Kremlin here is three-fold: 1) legitimize the regime of Vladimir Putin and the regimes adherence to an aggressive ideology of ‘traditional values,’ and 2) discredit Western, liberal systems as ineffective alternatives to the Russian system; and 3) portray Vladimir Putin as the protector and savior of both the Russian people and of the future of the traditional Christian world. Because Putin utilizes these narratives to reinforce his own legitimacy, the narrative ‘Russia as the savior of the Christian world’ appeared much more frequently when targeting Russian speaking audiences.

Frequency of Narratives Targeting Russian-Speaking Audience

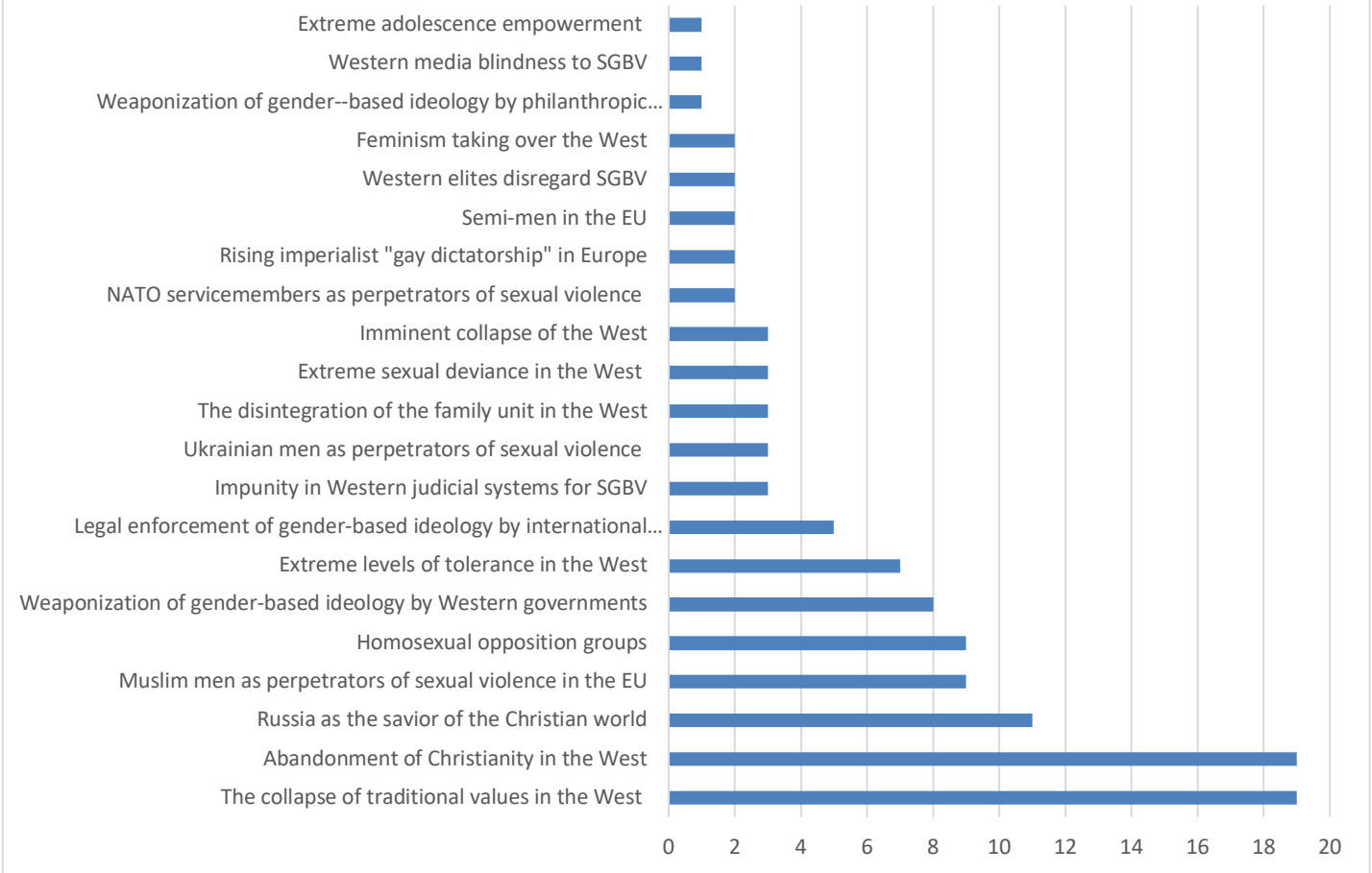


Figure 17: Frequency of Narratives Targeting Russian Audience

DISCUSSION

The Kremlin utilizes sexuality and gender-based narratives in disinformation operations because of their extremely potent emotionally based content and their ability to reuse storylines and narratives in different cultural contexts with only minor changes. Sexuality and gender-based narratives are cheap and effective cognitive weapons in the Kremlin's political warfare toolkit that can be used against the West, the Russian domestic population, and to manipulate Russian aligned nations with only minor changes. From this analysis, it is clear that the Kremlin has a perennial cast of characters and villains, which can be shifted around depending on the targeted national audience. For example, in the Czech Republic and other EU states who resisted migration from the Middle East, the villain in the story becomes a Muslim man who is invading the nation both territorially and symbolically through the sexual assault of the nation's women. For a Polish audience, the villain is often LGBTQ+ populations who have been purposefully exported from the West. In Armenia, the villain is Open Society Foundation and the United Nations, who are plotting to bring Western 'gender ideology' into the country to undermine its national security. For the Russian population, the villain is the idea of a collective West, who constantly seeks to undermine the Russian state through foreign 'gender ideology.' This idea of a Collective West is central to this analysis, as the entirety of the Western World was often targeted as one force instituting 'radical' tolerance, liberalism, and multiculturalism around the world. Interestingly, the idea of the collective West, Europe/European Union, and the United States were often completely

interchangeable in a storyline in my sample because the ultimate target was liberalism and multiculturalism itself.

Another interesting finding concerns the narratives surrounding sexual and gender-based violence in Europe. The storyline was often nearly exactly the same: a young girl, often ethnically Russian was walking home from school or church, an outsider (Muslim man, NATO soldier stationed in the country, Jewish man, Ukrainian man, LGBTQ+ individual) assaulted her, some kind of trustworthy bystander witnessed the attack or the kidnapping and is the source of authority in the reporting, Western European police, media, and political leaders refused to do anything about the attack, forcing Russian leaders to protect the helpless victim. This narrative storyline is extremely useful for the Kremlin because they can simply exchange the identity of the attacker and the location of the attack, and the story appeals to an entirely new population in a different cultural and historical context. These storylines are effective because they exploit cognitive biases and basic human emotions such as fear and anger.

Taken together, the intended message of these narratives is clear: that Western governance systems, and in particular their values of multiculturalism and tolerance, will lead to moral perversion and deviance, especially in the way of sexual vices and a corruption of ‘traditional’ femininity and masculinity. In this message, Russia, only under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, is the one and only savior for traditional Europe and Christian civilization. With this messianic image, the Kremlin is attempting to pose the Russian system of “sovereign democracy” as the only viable alternative, with its cultural and ethnic homogeneity, embrace of traditional gender roles and family unit,

and adherence to conservative values. In recent years, scholars have described authoritarian states, such as China and Russia, as attempting to create an alternative system to liberal democracy, often called illiberal democracy or competitive authoritarianism.¹⁹³ In the Russian case, the goal seems to not only be to create an alternative political system to that in the West, but an alternative cultural and societal structure that is built on a specific view of traditionality, gender norms, and religion.

The use of sexuality and gender-based narratives in Kremlin-sponsored disinformation is should be understood as a direct threat to the future of Western liberal democratic systems, especially as right-wing parties in the U.S. and Europe are increasingly embracing ideals that align with the Kremlin's alternative worldview. The Kremlin is actively utilizing sexuality and gender-based narratives in disinformation operations in order to maintain and expand domestic and geopolitical power in its claimed near abroad and beyond.

Central to these kinds of disinformation narratives is the creation and exploitation of the idea of an "Other," who emerges Western "gender ideology" and is infiltrating Russia both physically and spiritually, threatening the spiritual architecture of the Russian system. The creation of an 'Other' has been a central political and propaganda tool of Russian leadership throughout both the Imperial and Soviet eras, and Muslim and Jewish populations and an idea of the 'West' have been otherized for hundreds of years. Because of this, the current rhetoric emerging from the Kremlin is a rhetorical return to past

¹⁹³ Fareer Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, *Foreign Affairs* (Nov/Dec 1997), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>.; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002).

political rhetoric and national identity, especially from the Imperial Era. However, there has been a recasting of characters and the creation of new enemies and threats. Most significantly, the otherization of LGBTQ+ individuals and the creation and exportation of the idea of weaponized Western ‘gender ideology’ is new to the playbook. Historical circumstances of the modern age have presented gender and sexuality-based groups as a useful enemy because the otherization of these groups fits well with the historical and cultural pattern that Russian leadership has established in the past of pure/impure dichotomies. By otherizing these groups, the Kremlin can present them as existing outside of the natural order, by design of the West, in order to undermine traditional Russian culture. The entire set of sexuality and gender-based narratives covered in this analysis present two sets of threats. The first is the physical threat of sexual violence at the hands of an ‘Other.’ The second is the spiritual threat of so-called Western gender ideology. In this way, the Kremlin presents the West as posing a dual threat: one of territorial and physical encroachment and one of spiritual destruction, purposefully penetrating the Russian spiritual and cultural bodies in order to destroy “Third Rome” and the divine future of the Russian state.

Today, the Kremlin has successfully connected all of the designated ‘Others’ – the West, Jews, Muslims, and LGBTQ+ populations – into a conglomeration of an enemy that is often portrayed as being controlled by the West. In contemporary Kremlin rhetoric, the West is often tied to Islam, either through an idea of extreme tolerance or as a military partnership meant to counter the Russian state; the West is portrayed as being controlled, often financially, by Jews, often taking the form of criticism of Open Society

Foundation and George Soros; the West is depicted as the creator and exporter of LGBTQ+ ‘ideology’ or “radical feminism” in order to penetrate and weaken the traditional Russian state both physically and spiritually. Now, the West is a total threat, a merging of all possible transgressions of Russian traditional cultural boundaries. Simultaneously, the Kremlin is able to present itself as the protector of traditional political and cultural systems in countries that fall within the sphere of influence.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Three levels of action have become popular in the fight against disinformation worldwide: 1) government action; 2) social media platform action; 3) civil society group action. Any attempt to thwart the threat of disinformation must include all these of these groups and cannot exist simply as a checklist of activities to complete. With sexuality and gender-based narratives, which rely heavily on emotionally charged content, simple fact checking, or rationality is often not going to be enough. The understanding that disinformation emerges from a diverse range of actors with a diverse range of motivations, from material to political to religious, and that consumers of disinformation are diverse, is also essential.

There are different categories of consumers of disinformation: those who are deeply ingratiated with conspiratorial worldview, and those who are simply looking for answers, who are often jaded and put off by traditional political systems, but who have not formed identity around a conspiratorial worldview. The understanding that intervention strategies will not be the same for all kinds of consumers is central to success. Many scholars have assumed that conspiratorial thinking is resistant to rational argumentation; however, the findings of Orosz et al. challenge that assumption and suggest that rational argumentation and ridicule of conspiratorial thinking may be effective intervention in the case of individuals who have not become completely ingratiated in the conspiratorial mindset.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Gabor Orosz et al., “Changing Conspiracy Beliefs through Rationality and Ridiculing,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01525/full>.

Fact checking has become perhaps the most common solution to the threat of disinformation on an individual level. However, simple fact checking has extremely significant shortcomings especially in defending against emotionally charged disinformation. Fact checking is an important action that should be continued in appropriate circumstances; but it does not contribute to actual meaningful change in societal resilience against disinformation. Fact checking should be paired with meaningful media literacy training, teaching consumers how to spot disinformation without outside fact checking. In today's 'post truth' world, when consumers cannot even agree on the truth and question the integrity and unbiased nature of fact checking, the practice will not be effective.

Porter and Wood have found that fact-checking is most effective when the fact-checker is a highly credible source, and especially when the fact-checker is "surprising," i.e. a Republican correcting another Republican or a Democrat correcting another Democrat.¹⁹⁵ In addition, they and others have found that fact checking is most effective when the corrector provides a new frame for thinking about the issue, rather than simply dismissing it as wrong, and when the corrector does not directly challenge the consumer's worldview and identity.¹⁹⁶ This final characteristic is the biggest danger when considering sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives. The Kremlin's utilization of these narratives ties directly to the fact that they appeal to people's identities

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The elusive backfire effect: Mass attitudes' steadfast factual adherence," *Political Behavior* (2018).

¹⁹⁶ Brendan Nyhan, Ethan Porter, Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Wood, "Taking Fact-Checks Literally But Not Seriously? The Effects of Journalistic Fact Checking on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability," *Political Behavior* (2019).

through religion and culture. When countering these narratives, a fact checker must be careful not to completely dismiss someone's identity, as they immediately would lose credibility.

On a national and international level, action to prevent the threat of disinformation has largely been disjointed and irregular. Although much work must be done on a national level to increase media literacy and societal resilience, with sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives, the nation-state is often not the best actor to intervene. When a particular brand of gendered nationalism is being weaponized, a nation-state cannot effectively counter it. In this case, international institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations, as well as EU-US cooperative measures, are potentially the best solution. The primary recommendation here is that the United States and European Union establish a counter-disinformation coalition, which addresses joint threats and threats against the idea of Collective West.¹⁹⁷ This coalition would need to bring together experts from different fields: politics, journalism, social media platforms, and civil society to speak on a regular basis regarding narrative threats and potential solutions.

For the European Union specifically, increased funding and reorganization of the East Stratcom Unit is needed. The EastStratcom unit has been perpetually underfunded and politically unsupported at times, and, likely due to budget constraints, often conducts

¹⁹⁷ Annina Claesson, "Coming Together to Fight Fake News: Lessons from the European Approach to Disinformation," CSIS Issue 17, no. 3 (2019).

basic fact-checking that will not be effective in the fight against sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives. In general, the EU should:

- 1) *Focus on media literacy.* Media literacy programs have become more popular in Europe, but they should be the primary focus of the EU rather than efforts to take down, report, or ban disinformation itself. The reality is that rumors exist in society, but society must be able to, on average, be able to discern the truth. This could be done by incorporating media literacy into school curriculums from an early age and supporting continued-media education opportunities for all demographics.
- 2) *Increase the budget for counter-disinformation efforts.* Although the portion of the EU budget for the East StratCom Task Force in 2019 increased from 1.9 million to 5 million Euros, Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRS) alone has a budget that is more than double all of the EU's counter-disinformation agencies combined.¹⁹⁸ This is also not including the 1.4 billion Euros that the Kremlin spends on RT, Sputnik, and other mass media outlets.
- 3) *Understand the issue extends beyond election cycles.* The threat of disinformation should not be taken seriously only during election cycles. Disinformation attempts to penetrate the target audience at all times in order to fundamentally change perceptions of society, politics, and life. There are, of course, political goals that often incentivize a propagandist. However, these goals are going to be best

¹⁹⁸ Nina Jankowicz, "Avoiding the Band-Aid Effect in Institutional Response to Disinformation and Hybrid Warfare," Alliance for Securing Democracy, no. 21 (2019).

achieved if there is a constant deluge of disinformation far before an election.
Framing the issue around elections creates a fundamental misunderstanding of
how disinformation achieves intended results.

CONCLUSION

Since his return to the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has increasingly relied on the idea the West and its presumed associates as a threat to traditional gender roles and to legitimize and solidify his own heavy-handed rule. Vladimir Putin and his allies have reconstructed Russia's national identity at the nexus of "'traditional values,' patriotism, paternalism, strong statehood, and collectivism," through performatively masculine state-making.¹⁹⁹ An essential tool in the Kremlin's ideological warfare are sexuality and gender-based narratives in disinformation that targets both domestic and foreign audiences. The use of these kinds of narratives, which exploit emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust, and manipulate biases in human cognition, are cheap and effective means of furthering the Kremlin's alternative worldview abroad and strengthening Putin's rule domestically.

Russian leadership has an extensive history of utilizing an outgroup as a political and propaganda tool – most often Jews, Muslims, and some idea of conspiring West. However, the Kremlin's recent othering of LGBTQ+ populations presents a new pattern. The Kremlin has attempted to create a fear of Western ideology by manipulating targeted populations into fearing a territorial and spiritual encroachment from the West. According to the Kremlin's propaganda, an embrace of Western multiculturalism will lead to significant populations of dangerous and threatening 'Others' that will bring increased sexual violence, moral deviancy, and eventual societal degradation. Most

¹⁹⁹ Alexandra Novitskaya, "Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria," 12.

importantly, these groups will bring a deeper spiritual degradation that will weaken traditional views of the family, of gender roles, and of religion.

With the global rise of competitive authoritarianism in an era of renewed great-power competition, scholars and politicians have warned of ideological competition as a result of authoritarian actors – China and Russia – who wish to create an exportable form of illiberal, authoritarian governance. In the age of the internet, social media, and increasing distrust in institutions, social resilience against these forces is diminishing and the U.S. and many European countries are indeed at increased risk. However, in the Russian case, the goal is not only be to create an alternative political system to that in the West, but an alternative cultural and societal structure that is built on a specific view of traditionality, gender norms, and religion.

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