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Payback Needs No Bullets: Revenge as Motivation in Russia's Soft Power Campaign in Germany

Revised Abstract

This paper examines the role of revenge in shaping Russia's information campaign in Germany through a modified version of Joseph Nye's framework for government soft power policy. The success of the United States' Cold War effort to coopt the populations of Warsaw Pact countries through institutions such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America helped precipitate a crisis of identity in Russia during the 1990s. The USSR's failure to fend off what has been described as American cultural imperialism generated calls for revenge within the Russian government and public sphere, which eventually resulted in restrictions on Radio Liberty and other foreign broadcasters throughout the Russian Federation by 2002, the genesis of Russia Today by 2005 and targeted soft power campaigns throughout Europe in the 2010s. A case study focuses on propaganda targeting Russian-speakers in Germany which heavily emphasizes themes of resentment, Western cultural failure and the need for Russian-Germans to rebel against a government that is cruel and discriminatory toward them. The case study shows that a four-stage process followed by American foreign media during the Cold War has been replicated by Russian television and internet broadcasters in Germany, but modified to target specific Russophilic subgroups that share a sense of resentment against Western society. In weaponizing narratives of revenge, Russian propaganda has been able to mobilize Russian-speaking Germans to vote for right wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland and has also generated street protests by escalating the 'Lisa scandal' of January 2016. In studying this effort by the Russian government to replicate and adjust NATO's Cold War propaganda model, the paper seeks to expand scholarly interest in revenge as policy motivation in a range of state activity.

Introduction

Revenge has been much studied as a motivating force in international relations. Robert E. Harkavy, Oded Löwenheim, Gadi Heimann and Kayce Marie Mobley have examined the role of revenge in provoking, exacerbating or prolonging violent conflict between states, and Rupert Brodersen has analyzed the way leaders use moral, righteous language to justify violence that would otherwise be considered inexcusable by a domestic audience.¹ This paper explores a less-developed branch of revenge studies: its manifestations not in military aggression but in soft power policy, focusing on the propaganda of Putin's Russia in Germany. The paper's findings indicate that a desire for revenge can motivate and shape subtler aspects of foreign policy such as foreign broadcasting and diaspora relations. While strategic explanations are important and cannot be dismissed, the evidence suggests that the Russian information campaign in Germany cannot be chalked up simply to realpolitik. An ideological component is also present: specifically, a grievance-based form of payback against Western societies for perceived wrongs committed against Russia and its diaspora in Germany.

According to Joseph Nye, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, or policies.”² Nye has proposed a three-stage blueprint for state-driven soft power campaigns: first, establishing “agenda-setting” institutions such as Radio Liberty or Radio Moscow; second, “attracting” a target population; and third, eventually “coopting” that population as it warms to the culture being exported.³ Nye's “cooptation” thesis is built chiefly on the prominent example of the United States' Cold War soft power campaign, which succeeded in transforming Eastern Europe into part of America's political and cultural sphere. While Nye's framework accurately describes that particular effort, “cooptation” is not the only

¹ Robert E Harkavy, “Defeat, National Humiliation, and the Revenge Motif in International Politics,” *International Politics* 37, no. 3 (September 1, 2000): 345–68, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ip.8890515>; Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, “Revenge in International Politics,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (December 9, 2008): 685–724, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802508055>; Kayce Marie Mobley, “Revenge, Proportionality, and International Relations,” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2015) <http://athenaum.libs.uga.edu/handle/10724/34468>; Rupert Brodersen, *Emotional Motives in International Relations: Rage, Rancour and Revenge* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018).

² Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), x.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

motivating goal of soft power campaigns generally and is less applicable to countries that do not benefit from the overpowering gravitational pull of American culture.

The mechanisms implied in Nye's soft power blueprint are sound but require some refinement. This paper retains Nye's basic structure but introduces a four-stage outline to more precisely depict the processes in motion. 1) Identify a receptive target population within the enemy bloc and tailor content accordingly. 2) Achieve an overreliance on 'objective' or 'independent' foreign news sources for information while delegitimizing 'ideological' or 'biased' domestic news agencies. 3) Engender enthusiasm and trust for the foreign culture and disdain for domestic culture. 4) Generate political destabilization and unrest, which can serve multiple possible goals of the broadcaster. This was the United States' Cold War template and the one that Putin's Russia has utilized in modern times.

Understanding the mechanisms and motivations of Russia's renewed information war requires an requires a preliminary tour of two interrelated topics: first, the lessons Russia learned from the failure of the USSR to adequately defend itself from and respond to the American soft power campaign, and second, the crisis of identity that the successful export of American culture caused in Russia and the reactionary, vengeful sentiments this crisis generated. Lessons from the memory of failure and a vengeance motive produced a revitalized Kremlin soft power apparatus that operates according to similar, though not identical, logic to the historical American effort. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America succeeded in drawing entire nations into their orbit, as Czechoslovak, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, and Estonian leaders readily stated after 1989.⁴ Modern Kremlin propaganda tends to have more modest targets: people and groups who are already likely to be sympathetic to Moscow's political and cultural worldview. The case study reconstructs the Kremlin's campaign in Germany and its outcomes, arguing that Moscow's use of the four-stage blueprint, its targeting of Russian-speakers, and the themes of vengeance in its propaganda have contributed to both political and social destabilization: the former taking the form of support for right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland, the latter taking the form of street protests after Russian news agencies amplified a false story of a Russian girl's rape by Muslim migrants.

⁴ Christopher Felix, *A Short Course in the Secret War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), xviii-xx; G. R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War within the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 147-148.

Lessons from the Cold War

Dominic Tierney and Dominic Johnson contend that states that have experienced recent policy failure are far more likely to adapt than states that have not. This tendency is embodied in the concept of failure salience, which according to Tierney and Johnson is “the tendency to remember and learn more from perceived negative outcomes than from perceived positive outcomes...decisionmakers are far more likely to draw analogies to past debacles than they are to triumphs.”⁵ Failure salience rooted in the psychological phenomenon known as the negativity bias, which holds that the human brain fixates much more strongly on failures, humiliations and dangers than on positive events or outcomes. Tierney and Johnson state that “[m]ajor policy failures can define a historical period,”⁶ and cite the examples of a reactionary Germany after the First World War and the anti-war movements of the United States in response to the flagging military campaign in Vietnam.

In Russia’s case, a current defining policy failure is the Soviet Union’s inability to withstand ideological and cultural pressure from the United States through censorship in print, radio jamming and state control of television airwaves. This failure was partly due to the inherently amorphous and unmanageable nature of information osmosis and partly because the USSR was attempting to play a role that was beyond its ability to meet. On the one hand, regulating the flow of information in closed, large societies across thousands of miles was logistically daunting, demanded immense effort and required constant vigilance for extant and possible cracks in defenses.⁷ On the other hand, the United States soft power operation during the Cold War has been recognized as the most successful such campaign ever undertaken. Arch Puddington describes Radio Free Europe in particular as “arguably the most influential politically oriented international radio station in history.”⁸ J. Michael Waller comes to a similar conclusion: “Studies of American broadcasting into the Soviet bloc...confirm that public diplomacy efforts of the United States and its allies during the Cold War were hugely successful in creating the favorable conditions that led to the collapse of the Soviet empire in the late

⁵ Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, “Bad World: The Negativity Bias in International Politics,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (February 1, 2019): 112-113, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00336.

⁶ Ibid, 113.

⁷ Nye, *Soft Power*, 74.

⁸ Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), ix.

1980's.”⁹ Puddington and Waller—as well as Nicholas Schlosser, Michael Nelson, Timothy Ryback, Simo Mikkonen, Timothy Garton Ash, A. Ross Johnson, R. Eugene Parta and G. R. Urban—have demonstrated that American broadcasting networks were able to achieve a depth of penetration and trust in the communist world that the Soviet Union was structurally unable to reciprocate in Western societies.¹⁰ According to Boris Bruk, “Soviet propagandists were guided by and tried to utilize the same methods of manipulation (which worked in their own country with a static social structure) on the international arena...As a result, in many cases propaganda aimed at the countries with open societies had little effectiveness.”¹¹

Not all soft power is created equal. The success of the U.S. information campaign after World War II can be attributed to the conscious weaponization of existing cultural products that were being produced independently of the state and naturally appealed to millions worldwide: jazz, rock and roll, Hollywood movies, fashion trends, and much more. The postwar USSR attempted to frame its value system as a universal one through broadcasters like Radio Moscow and Radio Peace and Progress, as well as international organizations such as Cominform, the World Peace Council, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, the International Union of Students, and others. These organizations were premised on ideological and economic, as opposed to cultural, messaging. The Soviet Union had audiences across the non-communist globe—university students, socialist parties in Italy and France, intellectuals and elite modernizers in the Third World, guerilla and anti-imperial movements in South America and Africa—but the underlying appeal or superiority of Russian culture was rarely the centerpiece of Soviet foreign propaganda, even if that theme was prominent domestically. According to Nye, “the Soviet Union ceded the battle for mass culture,

⁹ Michael J. Waller et al., *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics, 2009), 67.

¹⁰ Nicholas J. Schlosser, *The Berlin Radio War: Broadcasting in Cold War Berlin and the Shaping of Political Culture in Divided Germany, 1945-1961* (ProQuest, 2008); Simo Mikkonen, “Stealing the Monopoly of Knowledge?: Soviet Reactions to U.S. Cold War Broadcasting,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* vol. 11, no. 4 (2010): 771-805; Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy*; Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: a History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 7-18, 85-102; ¹⁰ Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse University Press, 1997); A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: A Collection of Studies and Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Boris V. Bruk, 2013, “International Propaganda: The Russian Version,” paper presented at *45th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES): “Revolution,” Boston, MA, November 21–24, 2013*, 8, https://imrussia.org/media/pdf/Research/Boris_Bruk_International_Propaganda_Russian_Version.pdf.

never competing with American global influence in film, television, or popular music...American music and films leaked into the Soviet Union with profound effects, but the indigenous Soviet products never found an overseas market.”¹² Attempts to domestically engineer communist-friendly mutations of American cultural products—such as ‘Red Western’ cowboy movies and the managed importation of U.S. pop music through socialist artists like Dean Reed—had some success, but were unable to surmount the problem because Eastern Bloc publics perceived American popular culture as organic, unforced and authentic.¹³ Sergei Zhuk notes the 1991 analysis of a former KGB officer: “The Soviet Union lost the Cold War to the United States of America because our Soviet ideologists failed a competition with the Western and especially, American popular culture, and especially, with the movies, television and music from the capitalist West.”¹⁴

Any new information war conducted by the Russian Federation based on the Soviet experience required extensive revision and a borrowing of methodology from the other side. Rather than attempting to coopt the populations of entire countries, Putin’s foreign propaganda effort has traded scope for effectiveness: it targets specific, manageable groups that possess either preexisting associations with Russia, such as Germany’s population of Russian-speakers, or identifiable affinity for Putin’s message of social conservatism and cultural traditionalism, such as elements of the European far-right. It has been said that “Russian information warfare is not consistent and strategic; its fundamental quality is tactical opportunism.”¹⁵ Stefan Meister has similarly argued that Russia’s propaganda campaign, conducted in pursuit of long-term strategic interests, usually has no ideological preference so long as the effect is to destabilize the target country’s political system; the Kremlin’s current emphasis on right wing parties is only a

¹² Nye, *Soft Power*, 74.

¹³ Rüdiger Ritter, “Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc—Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange? The Example of Willis Conover,” *Jazz Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 2013): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17494060.2014.885641>. See also Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945 – 1961* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Seán Allan, “Transnational Stardom: DEFA’s Management of Dean Reed,” in *Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Contexts*, ed. Seán Allan and Sebastian Heiduschke (New York, Berghahn Books, 2016), 168-188.

¹⁴ Sergei Zhuk, “Hollywood’s Insidious Charms: The Impact of American Cinema and Television on the Soviet Union during the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 593, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950252>.

¹⁵ Nicholas J. Cull et al., “Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against It. An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present - Executive Summary” (LSE Consulting, October 2017), 11, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2017/301017-Jigsaw-Soviet-Subversion-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-EXEC-SUMMARY.pdf>.

means to that end.¹⁶ While it is true that Putin's government seeks to maximize destabilization in NATO countries (and for this reason has occasionally supported radical left-wing groups in addition to right-wing ones) these analyses downplay the fact that—as will be discussed below—there is genuine ideological overlap between the populist, anti-progressive parties of Europe and a Russian vendetta against the Western powers that predates the current soft power effort. Russia's closest political allies include Viktor Orban's Fidesz government in Hungary, which has been sympathetic to Putin's anti-migrant stance; Austria's FPÖ, whose chairman Heinz-Christian Strache has long affiliated with Russian conservatives; France's National Rally (formerly National Front), which has taken out loans from Russian banks; Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, whose leaders have traveled to Russia to discuss election strategy; and so forth.¹⁷ Russia's soft power effort is not purely focused on conservative populations but is unmistakably biased toward such groups because they are ideologically aligned with Putin's nationalist, traditionalist policies.

What unifies those targets of Russian influence is a shared sense of grievance against mutually intelligible versions of the Western neoliberal order and the desire to rectify perceived injustices and punish the perpetrators. The thirst for revenge plays a role in motivating Russia's foreign propaganda campaign and, crucially, also colors the content and nature of the propaganda itself. As will be covered in the case study, targeted content produced for Russian-Germans revolves around themes of vengeance and punishing or fighting back against the 'decadent' and 'immoral' West for attacking Russia and persecuting its diaspora. The motivation of Russian policymakers themselves stems from negative perceptions, originating during the 1990s, that Western nations peddle false promises masking a vicious agenda of exploitation.

The next section of the paper examines the origins of this sense of grievance, using the case of Radio Liberty as an illustration. In the 1990s, Radio Liberty transitioned from the role of

¹⁶ Yarden Schwartz, "Putin's Throwback Propaganda Playbook," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January 18, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/putin_russia_propaganda_trump.php/.

¹⁷ Anne Applebaum et al., "'Make Germany Great Again' – Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections," Institute for Strategic Dialogue/London School of Economics, December 2017, 10, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/make-germany-great-again-kremlin-alt-right-and-international-influences-in-the-2017-german-elections/>.

enemy broadcasting station to symbol of Russia's continued humiliation by the United States and the necessity of retaliatory broadcasting policies against America and its allies.

Origins of Post-Soviet Grievance

When the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the remaining restrictions on information access that had persisted during the glasnost period. What had been a stream became a cascade: almost overnight, Russian citizens were exposed to an enormous quantity of information that had previously been heavily filtered or prohibited. It was not until 1988 that a mainstream Soviet film, *Little Vera*, even featured an explicit sex scene¹⁸; in the 1990s, pornography in Russia became so ubiquitous that the era came to be called a “porn boom.”¹⁹ Helming the world's most extensive jamming operation, Soviet authorities restricted access to Voice of America until 1987 and Radio Liberty until 1988; in August 1991, Boris Yeltsin allowed Radio Liberty to open a permanent office in Moscow.²⁰ These rapid reversals were culturally and socially disorienting. While much of the public took advantage of newfound information access—museum attendance in 1993, for instance, increased more than 70 percent over the previous year—economic chaos and hyperinflation also caused a severe cutback in participation in most public cultural and educational events.²¹ In 1993, Russian theaters received 12 percent of the ticket revenue they had in 1990,²² annual concert attendance was less than half of what it had been in 1980²³ and the film industry experienced what has been described as a “near-total collapse.”²⁴ The Soviet Union had had the highest rate of cinema attendance on earth²⁵; in 1995, nationwide cinema attendance was

¹⁸ Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97.

¹⁹ Saara Ratilainen, “Old Title, New Traditions: Negotiating ideals of femininity in *Krest'ianka* magazine,” in *Mediating Post-Socialist Femininities*, ed. Nadia Kaneva (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 94.

²⁰ Serge Schmemmann, “Soviet Union Ends Years Of Jamming Radio Liberty,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/01/world/soviet-union-ends-years-of-jamming-of-radio-liberty.html>;

Philip Shenon, “Years of Jamming Voice of America Halted by Soviet,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/26/world/years-of-jamming-voice-of-america-halted-by-soviet.html>;

Rimantas Pleikys, “Radio Jamming in the Soviet Union, Poland and others [sic] East European Countries,” *Antentop* 2006, no. 8, <http://www.antentop.org/008/files/jamm008.pdf>; Steven Lee Myers, “Putin Annuls Decree Allowing Radio Liberty's Broadcasts,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/05/world/putin-annuls-decree-allowing-radio-liberty-s-broadcasts.html>.

²¹ K. Razlogov et al., *Cultural policy in the Russian Federation* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 1997), 156.

²² *Ibid.*, 142.

²³ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153; Olga Sezneva and Joe Karaganis, “Chapter 4: Russia,” in *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies*, ed. Joe Karaganis (Social Science Research Council, 2011), 158.

²⁵ Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.

by one measure a hundred times smaller than it had been in Soviet times.²⁶ In the 1990s, less than ten percent of films shown in cinemas were Russian-made,²⁷ with three-quarters of featured pictures being American.²⁸ In place of the mass cultural participation that had been routine in the USSR was an explosion of pirated home movies and cassette tapes.²⁹ Meanwhile, social and economic problems multiplied and crime increased to unprecedented levels. In 1994, the homicide rate was more than triple that of 1988; Russia's murder rate soon reached up to twenty times the Western European average.³⁰ A 1994 survey found that 95 percent of Moscow women feared the possibility of rape.³¹ The spirit of reform and progress that had swept the country in the early 1990s had by the end of the decade turned into widespread pessimism and a sense of national failure. When Boris Yeltsin had taken office as president of Russia in 1991, he enjoyed a 90 percent approval rating;³² when he left the presidency in late 1999, one poll registered his approval rating at 8 percent, while another showed 2 percent.³³

The social and political hardships of the 1990s inflicted significant damage onto the Soviet Union's foreign propaganda apparatus. The USSR had once helmed a fearsome radio, print and television operation: it spent up to \$4 billion each year on foreign propaganda during the 1970s and 1980s,³⁴ spreading pro-communist content in dozens of languages across the globe and sustaining an 'information race' with the United States.³⁵ In the years following 1991, the Russian media experienced severe funding cuts and invested little effort disseminating

²⁶ George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (Penn State Press, 2010), 2.

²⁷ Walter Moss, *A History of Russia, Volume 2: Since 1855* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 565.

²⁸ Robert A. Saunders and Vlad Strukov, *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Federation* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 186.

²⁹ Sezneva and Karaganis, "Chapter 4: Russia," 158-159.

³⁰ William Alex Pridemore, "Measuring Homicide in Russia: A Comparison of Estimates from the Crime and Vital Statistics Reporting Systems," *Social Science & Medicine* 57, no. 8 (October 2003): 1343-54, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/12927465/>; Valeriy V. Chervyakov et al., "The Changing Nature of Murder in Russia," *Social Science & Medicine* 55, no. 10 (November 2002): 1713-24, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12383457>.

³¹ Janet Elise Johnson, *Gender Violence in Russia: The Politics of Feminist Intervention* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 29-30.

³² Michael McFaul, "Yeltsin's Legacy," *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 24, no. 2 (2000): 42.

³³ Ibid; Mark Tran, "The Political Highs and Lows of Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin," *The Guardian*, April 23, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/23/russia.marktran>.

³⁴ Bruk, "International Propaganda," 8.

³⁵ Linda Riso, "Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War," *Cold War History* 13, no. 2 (May 2013): 145-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.757134>.

information abroad.³⁶ Left without a unifying ideological theme,³⁷ the country's formerly extensive operations in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia were downsized and sometimes neglected to the point of extinction. With the drawdown of the former USSR's international obligations and the Russian Federation no longer seeking to export communism, post-Soviet reporting culture became disoriented and, in a state of vacuum, attempted to mimic the media of Western countries. Olga Khvostunova writes: "Fascinated by the seemingly ideal Western model of the press, Russian media borrowed most of its characteristics: freedom of speech, private ownership of the media outlets, similar legislation, distance from the state, public influence, and a watchdog role."³⁸ Meanwhile, Yeltsin's decision to allow Radio Liberty to broadcast freely within the Russian Federation—without securing parallel rights for Russian radio in the United States—was a move that at the time was considered extremely radical.³⁹ Although the decree had enough support to remain in place for a decade, it was harshly criticized from many directions. Radio Liberty itself reported in 2002 that a broad spectrum of "nationalists, Communists, and other reactionary elements have regularly called for an end to RFE/RL's activities in Russia."⁴⁰

Over the course of the 1990s, a narrative developed among the Russian elite and public that the country's problems had been caused by the crude and ineffective transplantation of Western economic and cultural models onto Russian society. According to this worldview, these failures happened due to the confluence of internal treachery or incompetence (culprits included Mikhail Gorbachev, privatization masterminds Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, and Yeltsin) and duplicitous Westerners who promised prosperity and cultural enrichment but delivered exploitation and the debasement of Russian life (for instance, Lawrence Summers, Jeffrey Sachs, Jonathan Hay, and members of the Harvard Institute for International Development).⁴¹ At a 1998 symposium at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov is reported to have "singled out Harvard for the harm inflicted on the Russian economy by its

³⁶ Olga Khvostunova, "A Complete Guide to Who Controls the Russian News Media," *Index on Censorship* (blog), December 9, 2013, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/12/brief-history-russian-media/>.

Bruk, "International Propaganda," 8.

³⁷ Julia Ioffe, "What Is Russia Today? The Kremlin's Propaganda Outlet Has an Identity Crisis," *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 2010, https://www.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php.

³⁸ Khvostunova, "A Complete Guide."

³⁹ Myers, "Putin Annuls Decree."

⁴⁰ "Newslines – October 4, 2002," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, October 4, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142773.html>.

⁴¹ Janine R. Wedel, "The Harvard Boys Do Russia," *The Nation*, May 14, 1998, <https://www.thenation.com/article/harvard-boys-do-russia/>.

advisers, who encouraged Chubais's misguided approach to privatization and monetarism."⁴² At a summer protest in front of the Duma in the same year, demonstrators held signs saying "Are the Yankees the rulers of this country?" and "Stop experimenting with the Russian People!"⁴³

Although they were unfocused, in the minority and lacked support from the Yeltsin government, during the 1990s there were already numerous calls for revenge against outsiders who had caused harm to Russia's social fabric. In the Duma, there was a faction sympathetic to the notion of retaliation or payback for "interference" or "violations of sovereignty" by Western information agencies, but it did not have much impact on policy and was attacked by supporters of the new government. On 16 February 1994, controversial LDPR deputy V. A. Marychev made the following proposal: "In connection to interference in the internal affairs of the sovereign state of Russia, I propose to ban the activities of Radio Liberty on television throughout the territory of the Russian Federation...including in the Central House of Cinematographers."⁴⁴ He was swiftly ridiculed by film director and Choice of Russia deputy Yuli Gusman, who suggested that such propositions made the Duma look like a "madhouse" to the outside world, that it was "obvious nonsense...to jam other people's stations," and that the proposal should not even be put to a vote.⁴⁵ Gusman, a supporter of Yeltsin, expressed a view that at the time was common, though far from universally accepted: Soviet-style jamming or interruption of foreign broadcasting was a fruitless and expensive endeavor that could and would be circumvented. Despite Gusman's dismissal, Marychev's resolution was in fact put to a vote and produced the outcome: 76 for (17.1%), 157 against (35.4%), 32 abstentions (7.2%), and 179 cast no vote (40.3%). Those supporting retaliation against American information agencies were outnumbered, but it was a large enough bloc to ensure that variations on the subject were continually revisited in subsequent parliamentary sessions, though they seldom yielded actionable proposals.

When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency, he swiftly validated the narrative of internal dereliction and external manipulation. In a little-remembered interview of the new president conducted by *Izvestiya* in July 2000, Putin voiced his belief that Russian society had

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dan Josefsson, "Shock Therapy: The Art of Ruining a Country," *ETC English Edition* 1 (April 1999), <http://josefsson.net/artikelarki/51-shock-therapy-the-art-of-ruining-a-country.html>.

⁴⁴ "Стенограмма заседания 16 февраля 1994 г.," Государственная Дума, <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/3239/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

been severely damaged by Western ‘advertising packages’ that had been promoted on film, television, and radio and through the economic management theories of shock therapy.

Question: In your [recent address to the Federal Assembly] you said that we have ‘shared values that unite us.’ Will you try to implant a new national idea in society?

Putin: [T]he country has lived amid fierce political battles for ten years and many have felt that a national idea was a panacea that would end interminable quarrels and arguments. The government failed to explain to the people convincingly the implications of the ongoing changes for the country and for each individual. All the words were uttered: freedom, democracy, a free market. But what stands behind the words? Copies of advertising spots from Western media or perhaps shining shop windows? Or something else? For a long time the popular mind has been exposed to this ‘advertising-package’ propaganda. I believe that inventing or, as you put it, implanting a national idea is a futile and meaningless thing. It cannot be invented. The morality and ethics of a people are shaped over centuries. Russia, like any self-respecting state, has the basis on which we can build our moral edifice, so to speak. ⁴⁶

Embedded in Putin’s analysis is a condemnation of both the American information apparatus that in his view had intruded upon Russian society and of the internal collaborators who had opened the door and left it up to the public to determine ‘the implications of the ongoing changes’.

Pursuant to his stated agenda of Russian self-determination, Putin also established early on that he would be more receptive to calls for retaliation against the U.S. media footprint in Russia than Yeltsin had been. On 16 January 2000, security forces arrested Radio Liberty journalist Andrei Babitsky in Chechnya after he had caused controversy by publishing what was perceived to be pro-rebel reporting. Although he was eventually released, Babitsky is reputed to have been tortured and threatened while in custody. Using the language of betrayal and ingratitude that would recur throughout his presidency in multiple contexts, Putin told *Kommersant-Daily* in a 10 March interview: “He worked directly for the enemy. He was not a neutral source of information. He worked for bandits, he worked for bandits. What Babitsky did is much more dangerous than shooting machine guns... Who asked him to go there without accreditation from official authorities?... You say that he is a Russian citizen. Then behave according to the laws of your country, if you expect that the same laws will be applied to you.”⁴⁷ Thomas Dine, director of RFE/RL, noted in 1 March testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Relations that Yeltsin started his term by permitting a Radio Liberty

⁴⁶ “Interview with the Izvestia Newspaper,” *President of Russia*, July 14, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24171>.

⁴⁷ Pavel Gutiontov, “An Ordinary Business,” *Business Tuesday*, March 2, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20110722133248/http://www.ruj.ru/authors/gut/100303_4.htm.

office to open in Moscow, while Putin started his by arresting a Radio Liberty journalist.⁴⁸ Putin later expressed irritation at the United States directly for what he perceived to be hypocritical behavior. In a press conference on 18 July 2001, the president responded to a question about international media cooperation by stating, “I would say that we are totally open, whereas we ourselves sometimes meet with obstacles. For instance, I am sure representatives of Radio Liberty are present here. Radio Liberty is operating here as a national radio station. But when our Ministry of the Press asked the US authorities to allow Radio Russia or Radio Mayak to operate on the same terms, we were turned down.”⁴⁹ Here as in the Babitsky case, Putin alleged grievance and hypocrisy and strongly suggested that retributive measures against American media were coming soon.

Given the financial woes, political dysfunction and relative media freedom of the Yeltsin presidency, those who were outraged at the time about the influence of American culture and information agencies on Russian society were unable to generate retaliatory momentum. What was ultimately required for that policy shift was the combination of a sympathetic executive and a galvanizing event to focus uncoordinated appeals against a plausible enemy. Such an opportunity appeared on 3 April 2002, at the end of the military phase of the anti-insurgency campaign in the Caucasus, when Radio Liberty began broadcasting in Chechnya in the Russian, Chechen, Avar, and Circassian languages.⁵⁰ The U.S. decision to broadcast in the Caucasus caused immediate outrage among Russian officials. The Foreign Ministry issued a warning that the action would sour Russian-American relations that had improved since the 11 September attacks, a loud chorus of elected officials condemned Russia’s lack of reciprocal broadcasting in the United States, and Vladimir Putin’s office declared that RFE/RL’s programming will be monitored “very seriously and attentively.”⁵¹ Assurances by the U.S. State Department that RFE/RL was merely a “news and information service” that did not reflect U.S. foreign policy were, predictably, not believed,⁵² while U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s claim that the

⁴⁸ U.S. Government Printing Office, “The War in Chechnya: Russia’s Conduct, the Humanitarian Crisis, and United States Policy (Committee on Foreign Relations – United States Senate),” March 1, 2000, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg63578/html/CHRG-106shrg63578.htm>.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Excerpts from the Transcript of a Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists,” *President of Russia*, July 18, 2001, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21291>.

⁵⁰ Martin Ritchie, “US radio begins Chechen broadcasts,” *BBC News*, April 3, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1909273.stm>; A. Ross Johnson, “History Of RFE/RL,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, December 2008, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/history>.

⁵¹ Ritchie, “US radio begins Chechen broadcasts.”

⁵² *Ibid.*

move was “not intended to harm Russia or damage Russian-American relations” was dismissed.⁵³ Presidential spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky decried the “one-sidedness” of the broadcasts and vowed that “Moscow will not disregard indulgence in extremism and terrorism.”⁵⁴ He went on to say that, in the long term, “some kind of reciprocal action within the framework of Russian legislation” would be needed.⁵⁵ Roman Stershnev, a writer for Ministry of Defense publication *Krasnaya Zvezda*, captured the prevailing point of view in a piece titled “‘Liberty’ of Terrorists?”: “[T]he dissemination of ‘Liberty’s’ broadcasting to the already restless North Caucasus is intended to consolidate a pro-Western informational niche...with the help of which one can significantly increase pressure on Russian policy pursued in the region. This is evidenced by the entire experience of ‘Liberty’s’ broadcasting, which has always served as a tool for promoting American interests.”⁵⁶

In the Duma, pressure to act mounted across the ideological spectrum. United Russia member and deputy chairman of the International Committee Sergey Shishkarev submitted a notice to Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and said in a speech of 24 April 2002: “We are interested in the way in which the radio station ‘Liberty’ received a license for broadcasting on Russian air and on what basis this radio station operates in the territory of the Russian Federation... Why does our radio station, for example, Voice of Russia, not have similar rights in the United States? What does the Government of Russia plan to do to neutralize the very likely negative effect of the radio station ‘Liberty’ broadcasting to the North Caucasus?”⁵⁷ On the same day, communist party deputy Yury Nikiforenko accused Yeltsin of an opportunistic betrayal of Russia: “The fact is that there are no Russian radio stations on the air in the United States. The FSB and foreign intelligence do not finance anyone against the United States. And here we experienced a humiliating act of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin in August 1991: he needed help in his struggle against Soviet power. And now we got a radio station that is fighting against the Russian people, Russian culture, the Russian state, and not only in connection with Chechnya, but in many positions.”⁵⁸ This last part of Nikiforenko’s remarks was particularly noteworthy: the assertion that Radio Liberty was conducting a multipronged assault on Russian

⁵³ Алексей Маринин, “‘Свобода’ заговорила по-чеченски,” *Российская газета*, April 4, 2002.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Роман Стершневу, “‘СВОБОДА’ ТЕРРОРИСТАМ?,” *Красная звезда*, April 4, 2002.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Стенограмма заседания 24 апреля 2002 г.,” Государственная Дума, <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/1719/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

society and was a symbol of the country's continued cultural and geopolitical humiliation by the United States.

There were several dissenters on the committee. Fatherland – All Russia deputy Konstantin Kosachev, delivered a case rooted in upholding press freedom: “Of course, it’s impossible to agree with many assessments of Liberty journalists, but if we follow the principle of freedom of speech, then we must defend our positions and interests not through prohibitions and jamming, but with the help of transparency and legitimacy of actions by federal forces in Chechnya.” More provocative was the dissent of Union of Right Forces deputy Andrei Wolf, whose speech centered less on principle and more on the practical shortcomings of censorship:

I am also against the propaganda of terrorism in the mass media, but I want to draw the attention of my esteemed colleagues to the reason why the Liberty radio station’s broadcasting in the Chechen language will definitely find its audience. It is in a certain information vacuum which has formed in the territory of the republic, where the only source of information about the current situation of the counterterrorist operation is one – the official point of view. Unfortunately, this point of view is one-sided and not always objective. And in this situation, naturally, other, alternative points of view will be heard and will be popular... We have very bad memories related to how we jammed Radio Liberty and Voice of America, but, despite this, the intellectuals in the kitchens tried to listen. Let’s not go on the same prohibitive path. And if we say that we are losing the information war in Chechnya, then we are losing it not because we did not ban something in time, but because we cannot prepare truly high-quality journalists working professionally in this field who could adequately and objectively cover the events taking place in Chechnya from all sides.⁵⁹

This admonition of learning lessons from past failure as opposed to seeking vengeance struck a nerve among others on the committee and particularly irked Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The LDPR chairman delivered an impassioned rebuttal accusing Wolf of being anti-Russian and suggesting that Russian radio ought to penetrate the entire United States as retaliation for Radio Liberty’s activity in Chechnya: “[Not to] interfere with the position of Deputy Wolf [is] to destroy the Russian Federation from the inside... we have the right to stop [Radio Liberty’s] activities. And do not refer to the fact that someone wants to hear something in all languages. Let’s have the radio station ‘Mayak’ broadcast to the whole of America.”⁶⁰ Although Zhirinovskiy’s position was much closer to the average than Wolf’s was, the latter’s emphasis on internalizing and reacting to the problems of Soviet censorship presaged future Kremlin policy.

⁵⁹ “О проекте постановления Государственной Думы ‘О парламентском запросе Государственной Думы Федерального Собрания Российской Федерации Председателю Правительства Российской Федерации М. М. Касьянову ‘О вещании радиостанции ‘Свобода’ на чеченском языке на территории Северного Кавказа,’” Государственная Дума, http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/api_search/?kodz=612&kodvopr=32.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The failure of Wolf's argument to persuade the Duma is a telling barometer of how much Russian politics had changed since the early 1990s. While skeptics presented their positions, the momentum within Moscow was clearly skewed toward the retributive posture that had been denied to prior advocates like Marychev. The vote tally that obtained in 1994 had been decisively reversed. The tally on Shishkarev's motion produced the results: 347 for (77.1%), 1 against (0.2%), 0 abstentions, and 102 cast no vote (22.7%). With a likeminded president and a clear example of what critics could plausibly frame as a premeditated infringement on sovereignty and an interjection into a sensitive domestic crisis, it was a matter of time before Yeltsin's August 1991 decision would be nullified. That came to pass on 4 October 2002, when Putin's office signaled that the president was revoking the decree.⁶¹ While the announcement did not legalize RFE/RL content within the Russian Federation—playing to the Kremlin's broader pretense of the time that a media takeover was not occurring—it was clearly designed to curtail the organization's influence by removing the special status it had been given a decade earlier. A *New York Times* article of 5 October remarked on the Kremlin's press release: “[T]he statement reiterated criticisms that Russian officials have leveled against [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty] for its coverage. It singled out the station's reporting on Chechnya, where Russia is mired in a civil war, and on Ukraine, a former Soviet republic.”⁶²

The Caucasus broadcasting scandal was indicative of an emerging political climate where leniency toward American reporting would no longer be tolerated. It was also a watershed moment in which both the legislative and executive branches of the Russian government publicly expressed interest in developing a new foreign information apparatus to counterbalance Western media. In the years that followed 2002, investment in foreign television and radio broadcasting significantly rose and Moscow enlisted the help of public relations firms such as Ketchum, Inc.⁶³ Within less than a decade, the Kremlin's annual budget on foreign propaganda started exceeding \$1 billion.⁶⁴ Moscow established, among other networks, Russia Today in 2005, Russia Beyond the Headlines in 2007, and Sputnik in 2014, all of which have been generously funded. RT in

⁶¹ Myers, “Putin Annuls Decree”; “Newline – October 4, 2002,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*.

⁶² Myers, “Putin Annuls Decree.”

⁶³ Bruk, “International Propaganda,” 14-15.

⁶⁴ Joby Warricki and Anton Troianovsk, “How a Powerful Russian Propaganda Machine Chips Away at Western Notions of Truth,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/national-security/russian-propaganda-skripal-salisbury/>.

particular is as among Putin's cherished projects, one he has insisted must receive "full support" from the state for all its budgetary needs.⁶⁵ When the Ministry of Finance suggested that it was considering a cut to RT's funding in October 2012, "Putin personally intervened to block [it]."⁶⁶ RT's starting budget of \$30 million quintupled within three years and by 2012 had reached \$200 million.⁶⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov has documented how during the 2000s the Russian government also started shortlisting potential information targets in Western societies—including constituencies of Austria's FPÖ and France's Front National—and began pouring money into pro-Russian journals in foreign languages, like Italy's *Eurasia: Rivista di studi geopolitici*,⁶⁸ and front organizations posturing as think tanks or centers of learning, like the Vienna-based Austrian Technologies GmbH.⁶⁹ This temperature-taking laid the groundwork for the robust and much-publicized influence campaigns of the 2010s.

The Kremlin's network of foreign media has unified lessons from the Soviet broadcasting experience with a message of grievance against injustices committed by Western powers. On the one hand, Russian propaganda can be targeted, precise and written for a specific foreign audience, as the case study of Russian-German media consumption will illustrate. The Putin-era information war never unfolded along the lines of Zhirinovskiy's exaggerated goal of making Radio Mayak broadcast to "the whole of America," a simplistic tit-for-tat based on RFE/RL's model of penetrating the entire Soviet bloc. Konstantin Kosachev, director of the Russian agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, has stated (as quoted in Bruk) that it is "a mistake to consider [current] interest [in soft power] as an attempt to [revive] the Soviet-style propaganda."⁷⁰ On the other hand, the information campaign's content revolves around a narrative of Russian persecution (both at home and abroad) and the need to resist perceived mischaracterizations of Russia by the Western media, U.S. and NATO aggression, and cultural progressivism. Despite signs of a potential détente during the 'reset' discussions of the early Obama presidency, already in 2010 the Columbia Journalism Review highlighted the disconnect

⁶⁵ Bruk, "International Propaganda," 13.

⁶⁶ Oliver Bullough, "Inside Russia Today: Counterweight to the Mainstream Media, or Putin's Mouthpiece?," *New Statesman America*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/world-affairs/2013/05/inside-russia-today-counterweight-mainstream-media-or-putins-mou>.

⁶⁷ Bruk, "International Propaganda," 10.

⁶⁸ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018): 176.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 164-170.

⁷⁰ Bruk, "International Propaganda," 9.

between Russia Today's formal status as a reputation-boosting institution and de facto role as an instrument of vengeance against Western targets: "Russia Today was conceived as a soft-power tool to improve Russia's image abroad, to counter the anti-Russian bias the Kremlin saw in the Western media. Since its founding in 2005, however, the broadcast outlet has become better known as an extension of former President Vladimir Putin's confrontational foreign policy. Too often the channel was provocative just for the sake of being provocative... Often, it seemed that Russia Today was just a way to stick it to the U.S. from behind the façade of legitimate newsgathering."⁷¹

The case study that forms the final part of this paper examines the effects of the Kremlin's soft power strategy in Germany over the course of the last six years. Through the practical application of the four-stage soft power model—modified to target a particularly susceptible demographic—and vengeance-themed anti-Western content, Kremlin-funded news agencies have been able to create or exacerbate both political destabilization and physical unrest.

Case Study: Russian-speakers in Germany

Background

The Russian-speaking community in Germany consists of at least 3 million people, or about 4 percent of the country's population. The largest subgroups are ethnic German *Aussiedler* (more than 2 million), ethnic Russians (about 1.31 million), and Russian Jews (at least 118,000), with smaller numbers of other post-Soviet emigres living predominantly in the former GDR.⁷² In 2017, immigrants from Russia comprised 12.5 percent of the total migrant population vote, a percentage equal to the voter base of migrant Turks, while Kazakh immigrants (most of whom are Russian-speaking) comprised 10.6 percent.⁷³ While some ethnic Germans had already come to West Germany during the early Cold War, in 1980s Helmut Kohl's government instituted a controversial 'open-door policy' that encouraged mass repatriation over the following decades,

⁷¹ Ioffe, "What Is Russia Today?"

⁷² For immigrants from the Russian Federation: *Migration und Integration: Bevölkerung in Privathaushalten nach Migrationshintergrund im engeren Sinne nach ausgewählten Herkunftsländern* (2017), distributed by Destatis, <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/migrationshintergrund-staatsangehoerigkeit-staaten.html;jsessionid=E2D6B81381F9FDDF5DEB9C7E84A1CD9D.internet722>.

⁷³ Mara Bierbach, "What You Need to Know about the German Electorate," *Deutsche Welle*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-german-electorate/a-40196296>.

although a yearly quota was imposed beginning in 1993.⁷⁴ *Aussiedler* were typically put on a fast-track for citizenship rights and offered integration classes, and are largely bilingual while ethnic Russians and Jews are significantly less so.⁷⁵

While the term ‘Russian-Germans’ is often used to refer specifically to Russian-speaking ethnic Germans, for the sake of brevity this case study uses that phrase to refer to all Russian-speakers in Germany. It should also be noted from the outset that the case study only refers to part of the Russian-German population: fifteen prominent community organizations have published an open letter stating “[There is a] very one-sided portrayal of ethnic Germans from Russia as a particularly motivated group of voters... We are not the AfD, not the CDU, and not Putin’s fifth column! We are individuals like all other citizens of our country!”⁷⁶ To avoid mischaracterization, this paper’s analysis tries to be as objective as possible by referring to the available data, scholarship, fact-based investigative reporting and primary sources.

Russian-Germans enjoy a large menu of Russian-language media, which can be locally-produced or broadcast from within Russia via satellite television or the Internet, and are serviced by a network of Russian-language newspapers and other print media. Beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s, print publications included *Evropazentr*, *Russkij Berlin / Russkaja Germanija*, *Vostochny Express*, *MiR Medien in Russisch*, *Neue Semljaki*, *Kommersant Weekly*, and *Moskovskii Komsomolets Germania*.⁷⁷ German-language online publications include *Heimat Rodina* and *anonymousnews.ru*. More recently, Russian social media apps such as *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte* have become popular sources of information among younger members of the community.⁷⁸ Satellite television and the internet provide access to Russian channels and websites including *Rossiya 1*, *RIA Novosti*, *REN-TV*, *Channel One*, *RT* and its branches *Ruptly*

⁷⁴ Veysel Oezcan, “Germany: Immigration in Transition,” *migrationpolicy.org*, July 1, 2004, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/germany-immigration-transition>.

⁷⁵ *Russian-speaking Germans* (October, 2016), distributed by Boris Nemtsov Foundation, https://nemtsovfund.org/cp/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Russians-in-Germany-v.9a_eng.pdf.

⁷⁶ Andrey Gurkov, “Ethnic Germans from Russia in Open Letter: ‘We Are Not the AfD,’” *Deutsche Welle*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/ethnic-germans-from-russia-in-open-letter-we-are-not-the-afd/a-40549269>.

⁷⁷ Tsypylma Darieva, “Russian ethnic media in Germany, Great Britain, Austria and France,” report for European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network, London School of Economics, July 2001, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EMTEL/minorities/papers/russianmediamap.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Nikolay Mitrokhin, “The ‘Russian World’ in Germany,” *Eurozine*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-russian-world-in-germany/>.

and RT Deutsch, and Sputnik.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Russian-Germans—who have been described as an ‘invisible’ minority—are seldom featured in German-language media. According to Petra Rethmann: “Although German TV channels recognize the presence of a number of linguistic communities in the country, they almost entirely ignore Russophones. There are no Russian moderators or lead actors in serials, and members of the Russian-German community rarely participate in talk shows, where the presence of Turkish-speaking participants is common.”⁸⁰ Atlantic Expedition analyst Mathias Weber has contended that the community also holds resentments about the status of Russians or the Russian government as default villains in Western cinema.⁸¹

Prior to 2015, this group was a largely apolitical one.⁸² A 2013 analysis conducted by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees reported that “In comparison with other immigrant groups, [Russian-speaking immigrants of German descent] most often have long-term future plans for a life in Germany, are more satisfied with their life situation and are above average in positively assessing the integration climate.”⁸³ The same report stated that although such immigrants “have favorable conditions for political participation in Germany, since they quickly acquire German citizenship and thus full participation rights...political interest and corresponding activities in Germany are rather small.”⁸⁴ However, some Russian-Germans feel that their community is ignored, disfavored or persecuted.⁸⁵ In particular, there is a widespread perception among Soviet-born peoples of German ethnicity that they are treated as foreigners by native Germans (despite self-reporting high levels of integration).⁸⁶ The community as a whole also suffers from a lack of formal political representation. Until the 2017 elections, there was no

⁷⁹ Stefan Meister, “The ‘Lisa case’: Germany as a target of Russian disinformation,” *NATO Review*, 2016, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm>.

⁸⁰ Petra Rethmann, “How Russians Have Helped Fuel the Rise of Germany’s Far Right,” *The Conversation*, November 1, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/how-russians-have-helped-fuel-the-rise-of-germanys-far-right-105551>.

⁸¹ Mathias Weber, “Russian Germans - Why They like Putin and Disapprove the United States [sic],” *Atlantic Expedition*, June 23, 2017, <http://atlantic-expedition.org/russian-germans-why-they-like-putin-and-disapprove-the-united-states/>.

⁸² Rethmann, “How Russians Have Helped Fuel the Rise of Germany’s Far Right.”

⁸³ Susanne Worbs et al., “(Spät-)Aussiedler in Deutschland,” *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*, 2013, 7-11, <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Forschungsberichte/fb20-spaetaussiedler.pdf?blob=publicationFile>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Tatiana Golova, “Russian-Germans and the Surprising Rise of the AfD,” *OpenDemocracy*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russian-germans-and-surprising-rise-of-afd-germany/>.

⁸⁶ *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

member of or major candidate for the Bundestag who campaigned on representing the Russian-German population; Kazakh-born CDU deputy Heinrich Zertik, an ethnic German, did not make his heritage the center of his campaign strategy and was dropped from the CDU list in 2017.⁸⁷ While Russian-Germans once voted for CDU in great numbers because that party had invited them to Germany during the 1980s, a 2017 study found that younger members of the community in particular were losing interest in voting for the mainstream conservative party.⁸⁸

Social and potentially racial and homophobic tensions are also in play. Part of the Russian-German population is known to be resentful of Middle Eastern and North African migrants, who are perceived to be a class favored by the German government at the expense of Russian-speaking immigrants. Using a sample of 606 respondents (of whom 95 percent were born outside Germany), an October 2016 poll conducted by the Boris Nemtsov Foundation found that 72 percent of Russian-Germans believed that some terrorists were pretending to be refugees and a plurality of 43 percent believed that refugees could never integrate into German society.⁸⁹ More than 40 percent of respondents also deemed having a homosexual neighbor as “not acceptable” living conditions (well above the native German average).⁹⁰ These data correspond to investigative reporting and academic work about the community describing feelings of distaste for what is perceived as German society’s excessive culture of tolerance and fear of its consequences.⁹¹ In one 2017 example cited by *Ostpol* journalist Moritz Gathmann, a board member of a Cologne organization of Russian-speaking parents described widespread community opposition to helping Muslim refugees due to potential risks for children.⁹²

⁸⁷ Applebaum et al., “‘Make Germany Great Again’”, 16.

⁸⁸ Achim Goerres, Sabrina Mayer, and Dennis Spies, “The ‘Most German’ Voters? A Focus Group Analysis of Identities, Political Issues and Allegiances to the Right among Ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union before the 2017 Bundestag Election,” *paper presented at the Council for European Studies Annual Conference in Glasgow, 12-14 July 2017*, 20, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318245484_The_'Most_German'_Voters_A_Focus_Group_Analysis_of_Identities_Political_Issues_and_Allegiances_to_the_Right_among_Ethnic_Germans_from_the_Soviet_Union_before_the_2017_Bundestag_Election.

⁸⁹ *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

⁹⁰ Ibid; Elizabeth Schumacher, “Germans Tolerant of LGBT Neighbors, but Not Muslim Ones,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/germans-tolerant-of-lgbt-neighbors-but-not-muslim-ones/a-45078938>.

⁹¹ Mitrokhin, “The ‘Russian World’ in Germany.”

⁹² Moritz Gathmann, “Quo Vadis, Deutschrussen?,” *Ostpol*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.ostpol.de/beitrag/4856-quo-vadis-deutschrussen>.

Stage 1: Niche Population Targeting

Stage 1 of the Russian propaganda effort consists of niche population targeting. The Kremlin has capitalized on the destabilizing potential of Russian-Germans in two primary ways: by investing resources in aiding Alternative für Deutschland appeal to those voters and in spreading propaganda to the diaspora directly through social media, television news reporting and internet sites, with the aim of breeding resentment, disaffection and ultimately mobilizing the population to cause unrest (see Stage 4).

Aiding AfD. Although AfD does not directly receive funds from Russian sources (as France's National Rally has), it was heavily advised and supervised by the Russian political establishment during the 2017 election season.⁹³ In February of that year, AfD leaders Frauke Petry and Julian Flak traveled to Moscow for an in-depth summit on strategy.⁹⁴ After consultation with speaker of the Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and United Russia deputy and former Channel One reporter Pyotr Tolstoy, AfD fielded six Russian-German candidates for the Bundestag, the largest such pool in history. Two of these, Anton Friesen and Waldemar Herdt, were successful and are now that body's only Russian-Germans.⁹⁵ A months-long Institute for Strategic Dialogue/London School of Economics analysis of Kremlin-funded German-language media organizations such as *Sputnik Deutschland* and *RT-Deutsch* found that both "were consistently negative in their coverage of German officials and institutions; the AfD was the only exception."⁹⁶ A related study of German Twitter accounts conducted by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism found that this praise for AfD has earned those two websites a place within the regular media diet of committed AfD voters.⁹⁷ Surveying nearly 35,000 tweets originating from AfD-affiliated accounts, the study assessed just under 11,000 URLs. *RT-Deutsch* was found to be in the top ten most shared news sites, while *Sputnik Deutschland* was in the top twenty.

⁹³ Joseph Nasr, "Leader of Germany's Far-Right Party Meets Putin Allies in Moscow - Reuters," *Reuters*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-afd/leader-of-germanys-far-right-party-meets-putin-allies-in-moscow-idUSKBN16012C>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Markus Wehner, "Der smarte Anton und der wilde Waldemar," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.faz.net/1.5519929>; Applebaum et al., "Make Germany Great Again", 16.

⁹⁶ Applebaum et al., "Make Germany Great Again", 12.

⁹⁷ Abigail Fielding-Smith and Crofton Black, "Online Battle for Right Wing Hearts and Minds in German Election," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-09-20/online-battle-for-right-wing-hearts-and-minds-in-german-election>.

AfD's association with the Putin government is fueled by significant ideological overlap. As the authors of the ISD/LSE study put it, AfD candidates' platforms "often overlap with the Russian nationalist agenda," which is why "[o]f all the political forces in Germany, [AfD] maintains the strongest links with Russia."⁹⁸ Echoing Putin's publicly stated beliefs, notions of Western betrayal predominate in domestic Russian media, where NATO is seen to have promised prosperity and stable government and, rather than delivering results, pounced upon a weakened Russia for exploitation and profit, leaving behind a damaged culture. AfD, whose headquarters and strongest voter base are in the former GDR, has proven a natural partner in this regard, for it too has drawn upon feelings of Western treachery in a German context: specifically the historical perception among East Germans that Helmut Kohl had not pursued reunification as the fusion of two coequal states and the idea that West Germany had "internally colonized" the former GDR in the 1990s.⁹⁹ SPD's Petra Köpping, Minister of Integration for Saxony, stated in an October 2018 interview that she believes "that the humiliation of the people in the East has led to a greater rush to the AfD," an explanation she prioritizes over the post-2015 migrant crisis, which acted as a catalyst.¹⁰⁰ When asked if voters in the former GDR made this choice "out of pure protest," she replied "Exactly. People had the feeling that the democratic parties such as the CDU, SPD or Left had not taken care of their problems. They then elected the AfD to signal the parties: Wake up!"¹⁰¹

Targeting of Russian-Germans. Much of the propaganda consumed by Russian-Germans, particularly on social media networks, specifically invokes themes of resentment for mistreatment, cultural and political disaffection, and revenge against Russia's enemies. The material is generally constructed around two intertwined poles: on the one hand, the greatness of Russia and of its values, and on the other, a sick and brainwashed West that seeks to destroy

⁹⁸ Applebaum et al., "Make Germany Great Again", 10.

⁹⁹ See: Heather M. Stack, "The 'Colonization' of East Germany?: A Comparative Analysis of German Privatization," *Duke Law Journal* 46, no. 5 (1997): 1211–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1372919>; Kremlin-funded media have also drawn from the lexicon of 'internal colonization': H. Posdnjakow, "Interne Kolonialisierung: Wie Die DDR Ausverkauft Wurde," *RT Deutsch*, June 16, 2018, <https://deutsch.rt.com/inland/71498-interne-kolonialisierung-wie-ddr-ausverkauft/>; Jürgen Cain Külbel, "'Ost-Offensive': Für Ein Selbstverwaltetes Ostdeutschland Ohne NATO Und Transatlantischen Einfluss," *RT Deutsch*, March 2, 2019, <https://deutsch.rt.com/meinung/83478-ost-offensive-selbstverwaltung-ostdeutschlands-ohne/>.

¹⁰⁰ Antje Hildebrandt, "Sachsens Integrationsministerin - „Sie immer mit Ihren Geflüchteten! Integrieren Sie doch erstmal uns“,“ *Cicero*, Oktober 2018, <https://www.cicero.de/innenpolitik/sachsen-integrationsministerin-petra-koeppling-fluechtlinge-spd-cdu-afd-ostbeauftragter>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Russia. Investigative reporting for *Eurozine* conducted by Nikolai Mitrokhin has unearthed some of this content in the German spheres of Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte:

[Topics include] Russian food and drink (a form of patriotic ‘food porn’); nostalgia for the USSR; the uniqueness of everything Russian; the greatness of Russian history or the importance of Russia’s victory in World War II; patriotism; the power of the Russian army or of Russians generally; Putin; and the inanity, ugliness or unacceptability of anything foreign (this is likely to involve blatant racism, antisemitism and homophobia). Overall, demotivators [a kind of meme] serve to affirm identity and define ‘us’ or ‘our fellow-countrymen’ in the face of constant attacks by ‘jackasses’ from Ukraine, ‘Gayropa’ and the USA. Thousands of demotivators of this kind are produced on what is clearly a professional basis. Presumably this is done in ‘troll factories’ functioning within the framework of the ‘partnership between private and state enterprise’ that characterizes Putin’s Russia.¹⁰²

The ISD/LSE study found similar results in the areas of news and public opinion:

Kremlin-affiliated media in Russia, with a heavy AFD bias, has a significant reach within Russian-German audiences. In August [2017], Kremlin-sponsored outlets devoted significant coverage to topics relating to ideas of a strong Russia and weak Europe, such as the ‘Crisis of European Union’, the ‘Western Plot Against Russia’, ‘Russian Patriotism’ and ‘Decadent Western Values’. The topic of ‘World War II’ was also used to stigmatize the population with the possibility of a war and Russia’s apparent need to protect itself against the enemy.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, the Nemtsov Foundation poll reports that “Russian TV viewers feel more fear of migrants and refugees, more worry about terrorism threat.” Those who receive 60 percent or more of their news from Russian as opposed to German television are 17 percent more likely to believe that refugees make crime problems worse, 13 percent more likely to favor closing Germany’s borders, and 10 percent more likely to believe that refugees have terrorists among them.¹⁰⁴ A former Protestant pastor from Marzahn-Hellersdorf, an area of eastern Berlin with a heavy Russian-speaking population, commented that “There are Germans from Russia who see themselves as the real Germans. In their eyes, we have turned away from German virtues... The nationalism of the AfD and Russian nationalism, which is propagated on Russian state television, are not so dissimilar.”¹⁰⁵ The use of jingoistic and anti-Western themes to incite anger and resentment among the Russian diaspora has been termed a ‘Trojan Horse’ strategy in the English-speaking media.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Mitrokhin, “The ‘Russian World’ in Germany.”

¹⁰³ Applebaum et al., “‘Make Germany Great Again’”, 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

¹⁰⁵ Marina Mai, “Die Lieblingsmigranten der AfD,” *Die Tageszeitung*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.taz.de/!5335943/>.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Meyer, “Putin Has a Really Big Trojan Horse in Germany,” *Bloomberg*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-02/putin-s-trojan-horse-for-merkel-is-packed-with-russian-tv-fans>.

Thus, the source (Russia), the political beneficiary (AfD) and the target (Russian-Germans) of the revenge-themed propaganda campaign all share similar notions of grievance about Western failure. In Russia's case, this was the "false promise" of American culture and capitalism imported into the country by Yeltsin, Gaidar and Chubais; in the case of native East German AfD voters, at the Western-dominated reunified government's conduct after 1991; and in the case of Russian-Germans, at their purportedly second-class status compared to Muslim migrants and homosexuals due to the corruption and hypocrisy of "Western values." These mutual resentments made Russian-Germans a uniquely good target and AfD a uniquely good outlet.

Stage 2: Domestic Media Delegitimization and Foreign Overreliance

After establishing a supply of Kremlin-controlled information to Russian-Germans, the next phase of the cooptation process mimics, inversely, the long-term goals of RFE/RL and Voice of America during the Cold War: delegitimizing and promoting doubt of domestic news sources while creating overreliance on Russian ones. Although the Kremlin's foreign media contains significantly more disinformation than RFE/RL's broadcasting did—RT, with its motto of "Question More," has even gone so far as to doubt the very possibility of delivering objective news—it has still tried to achieve the reputation for external investigation and independent reporting that American radio enjoyed during the Cold War.¹⁰⁷ *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, for example, has been described by Bruk as "[portraying] itself as a neutral and reliable source of news regarding Russian events and culture, [even though] its content mostly reflects or supports the official agenda of the government."¹⁰⁸

Content consumed by Russian-Germans argues that Western news sources are blinded by progressive ideology, militarism and Russophobia and cannot be relied upon for a fair assessment of world events. A few representative examples will suffice. A Russian-language RIA Novosti article of 25 March 2016 titled "Coverage of the Ukrainian crisis as the apotheosis of Western hysteria" quotes Russian political analyst Yuri Svetov, who states: "I was abroad when [Malaysia Airlines Flight 17] was shot down over Ukraine. And in our hotel we had

¹⁰⁷ Tommy Horner, "Russia's RT Is Contesting the Very Meaning of 'Truth,'" *Public Radio International*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-05-11/russias-rt-contesting-very-meaning-truth>.

¹⁰⁸ Bruk, "International Propaganda," 13.

newspapers from all over the world. They actually had identical headlines saying Putin was the culprit. The same thing could be found on various television channels. It was like a blueprint. The only channel that had something else was RT.”¹⁰⁹ Other articles accuse German news agencies of severely botching coverage of the Syrian Civil War and tend to quote Germans who criticize their own media. A 6 October 2016 piece titled “German journalist: in the West, reports about the war in Syria are full of lies,” with content taken from an interview on *Sputnik Deutsch* with Jürgen Todenhofer, quoted him saying that “the coverage of the war that we receive in the West is completely false and one-sided.”¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, journalistic failures in Germany, such as the December 2018 *Der Spiegel* scandal involving discredited journalist Claas Relotius, are quickly exploited as further evidence of bias. An *RT Deutsch* article of 28 March 2019 openly titled “Criticism of the German Press Landscape” stated that “[i]t has been suspected for years that the German press landscape is not so precise with the truth. Cases like Claas Relotius seem to confirm distrust of the press.”¹¹¹

The limited polling that is available suggests that the twin goals of delegitimization and overreliance had been at least partially achieved by 2016. According to the Nemtsov Foundation data collected during that year, of the approximately two-thirds of Russian-Germans who use the internet and watch television daily, 37 percent use exclusively Russian-language websites and 40 percent watch only Russian-language television¹¹²; among Russian Jews, 50 percent of all television content consumed is in Russian.¹¹³ When asked the question, “How much do you trust Russian media to portray politics and current affairs in a truthful way?”, 32 percent of television viewers answered either “trust somewhat” or “trust completely,” 35 percent answered that they neither trust nor distrust Russian television, and 22 percent expressed some amount of distrust (heavy users of Russian media consistently reported higher levels of trust than lighter users¹¹⁴).¹¹⁵ When asked the same question with regard to Russian internet sites, 21 percent

¹⁰⁹ Дарья Чередник, “Освещение Украинского Кризиса Как Апофеоз Западной Истории,” *PIA Новости*, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20160325/1396860458.html>.

¹¹⁰ “Немецкий журналист: на Западе репортажи о войне в Сирии полны лжи,” *PIA Новости*, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20161006/1478687539.html>.

¹¹¹ Zlatko Percinic, “Veranstaltung ‘Fake oder Fakten’: Kritik an der deutschen Presselandschaft,” *RT Deutsch*, March 28, 2019, <https://deutsch.rt.com/inland/86525-kritik-an-der-deutschen-presselandschaft/>.

¹¹² *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

expressed trust, 24 percent distrust, and 32 percent answered neither nor. The statement “Western media is more trustworthy than Russian media” yielded the following breakdown: 19 percent agreed, 30 percent disagreed, and 39 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.¹¹⁶

These results suggest that Russian media has gone a significant distance toward accomplishing the objectives of Stage 2: large majorities of both television viewers and internet users either consider Russian media trustworthy or consider German sources of information to be no more legitimate than Russian counterparts. Nearly 70 percent of those polled do not consider German media to be more trustworthy than Russian media, including a substantial number of bilingual individuals.

Stage 3: German Cultural Delegitimization vs. Russian Alternative

Mirroring the way that American radio broadcasting during the Cold War gave glimpses of a dynamic and culturally open United States that became a symbol of a better life, the Russian propaganda campaign in Germany has sought to convince its target populations of a binary narrative: on the one hand, German society’s moral and cultural failings, and on the other, the Putin regime’s status as a bastion of Christian faith, “traditional values” and opposition to Islamism, political correctness, family disintegration and tolerance of homosexuality. Although public attitudes toward Russia tend to be more conciliatory in Germany than in other NATO states, Ipsos polling has shown that in ideological terms the broader German public rejects by a 3-to-1 margin Putin’s claims as a “defender of Christendom and traditional European values.”¹¹⁷ In the Russian-German community, the story is different. While the question has not been asked directly in the existing polling, other data as well as the widespread presence of pro-Putin and anti-Western material in the local Russian-German press suggest that at least part of the community buys into the theses of Kremlin-funded media. According to the Nemtsov poll, 52 percent of Russian-Germans believe that the West is unjustly prejudiced toward Russia (while 15 percent do not), 44 percent overall believe that Putin’s Russia is a “source of international

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *Public Opinion in Germany* (August 10-28, 2017), distributed by Center for Insights in Survey Research/International Republican Institute, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-9-14_germany_poll_presentation.pdf.

political stability” (while 15 percent do not), and 37 percent believe that “Russia should do more to protect ethnic Russians living abroad” (while 22 percent do not).¹¹⁸

The local Russian-German media is replete with a combination of scathing criticism of German society and pro-Putin views that are probably even more intense than those held by the community at large. According to Mitrokhin, “Xenophobic motives in the [local] media aimed at the Russian-speaking minority in Germany are very pronounced, even dominant. The leitmotif of the media... is usually migration; it is generally presented as the most urgent problem in Germany. Even relatively moderate newspapers are spreading a picture [of] alienation and Islamization, refugee catastrophe.”¹¹⁹ Mitrokhin describes an issue of *Russkaya Germania* (sold as *Russkiy Berlin* in the Berlin area), picked at random, from the week of 12 June 2017: “[of] the ten cover stories... five were devoted to Islamist terror.”¹²⁰ The weekly newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets Germania* (*MK-Germania*), a German edition of the Moscow tabloid of the same name, features especially extreme paranoia about the ‘Islamization’ of the West. The issue for the week of 17 March 2016 features an article called “Germans teach migrants ‘tolerant’ sex” that includes a doctored image of a billboard in Finland showing three brown-skinned men raping a blonde woman with the words (written in English) – “RAPE - RAPE - RAPE - You can do it in Finland – Refugees can do anything! – Contact the Finnish embassy now – You will not be punished!”; an advertisement for AfD is beside the article stating “Red card for Merkel! Asylum requires borders!” Opinion columns in Russian-German media have expressed disappointment in the discrepancy between the Germany that was promised and Germany as it is. For instance, an 8 July 2017 online piece in the publication *Heimat Rodina* states: “One wonders that traditional values gave way to the cosmopolitan urge, but at the same time fundamental Islamism is tolerated for political correctness! The FRG was a disappointment for Russian-Germans in this regard. It was not the Germany that grandfather and father told stories of in Kazakhstan, the Urals, or in Siberia.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ *Russian-speaking Germans*, Boris Nemtsov Foundation.

¹¹⁹ Nikolai Klimentiouk, “Nationalismus und Rassismus bei ‘Russlanddeutschen’?,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, January 18, 2018, <http://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/260496/nationalismus-und-rassismus-bei-russlanddeutschen>.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Eugen Krause, “Von Dem Deutschen, Dem Russlanddeutschen Und Dem Deutschen,” *Heimat Родина*, July 8, 2017, <http://www.heimat-rodina.de/opinions/15>.

Meanwhile, expressions of support for the Putin regime and its policies are common: *Russkaya Germania* presents this praise in more subdued form, while tabloid papers like *MK-Germania* engage in what Mitrokhin calls open “Putin-worship.”¹²² In the former, an 18 August 2016 edition ran an article titled “Vladimir Putin has his own picture of the world” that heavily implies the leader’s resolve, vision, originality and independence from the influence of others: “Vladimir Putin...is a person who lives by his own logic, which can be contrasted, for instance, with the logic of German politicians.” A much more explicit edition of *MK-Germania* for the week of 8 August 2016 included an article which praises the “a thousand times correct” Putin for rejecting a “unipolar world” and featured photographs of a bare-chested Putin holding a large fish and another comparing his appearance to that of Harrison Ford with the caption “Vladimir ‘Indiana Jones’ Putin.” On the online German-language news site *anonymousnews.ru*, an article of 12 February 2018 was titled “Putin on Europe: Gender mania and migration mean national death - do you not understand that?”¹²³ A later article of 13 December was headlined “Vladimir Putin tough: Russia imposes flight ban for US jets over Syria” and opens with the line “Russia is kicking the war-hungry Americans neatly in the ass!”¹²⁴

A feedback loop has emerged between the Kremlin’s targeted propaganda and the local Russian-German press, ensuring that the editorial decisions in the two overlapping media spheres produce highly similar content. The reliably binary nature of the local press’ editorial decisions—depicting European weakness on the one hand and Russian strength, independence and traditionalism on the other—indicates that, for both Russian-German writers and readers, the Kremlin’s information war has successfully delegitimized German political and social culture and in its place has put forth the Putin regime as a defender of traditional values, national identity and pride, and “sane” social policy.

¹²² Klimeniuk, “Nationalismus und Rassismus.”

¹²³ “Putin Über Europa: Genderwahn Und Migration Bedeuten Volkstod – Versteht Ihr Das Denn Nicht?,” *anonymousnews.ru*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.anonymousnews.ru/2017/07/02/putin-ueber-europa-genderwahn-und-migration-bedeuten-volkstod-versteht-ihr-das-nicht/>.

¹²⁴ “Wladimir Putin knallhart: Russland verhängt Flugverbot für US-Jets über Syrien,” *anonymousnews.ru*, May 2017, <https://www.anonymousnews.ru/2017/05/05/wladimir-putin-knallhart-russland-verhaengt-flugverbot-fuer-us-jets-ueber-syrien/>.

Stage 4: Political Destabilization and Unrest

The fourth and final phase of a targeted soft power campaign becomes possible when a sufficiently large group of people routinely trusts foreign media over domestic media and considers the broadcaster's culture to be superior to the one they live in. During the last phase—which, once achieved during the Cold War, continued indefinitely until regime change occurred—the target population is encouraged to express dissatisfaction in two distinct ways: in political terms, by voting (if possible) for political parties favored by the propagandists,¹²⁵ and unrest, which entails gathering in large groups to protest conditions in public. The Russian propaganda effort in Germany has been able to mobilize the latter's Russian-speaking population to produce both these outcomes and has done so by inflaming righteous anger and advocating retribution. In the buildup to the 2017 election, Russian propaganda characterized voting for Alternative für Deutschland as a form of protest against multiculturalism and discrimination against Russian-speakers and succeeded in generating community turnout for the party. In terms of fomenting unrest, Russian media capitalized on an event that occurred in January 2016 to generate street protests across Germany. Although the event—the purported rape of a thirteen-year-old Russian-German girl by Muslim migrants—was ultimately proven to have never occurred, Russian news agencies used the incident as proof of the German government's moral bankruptcy, its disregard of and cruelty toward Russians, and of the need for the Russian-German community to protect its young women from predators supposedly favored by the state.

Electoral results: voting to punish and destabilize system. Alternative für Deutschland has attempted to capitalize on Russian-speakers' lack of political representation and feeling of cultural alienation by coopting that community into its voter base. Especially after 2015, AfD began to campaign heavily in Russian-speaking districts and was the only party to pay significant attention to that group in during the 2017 election cycle. Its message emphasized the notion that the ruling CDU did not care about Russians, who had previously been described in German media as 'a group that has integrated well,' and instead favored Muslim migrants, who were depicted as unruly and law-breaking.¹²⁶ A few examples of targeted campaigning: in Berlin

¹²⁵ Exact parallels to the Cold War cannot be drawn due to differences in political system. Unable to convince voters to choose anti-establishment parties in free elections, organizations like Radio Free Europe instead focused their energy toward aiding the formation of quasi-opposition parties such as Solidarity.

¹²⁶ Mitrokhin, "The 'Russian World' in Germany."

residential neighborhoods, AfD produced pamphlets, flyers and posters printed specifically in Russian,¹²⁷ while in Magdeburg, a prominent AfD campaigner convened a so-called “Russia conference...at which speakers warned of a coming ‘Islamic invasion’ and praised Vladimir Putin.”¹²⁸ AfD-affiliated media in Germany including *Zuerst!*, *Compact Magazine* (which employs Russian-German journalists such as Katrin Ziske), *Epoch Times* and particularly *Junge Freiheit* systematically supported Kremlin positions such as the annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine.¹²⁹

AfD’s gamble for Russian-German votes proved to be an unequivocal success, especially considering that as late as 2013 voting patterns of districts with heavy Russian-German populations tended to favor mainstream or left-leaning parties. In Marzahn-Hellersdorf, just 4.9 percent of 2013 voters had selected AfD, a number that quadrupled in 2017. While the party’s best results are concentrated in the territory of the former GDR, it has been able to make gains among Russian-speakers throughout the country. According to an analysis by Nikolai Klimenyuk, in the 2016 Baden-Württemberg elections, AfD won 43 and 50 percent of the vote in the Russian districts of Pforzheim and Wertheim am Main, respectively.¹³⁰ Nationwide, AfD spokespeople have estimated that Russian-Germans comprise approximately one third of the party’s entire voter share, and Achim Goerres has estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the Russian-German population voted for AfD.¹³¹ In a 2017 interview, analyst Tatiana Golova submitted the following interpretation:

The attraction of AfD, for its part, lies in disenchantment: ‘we returned to our homeland and found it completely different’. Russian Germans discovered that that Germans didn’t actually see them as fellow Germans. They felt discriminated, even as they underwent a process of assimilation that led them to a variety of political positions... [ethnic Germans] are particularly sensitive on this point: ‘we waited so long [and many of them did wait several years] and then these refugees turned up and they let them in straight away – why was it all so unfair?’¹³²

¹²⁷ Mai, “Die Lieblingsmigranten der AfD.”

¹²⁸ Philip Oltermann and Rina Soloveitchik, “How Germany’s Russian Minority Could Boost Far Right,” September 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/22/how-germanys-russian-minority-could-boost-far-right>.

¹²⁹ Applebaum et al., “‘Make Germany Great Again’”, 11.

¹³⁰ Mitrokhin, “The ‘Russian World’ in Germany.”

¹³¹ Andrea Shalal, “Russian-Germans in Focus amid Fears of Moscow Propaganda,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-russian-germans/russian-germans-in-focus-amid-fears-of-moscow-propaganda-idUSKCN1AW1NA>.

¹³² Golova, “Russian-Germans and the Surprising Rise of the AfD.”

A community focus group convened by German researchers in the leadup to the election reflected that assessment of the migrant crisis. An older man in his 60s stated, “We had huge problems entering the country. And other people have it really easy. They are simply waved through.”¹³³ Immigration, then, was the most salient election issue for the community—especially among ethnic Germans who submitted a protest vote due to perceptions that Muslim migrants enjoyed favored status that the former had been denied.

Lisa case. On the night of 11 January 2016, a thirteen-year-old girl living in Berlin’s Marzahn-Hellersdorf district abruptly disappeared. Lisa, the daughter of Russian immigrants of German ethnicity and a dual citizen,¹³⁴ had been walking home from school and did not arrive, which prompted her parents to call the police and to put up missing posters around the neighborhood. Thirty hours later, Lisa was found standing on a street asking passersby to help her return to her parents. When she came home, she told her family that she had been kidnapped by three Arab men who repeatedly raped her. A subsequent police investigation established that she had been neither abducted nor raped but had gone to the apartment of an older Turkish man with whom she had previously been in an unlawful, but voluntary, sexual relationship (the German age of consent is 14 years). Lisa subsequently admitted to police that she had invented the story: she had been struggling academically, heard that her parents would be informed by the school and did not want to face them.¹³⁵ Although no individuals of her initial description were ever found, the Turkish man (a German citizen) was sentenced to nearly two years in prison for statutory rape and the production of child pornography. A second man, a Turkish citizen, had also had intercourse with Lisa, but charges against him were dropped after police were unable to prove that he had known she was underage.

Rumors that a Russian girl had been raped by migrants immediately propagated throughout Marzahn-Hellersdorf by way of social media, then to the rest of Germany and to Russia. On the night of Lisa’s disappearance, locals photographed the missing person notices and

¹³³ Goerres, Mayer, and Spies, “The ‘Most German’ Voters?”, 17.

¹³⁴ Elke Windisch, “Russland Nutzt ‘Fall Lisa’ Für Retourkutsche Am Westen,” *Die Tagesspiegel*, January 30, 2016, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/angeblich-vergewaltigte-13-jaehrige-russland-nutzt-fall-lisa-fuer-retourkutsche-am-westen/12900562.html>.

¹³⁵ Jan C. Wehmeyer, Peter Rossberg, and Benjamin Jendro, “Der Fall Elena* Ist Gelöst: Sie War Bei Ihrem Freund,” *Berliner Zeitung*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/marzahn-hellersdorf/der-fall-elena-ist-geloest-sie-war-bei-einem-freund>.

posted the images to Facebook, where they were swiftly reshared within the community and to friends and relatives in Russia.¹³⁶ Soon after Lisa came home, social media users passed around reports of a rape with headlines such as “13-year-old raped for 30 hours by migrants” and “13-year-old raped - politics and media silent.”¹³⁷ On 14 January, a group of five men shouting in Russian attacked a migrant camp across the street from the school where Lisa studied.¹³⁸ The next day, Lisa admitted that she had not been raped, but her parents did not believe her and came to the conclusion that she had been pressured by police into recanting her original claims.¹³⁹ On 16 January, a woman claiming to be Lisa’s aunt appeared at a rally of the ultranationalist National Democratic Party of Germany near a shopping center in Marzahn and stated that the police and media were covering up the story. A camera team working for Channel One was present at the rally and interviewed the woman and several others. The same evening, Channel One ran a story on Russian television featuring Berlin correspondent Ivan Blagoy which repeated claims that Lisa had been raped by three Middle Eastern men.¹⁴⁰ The story was rapidly reshared across social media and by 27 January it had been viewed a million times on Facebook alone.¹⁴¹ Soon after the story aired, German human rights activist and lawyer Martin Luithle reported Blagoy to the Berlin prosecutor’s office for incitement of ethnic hatred.¹⁴² Luithle justified his decision in an interview with RFE/RL: “What [the Russian journalist] is saying is that the state doesn’t work anymore, the police don’t work anymore... He tells the Russian-speaking people of

¹³⁶ “Der Fall Lisa (13): Mann (23) Wegen Sexuellen Missbrauchs Angeklagt,” *Berliner Zeitung*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/marzahn-hellersdorf/der-fall-lisa-13-mann-23-wegen-sexuellen-missbrauchs-angeklagt>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Damien McGuinness, “Russia Steps into Berlin ‘rape’ Storm,” *BBC News*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-eu-35413134>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Сергей Косяков, “Немецкий адвокат пожаловался на сюжет российского Первого канала в прокуратуру,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%81%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%8E%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%82-%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D1%83/a-18988993>.

Germany: ‘Help yourself, the police can’t protect you anymore.’ This is a super-dangerous thing.”¹⁴³

The messages of a corrupt police force and the need for a community response rapidly propagated across Kremlin-funded networks. On 17 January, *Sputnik Deutschland* picked up the story with the headline: “Berlin: Minors raped, police inactive.” The article read: “A minor girl was raped in Berlin, allegedly by a group of immigrant men. Citizens speak of impunity... It is not an isolated case. The police deny both the rape and the kidnapping... The women are particularly scared. They now want to accompany their children to school and then pick them up... Lisa’s relatives say that the police do not want to look for the criminals.”¹⁴⁴ It went on to quote several members of the Marzahn Russian-German community, including one man who said “They rape girls, kids. If so, we will respond to violence with force. There is no other way.”¹⁴⁵ As rumors spread, Russian news agencies published ever more exaggerated reports of the event. On the same day, the website of *Vesti* published an article titled “In Berlin, six migrants raped a girl from Russia for 30 hours,” which read: “[Lisa] said that at least five young people of Arab origin had grabbed her, dragged her into a car and blindfolded her. And then they brought her to an empty apartment, where there was only one bed, and raped her for 30 hours. Then, half-dead, she was thrown out in one of the Berlin districts. This is not yet confirmed. The police are silent... the victim’s uncle said that the police did not respond to the incident properly and the media was their only hope.”¹⁴⁶ On 18 January, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* interviewed Heinrich Groth, chairman of the Berlin-based International Convention of Russian-Germans, who rejected official conclusions outright: “All this is really true, and the police are making stupid and absurd attempts to hush up the situation... They intimidated the girl and her parents. And there is complete silence in the [mainstream German] media. There’s just a wall. Look at this strong political correctness! Therefore, we took a different path – social networks,

¹⁴³ Anna Shamanska, “Russian TV Presenter Accused Of Incitement In Germany,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-tv-presenter-accused-of-incitement-in-germany/27505716.html>.

¹⁴⁴ “Berlin: Minderjährige vergewaltigt, Polizei tatenlos,” *Sputnik Deutschland*, January 17, 2016, <https://de.sputniknews.com/gesellschaft/20160117307158514-berlin-minderjaehrige-vergewaltigt-polizei-tatenlos/>.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ “В Берлине Шестеро Мигрантов 30 Часов Насиловали Девочку Из России,” January 17, 2016, *Вести*, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2709069>.

emails...Lisa is badly injured and is in a state of half-shock. And no one is even looking for the criminals.”¹⁴⁷

Although others within the Russian-German community expressed skepticism, among many the belief that German authorities were lying about Lisa’s rape and that law enforcement could not be relied upon to secure justice for her family had already been established within a week of 11 January. Exacerbating the issue was the fact that, by chance, Lisa’s disappearance had coincided with a national scandal relating to an incidence of mass sexual assault throughout Germany on New Year’s Eve in which most perpetrators were in fact people of North African origin. On 19 January, Russian media reported that a protest would soon be held in front of the chancellor’s office in Berlin.¹⁴⁸ On 23 January, 700 Russian-Germans gathered there bearing signs in German and Russian reading “Our children are in danger,” “Protect our children,” “Today my child – tomorrow your child!”, “Children cry in the same language,” “Lisa we are with you,” “Hands away from me and my child!”, “We say no to violence” and “We have the right to doubt the objectivity of police.”¹⁴⁹ Meanwhile, public demonstrations of Russian-Germans formed elsewhere in the country. It is estimated that at least ten thousand people participated in more than twenty protests across Germany. A group of 250 demonstrators in Bielefeld brought German-language signs stating “Together against chaos” and “We trust in the media increasingly less.” The organizer of the rally, Valentin Janke, stated in an interview that “It is not just about Lisa. In general, we want order and safety to be restored in Germany. We are not against refugees, but against criminals. We demand protection and safety for our women and children.”¹⁵⁰ In the Pforzheim-Haidach, where more than half the population of about 8,500 consists of Russian-Germans, local leaders convinced nearly a thousand residents to attend a

¹⁴⁷ Елена Чинкова, “Российские Немцы - Об Изнасилованной в Германии Школьнице: Запугали и Девочку, и Родителей!,” *Комсомольская Правда*, January 18, 2016, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26481.5/3351625/>.

¹⁴⁷ Лариса Худикова, “Насилие Над Девочкой в Берлине: Российские Немцы Выйдут к Резиденции Меркель,” *Вести*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2709854>.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ “Berlin: Russia Teen Rape Claim ‘Fabricated,’” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/berlin-teen-rape-case-germany-russia/27518976.html>; McGuinness, “Russia Steps into Berlin ‘rape’ Storm.”

¹⁵⁰ Elena Gunkel and Jan Sternberg, “Mit Faschisten auf der Straße,” *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, January 30, 2016, <http://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Deutschland-Welt/Das-Maedchen-und-die-Fruerche-der-Propaganda-im-Fall-Lisa>.

protest rally.¹⁵¹ Haidach had previously been considered a quiet, unremarkable and orderly part of the city.¹⁵²

The Lisa scandal reached maximum publicity when Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov made public comments about the story. On 26 January, he declared at a Moscow press availability: “We wish Germany success in dealing with the enormous problems caused by migrants. I hope these issues do not get swept under the rug, repeating the situation when a Russian girl’s disappearance in Germany was hushed up for a long time for some reason. Now, at least, we are communicating with her lawyer, who is working with her family and with the Russian Embassy. It is clear that Lisa did not exactly decide voluntarily to disappear for 30 hours. Truth and justice must prevail here.”¹⁵³ Lavrov’s comment provided credibility for the protesters and invoked the scandal’s subtext: that Germany was weak-willed and tolerant of migrant criminals while Russia’s government would seek justice for the victim. German media quickly identified Russia’s motives for bringing attention to the story at the official level. On 30 January, *Der Tagesspiegel* published an article titled “Russia uses the ‘Lisa Case’ to hit back at the West” with the byline “Moscow takes revenge with the ‘Lisa case’ for the West’s frequent criticism of [corruption trials] in Russia. Russian-Germans play an important role in Vladimir Putin’s information war, experts believe.”¹⁵⁴

The protest movement lost momentum in February and Kremlin-funded networks eventually moved on to other topics, but the implications of the crisis were not lost upon the German government. Berlin accused Russia of running a disinformation campaign and launched an investigation.¹⁵⁵ According to a postmortem working paper written for the Federal Academy for Security Policy by Jakub Janda, both Lisa’s admission that the story was fabricated and a public announcement by the Berlin police had virtually no impact on the story’s staying power in Russian media networks: “Despite the fact that the Berlin state police published a complete

¹⁵¹ “Russlanddeutsche: Propaganda auf Russisch,” *Handelsblatt*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/russlanddeutsche-propaganda-auf-russisch/13308156.html>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ “Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference on Russia’s Diplomacy Performance in 2015, Moscow, January 26, 2016,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, January 26, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2032328.

¹⁵⁴ Windisch, “Russland Nutzt.”

¹⁵⁵ Jakub Janda, “The Lisa Case: STRATCOM Lessons for European States,” Federal Academy for Security Policy, no. 11 (November 2016): 4; Meister, “The ‘Lisa case’.”

denial of the story, most Russian government-controlled media that featured the issue did not correct it or remove it from their websites.”¹⁵⁶ The Lisa case has, accordingly, heightened awareness in Germany of the impact Russian foreign media has had on German public life.

Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to document the motivations, mechanisms and content of the Russian Federation’s foreign media campaign under Vladimir Putin. Contrary to assertions that Russian soft power strategy is premised purely on opportunism, the study illustrates how it is responding to the failures of the Soviet information campaign and by a genuine desire to exact vengeance upon NATO countries that can be traced to the political, social and cultural instability of the Russian 1990s. The bulk of Russia’s propaganda targets are selected according to a coherent logic: shared grievance against perceived wrongs committed by Western societies and a concomitant reaction against liberal democracy and progressivism. These groups tend to be Eurosceptic, right wing and/or Russophilic subpopulations in Western countries. Following the same four-stage pattern used by U.S. broadcasters during the Cold War, Kremlin-funded media have been able to target Russian-Germans, encourage foreign media dependence among a segment of that population, delegitimize German government policy and that country’s ‘culture of tolerance’ while promoting Putin’s government as a defender of conservatism and ‘traditional values’, and ultimately aid the emergence of a destabilizing populist political party and mobilize thousand of Russian-Germans to protest in cities across the country. The case of Russia’s information campaign in Germany demonstrates the potency of revenge as both a cultural and strategic motivation for and shaper of soft power policy.

¹⁵⁶ Janda, “The Lisa Case.”

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