

# Conspiratorial Soft Power? Assessing the Effects of Russian Propaganda in the Near Abroad

Scott Radnitz  
Associate Professor, International Studies  
University of Washington  
[hrad@uw.edu](mailto:hrad@uw.edu)

Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021  
--Do No Cite Without the Permission of the Author--

## Abstract

In the past decade, Russia has sought to spread conspiratorial narratives abroad as part of a campaign to disrupt what it perceives as an unjust post-Cold War order. This paper analyzes the impact of Russia's spread of conspiracy theories (CTs) to neighboring states. It identifies two primary mechanisms by which CTs might spread: habituation, in which state propaganda influences people's tendency to engage in conspiratorial thinking as a rule; and persuasion, in which audiences endorse only CTs whose content is consistent with the propaganda they are exposed to. It tests these mechanisms using an original survey of Georgia and Kazakhstan, respectively "least" and "most" likely cases of targets of Russian propaganda. The results show that people who obtain news from Russian television, websites, or social media are by-and-large no more inclined to endorse CTs than those who do not. Ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, who are oversampled in the survey, are more likely to endorse pro-Russian geopolitical CTs, through the likely mechanisms of media saturation and ethnic affinity. Overall, however, domestic institutional variables explain CT belief better than Russian propaganda. Although survey respondents are amenable to CTs, there are barriers to the spread of the Kremlin's narratives, even in its geopolitical backyard. The findings cast doubt on claims of the malign influence of Russian propaganda and the ability of states to shape the attitudes of citizens abroad more generally. Instead, they shine light on the domestic political factors underlying belief in CTs.

In the past decade, Russia has been engaged in a major campaign to spread propaganda abroad. Its efforts were evident in its promotion of a conspiratorial narrative about the 2014 Ukraine war, which it broadcast to audiences both at home and around the world. Russia has also spread disinformation in Europe and the U.S. to improve Russia's image, exacerbate internal political divisions, and obfuscate responsibility for its violations of international law (Orenstein 2019; Snyder 2018).

Some commentators view the Kremlin's efforts with grave concern, seeing it as boosting the fortunes of illiberal parties in the EU and creating dissension within NATO (Schoen 2016). Some go as far as to argue that Russian meddling proved decisive in swaying the 2016 U.S. election toward Trump (Jamieson 2020). Others are more skeptical, viewing it as an ordinary, if heavy-handed, form of soft power and pointing out that Russia, at best, is able to exacerbate existing divisions whose origins are primarily domestic (Kotkin 2019; Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). State propaganda has been shown to have measurable effects on citizen beliefs and behaviors domestically, yet there have been fewer studies on how effectively states can shape the attitudes of citizens abroad. This paper makes headway on this question by looking specifically at the relationship between exposure to Russian media and belief in conspiracy theories (CTs) in neighboring states.

Not all Russian propaganda is conspiratorial, but CTs are a useful indicator of Russia's international influence. A conspiracy theory is a claim that posits that a small group of malign actors is engaged in a covert plot to further their own interests at the expense of the common good (see Barkun 2013, 3; Uscinski 2018, 48). By this definition, the thrust of much Russian geopolitical discourse in recent years is in fact conspiratorial, especially since 2014 (Yablokov 2018). Its content reflects Russia's resentment about the perceived neglect of its interests in the

post-Cold War order, and provides an alternative narrative in which Russia is the victim of nefarious designs of the West, whether the perpetrator is the CIA, Western-aligned “fascists,” or (Jewish) Hungarian-American financier George Soros (Snyder 2018; Toal 2017; Yablokov 2015)

Russia’s global promotion of CTs, if successful, has geopolitical implications. Agreement with Russia’s grievances and blame attributions is an indicator of sympathy with Russia’s worldview and, potentially, willingness to support its foreign policy. The endorsement or rejection of CTs promoted by the Kremlin indicates where public opinion lies on major geopolitical questions, and fosters the sorting of states in Russia’s “near abroad” into geopolitical blocs (O’Loughlin et al. 2016). The diffusion of belief in CTs is also seen as an instrument in Russia’s efforts to impair the quality of governance in strategically important states. In an era of increasing skepticism toward institutions, citizens are susceptible to misinformation that may cause them to disengage politically or draws them (further) toward extremist politics (van Kessel et al. 2020). Insofar as Russia succeeds in “exporting” CTs, their local uptake may undermine the premise of a shared and verifiable reality and can prove destabilizing to political systems.

This paper analyzes the possible influence of Russian CTs through two mechanisms: habituation, in which the worldview of people exposed to Russian propaganda becomes more conspiratorial; and persuasion, in which people believe propaganda only about specific claims, especially ones that are aggressively disseminated. It employs original survey data of Georgia and Kazakhstan, two frequent targets of Russian propaganda. Although both countries lie within the Russian media orbit, they differ in their baseline receptivity to the Kremlin’s worldview: Georgia is largely pro-West whereas Kazakhstan has been more closely aligned with Russia. Kazakhstan also has a large population of ethnic Russians, who may be especially susceptible to messages originating in Russia, making it a “most likely” case for the spread of Russian CTs.

The survey leverages this variation and includes questions on media consumption and a variety of measures of belief in CTs, allowing for a test of whether and how receiving news from Russia relates to conspiratorial beliefs.

The results show that Russia is one, but not the primary, vector for the endorsement of CTs in Georgia and Kazakhstan. People who obtain news from Russian television or social media are by-and-large no more inclined to endorse conspiracy theories than those who do not. One exception, however, is geopolitically salient conspiracy claims, which enjoy unusual support among Kazakhstani Russians through the likely mechanisms of media saturation and ethnic affinity. In general, however, domestic institutional factors explain CT belief better than Russian propaganda. Although survey respondents are amenable to CTs in general, there are barriers to the spread of the Kremlin's narratives, even in its geopolitical backyard. The findings provide mixed evidence on the potential influence of Russian propaganda and instead shine light on the domestic origins of belief in CTs.

### **Propaganda Near and Far**

Recent research has demonstrated that propaganda can be effective when people are exposed to repeated messages and have limited access to countervailing information. For example, Cantoni et al. (2017) find that Chinese textbooks changed the attitudes of students in ways that conform to state ideology. Measurable effects on attitudes and behavior have also been found from mass media, whether from Fox News (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007), independent television in Russia (Enikolopov et al. 2011), Nazi radio in Weimar Germany (Adena et al. 2013), or genocidal incitement on the radio in Rwanda (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

A related literature on how states broadcast propaganda abroad has produced more ambiguous findings. Some studies have found that U.S. government-funded radio during the

Cold War reached large numbers of listeners in the Soviet Union (Parta 2013). But such efforts can backfire. Kern and Hainmueller (2009) show that the availability of West German television in East Germany made viewers *more* supportive of the Communist regime. It also did not make East Germans more likely to join demonstrations in 1989, according to Kern (2011) and Crabtree et al. (2015). Della Vigna et al. (2011) likewise show that Croatians who listened to Serbian radio were more likely to vote for Croatian nationalist parties and reside in villages with anti-Serb graffiti than people who lacked reception. In the case of Russia, Gerber and Zavisca (2016) and Chapman and Gerber (2019) find limited and conditional effects of propaganda in the near abroad.

Other work highlights the importance of individual variables that moderate a target's receptivity to foreign propaganda. Szostek (2017) finds that birthplace, personal ties, and religious habits predict willingness to embrace Russian narratives about the Ukraine war. Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018) find that Russian television is persuasive only to viewers with preexisting pro-Russian orientations, and Toal and O'Loughlin (2018) find that beliefs about the Malaysian Airline crash over Ukraine in 2014 are associated with television viewing habits and region of residence.

When wielded as propaganda, scholars have shown how leaders invoke conspiracy for domestic consumption in order to build coalitions by inciting hostility against an outgroup, or to evade accountability by attacking the notion of a shared reality (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020; Yablokov 2018;). Regimes may also appeal to foreign audiences, making conspiratorial allegations against international rivals in order to boost their prestige or undermine social solidarity in the target country (Polyakova and Boyer 2018; Walker 2018).

Deliberate propaganda is not the only possible cause of belief in CTs. A voluminous psychological literature has found that demographic factors such as low education, low income, minority status, and being male are associated with conspiracism, in addition to psychological variables such as anomie, alienation, and supernatural belief (Douglas et al. 2017; van Prooijen 2017; Oliver and Wood 2014). A more recent turn in the literature examines how people's orientation toward their political system can make conspiracies appear more plausible. Uscinski and Parent (2014) argue that political "losers" adopt conspiracy beliefs as a compensatory measure to cope with the loss of power. In a comparative study of five countries, Drochon (2018) found that people who felt alienated from the state were more likely to believe CTs in which the government is the perpetrator. Conspiracism was highest in countries in eastern and southern Europe, where corruption and distrust of the state are more pervasive.

Despite the popularity of conspiracy as a form of political discourse, especially in autocratic regimes, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to how state actors promote and spread CTs abroad. And even as CTs proliferate over social media as part of global disinformation campaigns, the consequences of states' export of conspiracy claims have not been examined.

### **How Conspiracy Theories Travel**

I propose two complementary, but distinct, mechanisms by which CTs might spread as a result of foreign—and in this case, Russian—propaganda. Through the habituation mechanism, exposure to foreign propaganda alters the way people perceive power such that they become more conspiratorial in general. Alternatively, through the mechanism of persuasion, people endorse only CTs whose content is consistent with the propaganda they are exposed to.

The habituation mechanism involves a process whereby state propaganda influences people's tendency to engage in conspiratorial thinking as a rule. In the Putin years, Russia has played a spoiler role in international politics to disrupt what it perceives as an unjust unipolar order (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Trenin 2006). Russia's information strategy has correspondingly sought to inspire cynicism toward the international order and to promote particular CTs to advance its geopolitical interests. Central to Russian propaganda is the notion that the perceived beneficiaries from the status quo—the U.S. and Western Europe—seek to maintain global hegemony by engaging in devious practices such as fomenting revolutions and spreading ideas that undermine traditional values (Stent 2019; Snyder 2018; Sakwa 2017; Chebankova 2017).

People who are continuously exposed to messages such as these may internalize their tenor and thrust, in ways that shape their understanding of power. People might be drawn to the notion that powerful forces secretly pull the strings, that elites have no concern for ordinary people, and that nothing happens by accident. If these tenets are internalized as common sense, conspiracy may become an individual's dominant mode of interpretation, acting as an all-encompassing narrative to explain the political world (Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Swami et al. 2011). Exposure to foreign conspiratorial propaganda is unlikely to be the only influence on beliefs, but would be expected to be more thoroughgoing if people are not able to access countervailing information (Chong and Druckman 2013; Zaller 1992). Given that people are more likely to be exposed to messages from local and domestic sources on a regular basis, it may be unrealistic to posit that they are responsive first and foremost to foreign sources of information. Nonetheless, foreign propaganda may play some role in the production of conspiracy thinking. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: People who are exposed to conspiratorial messages from a sending country will be more conspiratorial

A second mechanism, persuasion, describes a more targeted process. Foreign propaganda may not affect the audience's general tendency toward conspiracism, but instead can incline people to endorse conspiratorial messages whose content is congruent with the propagandist's goals. Given that sending states usually prioritize some messages over others, CTs are more likely to be successfully conveyed to the extent that the sender undertakes a greater effort to disseminate them. For example, CTs about the terror attacks on 9/11 became embedded in political subcultures because the issue was salient and CT promoters used the Internet to propagate their claims widely (Bartlett and Miller 2011). Before Trump launched his presidential campaign, he aggressively asserted the claim that Obama was not born in the U.S.—and many of his supporters believed him (Pasek et al. 2015). In the international arena, governments may seek to increase the salience of particular issues before foreign audiences (Nye 2004a). When governments aggressively promote a narrative through news coverage and social media, it is more likely to resonate. Furthermore, CTs endorsed by the state may enjoy deference owing to the state's possession of intelligence information, allowing it to credibly make claims that would not be taken seriously if promoted by ordinary citizens (Olmsted 2009, 9).

Yet even repeated exposure may not be sufficient to shift attitudes. Prior research on belief in CTs has shown that individuals' perceptions are shaped by their preexisting ideological and partisan beliefs (Smallpage et al. 2017; Edelson et al, 2017; Miller et al. 2016). People tend to agree with assertions that implicate actors whom they already dislike, or involve a victim with



whom they sympathize. In such cases, people might be persuaded to endorse a CT insofar as it affirms their self-identification as a member of a group or satisfies a psychological need (Brotherton 2015; Krekó 2015). CTs promoted across borders may therefore resonate most strongly among people who identify with the politics or foreign policy of the sending state. Positive sentiments toward the sender can come from ideological affinity, common values, or ties based on heritage and ethnic commonality (Lacina and Lee 2013). Cross-border affinities may not only encourage concern with a state's well-being, but also lead to endorsement of the state's narrative about allies and enemies (Szostek 2017; Koinova 2013).

This leads to two hypotheses about the endorsement of CTs with specific content (persuasion) as opposed to CTs in general (habituation).

H2a: People who are exposed to messages from a sending country will believe CTs that are geopolitically salient

H2b: People who identify with the politics or foreign policy of a sending country will believe CTs that are geopolitically salient

Although the focus of this study is foreign propaganda, CTs with foreign origins may have to compete with CTs whose roots lie closer to home. Some research has shown that conspiracy ideation is an enduring, and possibly even, innate trait (Uscinski and Parent 2014; Oliver and Wood 2014; Brotherton and French 2013). Yet there is reason to believe that cynicism can be learned. If external propaganda puts forward the notion that all power is corrupt, people may have already reached that conclusion based on their experience with their own political systems (Drochon 2018). Where people learn to distrust authority, for example, from observing official malfeasance or experiencing abuses of power, they may determine that elites

are in fact plotting in secret against the common good (Norris 2012; Gilley 2009; Rothstein 2009). Disillusioned citizens may not need foreign media personalities to explain that powerful actors are conspiring against them.

H3: People who are alienated from their political system will be more conspiratorial

To summarize, to explain how the relationship between a state's promotion of CTs and people's receptiveness, several causal paths should be considered. If states spread conspiracism deliberately or as a byproduct of their foreign policy, citizens in the receiving country may come to see the world through a conspiratorial prism, by internalizing the notion that powerful actors always conspire against the powerless. However, it may be that states can successfully persuade audiences only by prioritizing certain messages and spreading them proactively. It may also be the case that specific conspiracy claims are persuasive only to people whose views or identity predispose them to trust the messenger. A final possibility is that dispositions toward power stemming from domestic sources are the primary cause of conspiracy beliefs. Because quotidian experiences are more pronounced and proximate, they may outweigh the persuasive efforts of external actors.

### **Putin's Propaganda and the Near Abroad**

In Russia, the medium—television—has usually conveyed the message. After Putin brought most of the Russian media under state control, the Kremlin began investing in broadcasting its message, including its critical take on the West, to audiences abroad through outlets like Russia Today, later rebranded as RT (Yablokov 2015). In 2014, Russia launched Sputnik, consolidating

its foreign broadcasting services into a single agency run by a longtime state propagandist, Dmitry Kisilev, and intended for people who are “tired of aggressive propaganda promoting a unipolar world and want a different perspective.”<sup>1</sup> Sputnik, which was modeled on the Voice of America, broadcast in 30 local languages to reach audiences in former Soviet states, including in countries traditionally wary of Russia, such as Georgia and Latvia. The Kremlin also spread propaganda through websites like RT and Sputnik, and on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and VKontakte (Helmus et al. 2018; Van Herpen 2015).

Much of the discourse emanating from the Kremlin in recent years has been conspiratorial. It involves narratives about the perceived unfairness of the post-Cold War order and Russia’s declining power, and sometimes recycles and amplifies American CTs (Yablokov 2015, 307). According to Kremlin propagandists, the West deliberately keeps Russia weak, clandestinely sponsors NGOs in the region to subvert pro-Russian governments through revolution, and pulls the strings to influence world events behind the scenes (Yablokov 2018). Russia aggressively spread CTs during the 2014 Ukraine war, as it sought to portray its actions, such as the forcible expropriation of Ukrainian territory, as defensive, and to mobilize pro-Russian Ukrainians in the Donbas against the new Euromaidan government (Snyder 2018; Ostrovsky 2015). It has also promoted specific CTs when convenient, such as the claim that the U.K. was behind the poisoning of ex-KGB spies in Salisbury (Gunter and Robinson 2018).

One arena in which the Kremlin has invested heavily in soft power is with the Russian diaspora in neighboring states. Ethnic Russians, especially those living in former Soviet republics, have been viewed in Russia as a sympathetic audience and a means to extend Russian power beyond its borders (Laruelle 2015). In Putin’s notorious 2005 speech calling the collapse

---

<sup>1</sup><https://sputniknews.com/russia/201411101014569630/>; <https://www.voanews.com/europe/russias-new-world-broadcast-service-sputnik>

of the USSR the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,” it is less recognized that he was referring specifically to that diaspora: “tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory” (Bigg 2005). Yet the sentiments of ethnic Russians in neighboring states who were relegated to minority status overnight are complicated and sometimes contradictory. In countries such as the Baltics, Ukraine, and Central Asia, some Russians have signaled resentment at their diminished status whereas others have embraced their country of residence and successfully integrated, yet people in either scenario may sympathize with Russia’s foreign-policy grievances (Commercio 2011; Peyrouse 2007).

This study involves Georgia and Kazakhstan, which are often the targets of Russian propaganda, but their foreign policy orientations create distinct prospects for its likely effectiveness. This feature makes them useful contrasting cases for this study. Georgia has worked to increase ties with the West at the expense of Moscow for most of its independent history. Georgia’s first President Eduard Shevardnadze was socialized as a Soviet apparatchik and served as Gorbachev’s foreign minister, but he reflected popular opinion in trying to resist Russia’s gravitational pull and seeking to join NATO. When he was deposed in 2003, President Mikheil Saakashvili sought to further move Georgia’s foreign policy away from Russia, allying with President George W. Bush and much of the US foreign policy establishment. The Kremlin has worked to prevent Georgia from joining Western institutions, most notably NATO, and has sought to influence public opinion and cultivate political allies toward that end. Yet Georgians overwhelmingly prefer European integration and are skeptical of Russian overtures, especially since the 2008 war (NDI 2015). Furthermore, fewer Georgians speak Russian fluently than their parents’ generation. As such, Georgians are generally skeptical toward Russian narratives on foreign policy. If, despite these barriers, Georgians are found to echo Russian conspiracy

narratives, this would indicate that Russia's information strategy is effective even in inhospitable settings and has the potential to resonate more widely.

Kazakhstan is more likely to be susceptible to Russian narratives because it is more closely bound with Russia, thanks to history and geography. Unlike Georgia, Kazakhstan had no history of statehood or a distinct national identity prior to Soviet rule. Khrushchev's "virgin lands" campaign led to the in-migration of ethnic Russians to northern Kazakhstan, and Russians made up much of the intelligentsia in Kazakhstan's cities. By 1989, Russians comprised up to 40% of the population, roughly the same as ethnic Kazakhs. Although Kazakhstan saw some of the earliest protests during perestroika, Kazakhstanis voted overwhelmingly to stay in the union, and Kazakhstan maintained a pro-Russian foreign policy after 1991. Strong relations persisted even while the government worked to re-engineer the demographic balance to favor Kazakhs and moved the capital north to counterbalance Russian influence (Wolfel 2002). Kazakhstan remained a faithful member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and the autocratic club of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and was in the first wave of countries to join the Eurasian Economic Union. Kazakhstanis tend to be positively disposed toward Russia and continue to speak Russian. Due to this confluence of factors, Kazakhstanis should be more susceptible to Russian CTs than are Georgians. If Russian CTs do *not* resonate in a receptive target like Kazakhstan, this would suggest that Kremlin efforts face resistance more broadly, especially in more hostile settings.

Another virtue of this case selection is their post-Soviet political inheritances. Although Georgia is more democratic, both countries are beset by opacity, political infighting, and oligarchy, which tend to make citizens distrustful of authorities. Like other post-Soviet citizens, people are exposed to (real or alleged) corruption and malfeasance, and their interactions with

state agents tend to be detrimental. Such episodes may incline people to believe CTs about their government, and perhaps to be conspiratorially disposed in general. Although citizens in longstanding democracies are also known to be suspicious of authorities, perceptions of institutions in these states may yield especially fertile conditions for the growth of CTs.

## **Data**

The data for this study comes from an original survey fielded in 2017 on 1000 respondents in each Georgia and Kazakhstan. For the dependent variable, CT belief, the questionnaire included a broad range of eight general and eight specific conspiracy claims. For the generic questions, I adapted a list of CTs proposed by Brotherton and French (2013) that involve replacing proper names with “non-specific descriptors” such as “the government” and “certain organizations. This scale is useful for comparison across countries, so that a respondent can imagine her own government when pondering the question. I began with a 15-item list the authors take as representative of five themes (e.g. government malfeasance, control of information) and eliminated those unlikely to resonate in the region, for example, cover-ups of extra-terrestrials, to end up with the following eight statements, which I call Generic CTs:

1. Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organizations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together
2. The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret
3. The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics
4. The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organization
5. The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement
6. The government uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity
7. Experiments involving new drugs or technologies are routinely carried out on the public without their knowledge or consent

8. A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest

Responses to conspiracy questions were measured on a scale of 1-4, from “definitely true” to “definitely false.”<sup>2</sup>

I also created a list of specific CTs that respondents in both Georgia and Kazakhstan—and throughout the Russian-speaking world—are likely to have encountered or whose elements would be familiar enough to require no additional explanation, but they vary in geopolitical salience.<sup>3</sup> Specific CTs include the following eight items:

1. The idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was invented to deceive people
2. Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organizations and companies, Masons really control world events like wars and economic crises
3. Mikhail Gorbachev was really working for the C.I.A. when the Soviet Union collapsed.
4. America supports fascists in Ukraine in order to increase its geopolitical influence
5. Russia, America, and other powerful countries secretly work together to control world events
6. The 9/11 attacks on the twin towers were perpetrated by the America government
7. Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organizations and companies, Jews really control world events like wars and economic crises
8. America employs local nongovernmental organizations to overthrow governments in the former Soviet Union

These claims entail a variety of actors, with differing levels of specificity to the region, and varying historical and contemporary salience. Claims #4, 6, and 8 are most critical for this study, as they are geopolitically salient. CTs about fascists and NGOs were aggressively disseminated as state propaganda in Russia, the former beginning in 2014 around the Euromaidan events, and the latter since the mid-2000s. The 9/11 CT portrays the United States in

---

<sup>2</sup> Because this scale has been validated, it is an effective way to measure conspiracism as a worldview. Yet some of these claims are plausibly grounded on evidence in the cases at hand, and may arguably not be considered CTs as all, especially #2 and #8. Without prejudging their veracity, analyzing them alongside unambiguous CTs can reveal whether they are part of an underlying conspiratorial worldview or whether they are better explained by different variables.

<sup>3</sup> I produced the list from Soviet-era tropes, claims circulating in the mass media, reporting from secondary sources, and focus groups conducted the previous year.

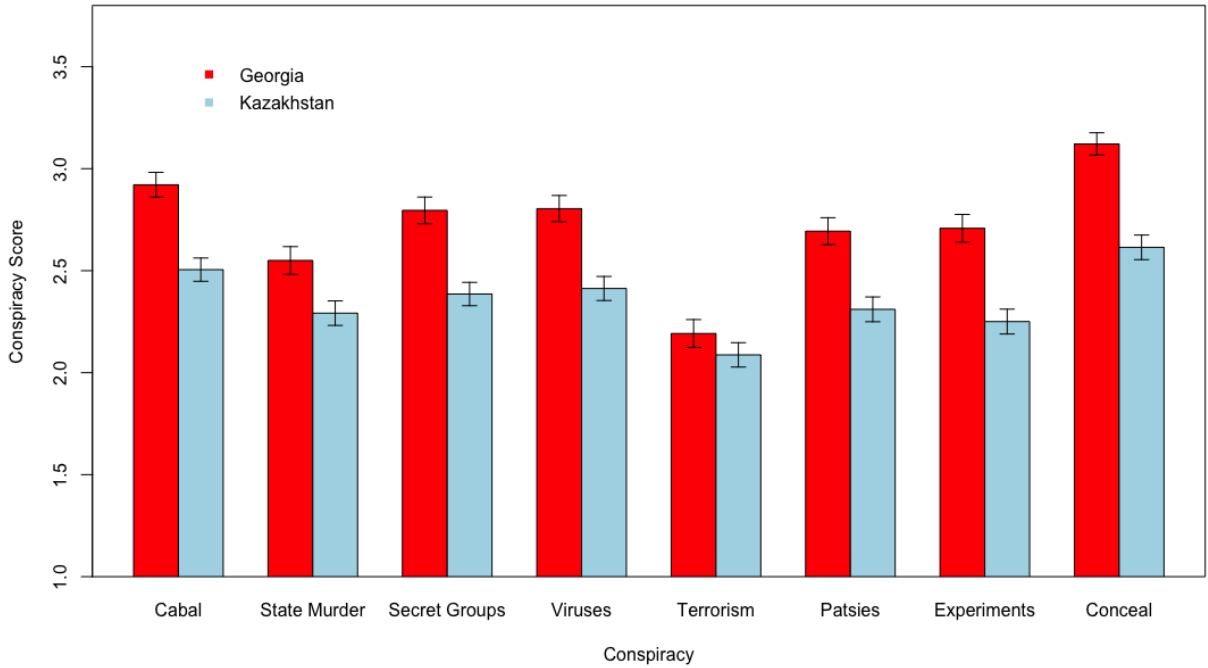
a negative light, and has been used by politicians abroad to heighten anti-Americanism. For this reason, it has been sometimes been promoted by politicians in Russia and Central Asia.

Testing H2a and H2b requires distinguishing geopolitically salient claims from others, so the other five claims function as placebos. The global warming hoax is obviously not specific to the region, but is widespread among anti-establishment politicians in a number of countries. CTs about the global machinations about Jews and Masons are both of worldwide vintage, and have a local, Russia-tinged flavor. Yet because they have little to do with geopolitics and have not been advanced by the Russian government, high levels of belief in them among Russian media consumers would not suggest persuasion. By testing those placebos alongside “treatments”—claims about 9/11, NGOs, and Ukraine—we can ascertain whether people are especially drawn toward CTs with pro-Russian geopolitical content, as opposed to CTs on diverse topics that are not central to Russian foreign policy.

Figure 1 shows mean scores for Generic CT for both countries side-by-side, with higher numbers correspond to higher levels agreement with the claim. Bars representing CTs are labeled in abbreviated form. Comparing means reveals that on every generic question, Georgians score higher than Kazakhstanis on conspiracy belief. Differences typically lie in the .3-.4 range on a 4-point scale, and are significant at  $p < .001$  on every question except terrorism, for which the level is .02.

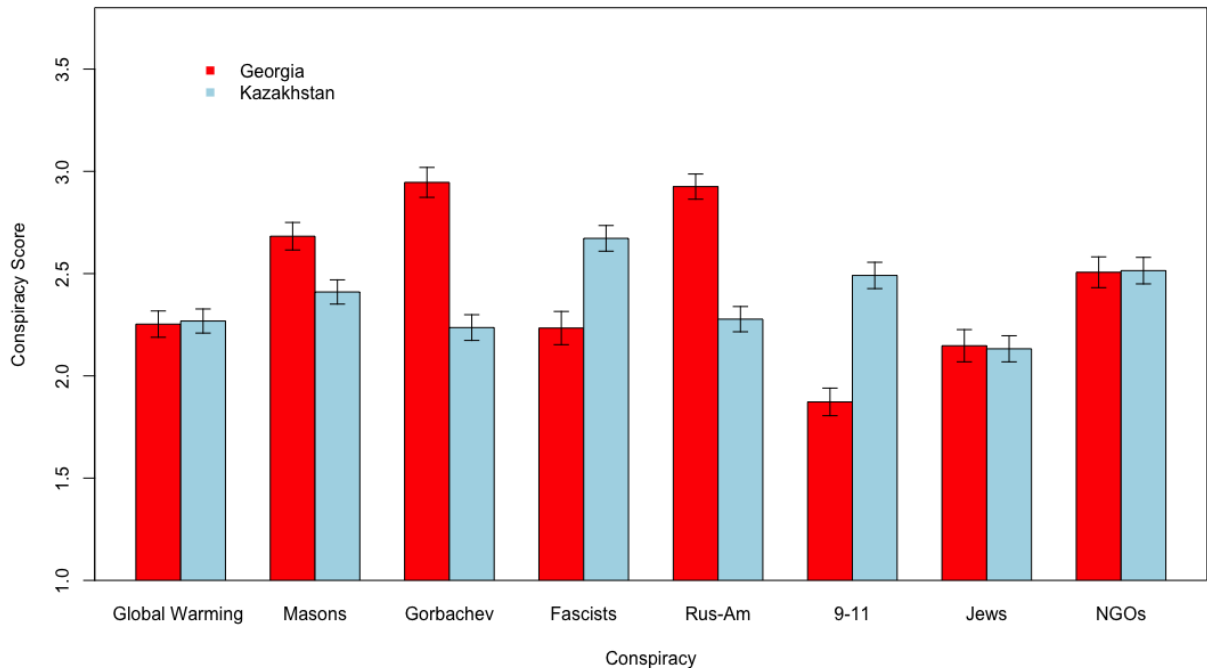
Figure 1: Mean Scores for Generic Conspiracy Theories





The results are different when it comes to specific claims, as respondents in the two countries are similarly conspiratorial. They are statistically indistinguishable on the topics of global warming, Jews, and NGOs, while Kazakhstanis are more likely to perceive conspiracies involving fascists in Ukraine and 9/11 ( $p < .001$ )—two of the three geopolitically salient issues. Georgians score higher on Masons, Gorbachev, and Russian-American collusion.

Figure 2: Mean Scores for Specific Conspiracy Theories



I include several sets of independent variables. The first are dummy variables indicating whether respondents reported using a source of information in the previous week to “learn about what is happening in the country and the world.” Relevant here is whether people reported using Russian television, social media, or websites.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority, 89% of Georgians and 84% of Kazakhstanis, reported watching some news on television in the previous week. However, 74.8% of Kazakhstanis reported watching *Russian* news, whereas only 11.6% of Georgians did.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Russian state TV, Russian-language social media and websites do not indicate exposure to

<sup>4</sup> The survey asked about both the national origins and language of each medium. Because Russian television is almost entirely under state control, I use the indicator of TV from Russia as the most direct measure of exposure to state propaganda. For the Internet-based sources, I use the indicator for Russian language because official propaganda can diffuse through decentralized media, and is notionally more likely to do so in the state language. For example, respondents who reported using Facebook and Instagram in Russian, as well as the Russian platforms Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, all have opportunities to consume messages reflect the Kremlin’s views.

<sup>5</sup> The latter figure is likely to be an undercount, as there may be a stigma associated with making this admission in Georgia. Additionally, in both countries, people who watch *Sputnik* in the local language may not be aware of its provenance.

unmediated messages from the Russian state, but may reflect official views that are propagated by ordinary users. Social media habits, like television viewing, reflect cultural orientations and languages spoken: 56.1% of Kazakhstanis used social media in Russian versus 5.2% of Georgians; and 39% of Kazakhstanis used Russian-language websites as opposed to 5% of Georgians. Because people choose where to obtain information, receiving news from any of these sources does not mean that viewers' minds are being changed. Because people select media that reflects their preexisting views, these variables should be interpreted carefully, as possible evidence of attitude change but at least as an indication of openness to Russian perspectives on current events. Causal interpretations might be bolstered by taking into account the content of propaganda or characteristics of the audience, which I discuss below.

### Analytical Strategy

To test the hypotheses, I run three sets of regressions: If H1 on habituation is correct, respondents who consume more Russian media should score higher on CTs in general. I therefore first regress generic CTs, which have no explicit connection to Russia, on Russian television, websites, and social media, pooling data from both countries. To create a composite measure of generic CT belief, I run exploratory factor analysis. A two-factor solution accounts for 59% of the variance, with the six questions pertaining to domestic conspiracies (“the government” or “some organization”) loading onto the first factor, while the two questions on global conspiracies (“single group of people” and “small unknown groups”) load onto the second.<sup>6</sup> I therefore created separate dependent variables corresponding to these two respective

---

<sup>6</sup> A three-factor solution also has the global questions loading onto a separate factor.

sets of claims, which I label Generic-domestic and Generic-global.<sup>7</sup> Each captures a distinct form of general conspiracism that has no obvious connection to Russia but reflects underlying suspicion of power, which, if exposure to Russian narratives were associated, would be evident in the analysis.

To assess how geopolitically salient CTs resonate (H2a and H2b), I regress CTs about fascists, NGOs, and 9/11 separately. I conduct separate analyses by country because H2b on ethnic Russians can only be tested in Kazakhstan. In each set of regressions, I include variables for political engagement to assess H3.<sup>8</sup>

Significant results do not necessarily indicate causality. Given the fact that citizens who are sympathetic toward Russia are also likely to consume Russian media, we cannot rule out the possibility of self-selection. However, if the effect stems from ethnicity, this variable can be presumed to exercise a causal effect, as believing in CTs is unlikely to cause an individual to identify as Russian. Institutional alienation is an intermediate case, as institutional distrust, by cultivating cynicism, can plausibly predispose people to believe unrelated conspiracy beliefs—just as others have argued that individual psychological factors are causal—yet both variables may be caused by a prior omitted variable. If, however, associations are found to be null, then the question of causality becomes moot. The absence of strong correlations, even in a most likely case, would be an important finding in its own right, as it would rule out Russian influence as a cause of CT belief.

---

<sup>7</sup> Analysis of every claim separately can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> I use OLS in all regressions since the range is from 1 to 4. Because the specific CT variables are ordinal with four categories, I also re-run those regressions using ordinal logit models in the Appendix.

## Results

Are consumers of Russian news more conspiratorial? Table 1 shows regression results on Generic-domestic and Generic-global for obtaining news from the Russian media, along with institutional variables. The results are inconsistent. For the first set of regressions (models 1-3 and 7-9) only social media is positively and significantly associated with Generic-domestic CTs. The coefficients on most other media variables are positive but do not attain statistical significance. When institutional variables are added (models 4-6 and 10-12), social media loses significance but websites become significant for Generic-global. These results provide weak support for H1, that exposure to Russian news is associated with habituation to a conspiratorial worldview.

The story is different for institutional variables: Democracy assessments, approval of the government, and trust in government are all negative and significantly associated with CTs both about the government and about global actors, providing strong support for H3. People who have given a bribe in the past year are significantly more conspiratorial. These variables account for more variation in both dependent variables than do the media or demographic variables, as evidenced by the increase in adjusted  $r^2$ . Each institutional variable captures some aspect of orientation toward the state. Despite their expression of an underlying concept, each retains significance in the presence of the others, suggesting that they are sufficiently differentiated. H3 therefore receives strong support.

Table 1: Russian Media and Generic Conspiracy Beliefs

	Generic-domestic						Generic-global					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Rus TV	0.040 (0.044)			0.006 (0.043)			0.017 (0.051)			-0.012 (0.054)		
Rus soc med		0.092* (0.042)			0.030 (0.042)			0.020 (0.049)			-0.003 (0.052)	
Rus web			0.068 (0.043)			0.042 (0.043)			0.085 (0.050)			0.115* (0.053)
edu	-0.009 (0.014)	-0.010 (0.014)	-0.010 (0.014)	-0.006 (0.013)	-0.006 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.013)	0.024 (0.016)	0.024 (0.016)	0.022 (0.016)	0.032 (0.017)	0.032 (0.017)	0.029 (0.017)
income	0.009 (0.009)	0.009 (0.009)	0.009 (0.009)	0.005 (0.009)	0.005 (0.009)	0.005 (0.009)	0.002 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)	0.006 (0.011)	0.006 (0.011)	0.006 (0.011)
age	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
male	-0.014 (0.035)	-0.014 (0.035)	-0.015 (0.035)	-0.017 (0.035)	-0.017 (0.035)	-0.018 (0.035)	0.018 (0.041)	0.018 (0.041)	0.017 (0.041)	-0.015 (0.044)	-0.015 (0.044)	-0.018 (0.044)
Kazakhstan	-0.376*** (0.046)	-0.395*** (0.041)	-0.372*** (0.038)	-0.158*** (0.048)	-0.169*** (0.044)	-0.168*** (0.041)	-0.440*** (0.053)	-0.439*** (0.048)	-0.457*** (0.045)	-0.298*** (0.060)	-0.305*** (0.055)	-0.345*** (0.052)
dem				-0.046*** (0.009)	-0.046*** (0.009)	-0.046*** (0.009)				-0.044*** (0.011)	-0.044*** (0.011)	-0.045*** (0.011)
approve				-0.171*** (0.019)	-0.170*** (0.018)	-0.170*** (0.018)				-0.120*** (0.023)	-0.120*** (0.023)	-0.119*** (0.023)
gov trust				-0.132*** (0.024)	-0.132*** (0.024)	-0.131*** (0.024)				-0.100*** (0.030)	-0.100*** (0.030)	-0.099*** (0.030)
bribe				0.281*** (0.061)	0.280*** (0.061)	0.280*** (0.061)				0.216** (0.076)	0.216** (0.076)	0.212** (0.076)

Constant	2.796*** (0.074)	2.792*** (0.074)	2.795*** (0.074)	3.801*** (0.091)	3.799*** (0.091)	3.800*** (0.091)	2.833*** (0.088)	2.832*** (0.088)	2.833*** (0.088)	3.633*** (0.114)	3.634*** (0.114)	3.635*** (0.114)
Observations	1,784	1,784	1,784	1,483	1,483	1,483	1,675	1,675	1,675	1,398	1,398	1,398
R <sup>2</sup>	0.055	0.057	0.056	0.257	0.258	0.258	0.063	0.063	0.064	0.167	0.167	0.169
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.052	0.054	0.053	0.252	0.253	0.253	0.060	0.060	0.061	0.161	0.161	0.163
Residual Std. Error	0.700 (df = 1777)	0.699 (df = 1777)	0.700 (df = 1777)	0.634 (df = 1472)	0.634 (df = 1472)	0.634 (df = 1472)	0.799 (df = 1668)	0.799 (df = 1668)	0.799 (df = 1668)	0.772 (df = 1387)	0.772 (df = 1387)	0.771 (df = 1387)
F Statistic	17.346*** (df = 6; 1777)	18.024*** (df = 6; 1777)	17.637*** (df = 6; 1777)	51.008*** (df = 10; 1472)	51.072*** (df = 10; 1472)	51.132*** (df = 10; 1472)	18.679*** (df = 6; 1668)	18.690*** (df = 6; 1668)	19.166*** (df = 6; 1668)	27.750*** (df = 10; 1387)	27.744*** (df = 10; 1387)	28.302*** (df = 10; 1387)

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

For the next analyses, I report only the three geopolitically salient specific CTs due to the high number of models that need to be run (three types of media for each claim, and the addition of ethnicity in Kazakhstan). Table 2 shows results for geopolitical CTs in Georgia. Neither television nor websites is associated with greater belief in any claim. However, use of Russian social media is associated with a significantly higher level of agreement with the 9/11 conspiracy claim—nearly a half-point higher score on the conspiracy scale of 1-4. Social media is not associated with more agreement regarding fascists or NGOs.

	Fascists		9-11			NGOs			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Rus TV	0.053 (0.131)			-0.008 (0.110)			-0.045 (0.117)		
Rus soc med		0.117 (0.186)			0.437** (0.161)			0.034 (0.174)	
Rus web			0.122 (0.197)			0.225 (0.165)			-0.043 (0.171)
edu	-0.057 (0.033)	-0.059 (0.033)	-0.059 (0.033)	-0.041 (0.027)	-0.049 (0.027)	-0.047 (0.027)	0.045 (0.029)	0.043 (0.030)	0.045 (0.029)
income	0.033 (0.022)	0.033 (0.022)	0.031 (0.022)	-0.002 (0.018)	-0.003 (0.018)	-0.005 (0.018)	0.007 (0.020)	0.007 (0.020)	0.007 (0.020)
age	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)
male	-0.001 (0.094)	0.001 (0.093)	0.002 (0.093)	0.215** (0.080)	0.214** (0.080)	0.218** (0.080)	0.449*** (0.086)	0.446*** (0.086)	0.447*** (0.085)
dem	-0.025 (0.027)	-0.024 (0.027)	-0.025 (0.027)	-0.059** (0.022)	-0.057** (0.022)	-0.060** (0.022)	-0.080*** (0.023)	-0.080*** (0.023)	-0.081*** (0.023)
approve	-0.264*** (0.046)	-0.262*** (0.047)	-0.264*** (0.046)	-0.197*** (0.040)	-0.190*** (0.040)	-0.195*** (0.040)	-0.209*** (0.042)	-0.206*** (0.042)	-0.208*** (0.042)
gov trust	0.115 (0.063)	0.109 (0.063)	0.113 (0.063)	0.081 (0.053)	0.071 (0.053)	0.082 (0.053)	0.039 (0.055)	0.038 (0.056)	0.040 (0.055)



bribe	0.047 (0.213)	0.047 (0.213)	0.058 (0.213)	0.151 (0.199)	0.152 (0.198)	0.163 (0.199)	0.329 (0.190)	0.325 (0.190)	0.323 (0.191)
Constant	2.907*** (0.227)	2.904*** (0.227)	2.906*** (0.227)	2.524*** (0.187)	2.493*** (0.186)	2.514*** (0.187)	2.908*** (0.197)	2.909*** (0.197)	2.913*** (0.198)
Observations	398	398	398	514	514	514	443	443	443
R <sup>2</sup>	0.116	0.116	0.116	0.106	0.119	0.110	0.186	0.185	0.185
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.095	0.096	0.096	0.090	0.104	0.094	0.169	0.168	0.169
Residual Std. Error	0.870 (df = 388)	0.870 (df = 388)	0.870 (df = 388)	0.824 (df = 504)	0.818 (df = 504)	0.823 (df = 504)	0.826 (df = 433)	0.826 (df = 433)	0.826 (df = 433)
F Statistic	5.642*** (df = 9; 388)	5.670*** (df = 9; 388)	5.669*** (df = 9; 388)	6.668*** (df = 9; 504)	7.582*** (df = 9; 504)	6.899*** (df = 9; 504)	10.966*** (df = 9; 433)	10.950*** (df = 9; 433)	10.954*** (df = 9; 433)

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

The final set of regressions, in Table 3, focuses on geopolitically salient CTs in Kazakhstan and includes media, ethnicity, and institutional perceptions. First, of the media variables, television is significant and positively associated with fascists in Ukraine, the most salient and provocative of Russia’s claims surrounding the event. This result is robust to the inclusion of the ethnic dummy variable, despite the fact that ethnic Russians are more likely to watch Russian television.<sup>9</sup> This provides partial support for H2a. Second, Russians are significantly more likely to perceive a conspiracy associated with the Ukraine events—fascists and NGOs—but not 9/11, highlighting the allure of Russian propaganda to Kazakhstani Russians. The ethnic variable is robust to the presence of the institutional variables, supporting H2b. Third, three institutional variables persist as significant with the expected sign: democracy, trust, and bribe-giving. Although approval falls out, this result provides support for H3. Other variables show inconsistent or no associations with the three claims.

<sup>9</sup> 87% of Kazakhstani Russians watch Russian TV as opposed to 66% of ethnic Kazakhs and 79% of other nationalities.

Geopolitical CTs and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan									
	Fascists			9-11		NGOs			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Rus TV	0.161*			0.008			-0.011		
	(0.082)			(0.087)			(0.087)		
Rus soc med		0.059			0.010			-0.098	
		(0.069)			(0.072)			(0.072)	
Rus web			0.136			0.036			0.096
			(0.071)			(0.074)			(0.074)
ethnic	0.364***	0.380***	0.384***	0.050	0.051	0.051	0.359***	0.366***	0.357***
	(0.075)	(0.075)	(0.075)	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.079)
edu	0.033	0.033	0.029	0.004	0.004	0.003	0.028	0.030	0.024
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
income	-0.020	-0.021	-0.019	-0.020	-0.020	-0.019	0.0003	0.0003	0.002
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)
age	0.002	0.003	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.006*	0.006*	0.006*
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
male	-0.030	-0.024	-0.031	0.164*	0.165*	0.164*	0.030	0.030	0.025
	(0.070)	(0.071)	(0.070)	(0.075)	(0.074)	(0.074)	(0.074)	(0.074)	(0.074)
dem	-0.060***	-0.055***	-0.057***	-0.037*	-0.037*	-0.037*	-0.051**	-0.051**	-0.052**
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
approve	-0.007	-0.013	-0.009	-0.058	-0.059	-0.058	0.064	0.062	0.067
	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.044)
gov trust	-0.188***	-0.186***	-0.183***	-0.139**	-0.139**	-0.138**	-0.166**	-0.165**	-0.164**
	(0.049)	(0.050)	(0.049)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)
bribe	0.251*	0.259*	0.255*	0.322**	0.322**	0.320**	0.174	0.178	0.168
	(0.105)	(0.106)	(0.105)	(0.112)	(0.112)	(0.112)	(0.110)	(0.110)	(0.110)
Constant	3.171***	3.218***	3.202***	3.155***	3.153***	3.147***	2.535***	2.582***	2.498***
	(0.223)	(0.223)	(0.221)	(0.237)	(0.237)	(0.235)	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.230)
Observations	725	725	725	690	690	690	717	717	717
R <sup>2</sup>	0.121	0.117	0.121	0.068	0.068	0.069	0.082	0.085	0.085
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.109	0.105	0.109	0.054	0.054	0.055	0.069	0.072	0.072
Residual Std. Error	0.913 (df = 714)	0.915 (df = 714)	0.913 (df = 714)	0.942 (df = 679)	0.942 (df = 679)	0.942 (df = 679)	0.956 (df = 706)	0.955 (df = 706)	0.955 (df = 706)

F Statistic	9.839*** (df = 10; 714)	9.485*** (df = 10; 714)	9.824*** (df = 10; 714)	4.970*** (df = 10; 679)	4.971*** (df = 10; 679)	4.995*** (df = 10; 679)	6.344*** (df = 10; 706)	6.542*** (df = 10; 706)	6.524*** (df = 10; 706)
-------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------

*Note:* \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

One concern relating to the persuasion mechanism is that the analyses tested only three of the eight specific CTs in Kazakhstan, which were singled out because they were geopolitically salient and important in Russian foreign policy. But it may be the case that similar results might obtain on questions that are not as salient: global warming, Gorbachev, Masons, Jews, and superpower collusion. If Russian media consumption were associated with endorsement of these ideas, it would indicate that attitudes are shaped not by an onslaught of recent propaganda, but instead by exposure to more diffuse messages emanating from Russia, which would suggest a mechanism somewhere between habituation and persuasion. Running regressions separately on these five claims, shown in the Appendix, reveals that neither Russian ethnicity nor any media source is significantly associated with any of them. Instead, domestic and demographic variables do a better job at explaining higher levels of belief.

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

To summarize, H1, the habituation mechanism, is only weakly supported because Russian media is infrequently associated with greater levels of general conspiracism, either on domestic or global matters. The persuasion hypotheses receives some support: H2a, that Russian media is more influential when it broadcasts geopolitical propaganda campaigns; and H2b, that ethnic Russians are more inclined to believe geopolitical claims. Overall, H3 performs better than hypotheses involving Russian media. Orientation toward the political system is more strongly associated with belief in CTs than are external influences.

### **Additional Tests and Alternative Explanations<sup>10</sup>**

Although the habituation mechanism is not supported by any evidence, given what the regressions on geopolitical CTs revealed—that being Russian and watching Russian television increases conspiracism for certain claims—perhaps those factors might make an impact together. To find out, I reran the regressions for Generic-domestic and Generic-global conspiracism in Kazakhstan and included an interaction of ethnic Russians and Russian television. This variable does not attain significance for either dependent variable, with or without the institutional variables. There is therefore no evidence that a process of habituation toward Russian conspiracism is occurring among ethnic Russians.

A second concern is that the effects might be additive rather than substitutes, in which case people who consume all three types of Russian media might be especially prone to echo Russian narratives in ways that those who consume only one do not. I therefore created a

---

<sup>10</sup> Tables with results for all additional tests are in the supplemental appendix.

variable for people who consume all three, which comprise one-quarter of Kazakhstani respondents. This variable is not significant for either of the generic measures, and the results are not substantively different from those above for the geopolitically salient CTs.

A third possible objection to the variables behind persuasion is that effects having to do with ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are not about affinity with Russia, but rather about simply being non-Kazakh. This might be the case, for example, if Kazakhs were made to feel intimidated by Russia's revanchist moves in Ukraine. Even though few observers expected Russia would make a claim on northern Kazakhstan after occupying Crimea, the threat was palpable enough for President Nazarbayev to make statements affirming Kazakhstan's statehood.<sup>11</sup> If ethnic Kazakhs were turned off, it could imply that Russia's narrative was not uniquely attractive to Kazakhstani Russians, but instead that Kazakhstanis overall found Russian CTs about Ukraine and NGOs alluring—except for offended members of the titular nationality. To check this, I created a dummy variable for ethnic Uzbeks (17 percent of the sample) and included it in the regressions on geopolitical CTs. The results on that variable are null, suggesting that the result is truly a Russian, as opposed to merely a non-Kazakh, effect.

Fourth, some scholars, including Miller et al. (2016) have argued that political sophistication heightens the motivated biases behind conspiracy beliefs, as it provides the wherewithal for people to identify congruences between a claim and their worldview, and to rationalize their endorsement of a CT. If this were the case, then we might presume that external propaganda has a greater impact on better-educated respondents. To assess this possibility, I interacted education with each medium (TV, websites, and social media) for generic CTs in both countries. The results show that this interaction does not improve the on either media or

---

<sup>11</sup> This comment came after Putin alluded to Kazakhstan's lack of statehood before the Soviet era.

education as a main effect. In fact, the only significant coefficient—involving Russian television for global CTs in Kazakhstan—is negative, indicating that more education makes a viewer *less* likely to accept those claims.

Finally, the lack of impact of Russian-language social media on CT beliefs may seem surprising given how rapidly misinformation spreads over that medium. Yet it may be that combining all social media platforms misses important distinctions in the content that people can access. The survey revealed that the five most popular platforms included three US-based companies—Facebook, Instagram, and What’s App—along with two Russian ones: VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki. The Russian platforms are more popular in Russia than the foreign ones, but less likely to be used to convey oppositional messages (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015). It may therefore be the case that people who use the Russian apps are exposed to more pro-Russian propaganda and conspiratorial content than those using the American apps in the Russian language. To find out, I substituted a dummy variable for having used VK or Odnoklassniki in the past week for the aggregate social media variable, and tested it on generic CTs in Georgia and both generic and geopolitical CTs in Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> The results were substantively identical to that of the combined social media variable in all regressions.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The Russian government has a reputation for being conspiratorial, and has worked to spread its geopolitical grievances abroad, not least to its post-Soviet neighbors. This study has shown that although citizens in two of its smaller neighbors—at least in population—are fairly conspiratorial themselves, those beliefs cannot be attributed primarily to Russia’s influence through the media.

---

<sup>12</sup> I do not run this test in Georgia because the numbers are too small.

The strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs in Georgia and Kazakhstan was not of foreign origin at all. Instead it was alienation from the political system—whether the belief that politicians are not responsive to the public; that government officials cannot be trusted; that their country is not a democracy; or actual experience paying bribes. These variables are associated with suspicions that the authorities, whether domestic or international, are capable of executing sinister plots inimical to the public good.

By ascertaining attitudes about CTs involving both domestic and global actors, it was possible to determine whether narratives involving different perpetrators have distinct effects. Comparing mean scores across the two countries, rather than across individuals, revealed that foreign alignments mattered for CTs about salient geopolitical events. Kazakhstanis scored higher than Georgians on Russian claims stemming from the Ukraine war: fascists and NGO subversion. This striking finding—as Kazakhstanis scored lower on almost all other CTs—indicates that propaganda can be effective in some instances. It suggests that, with the appropriate focus and investment, Russia can effectively spread its message to sympathetic audiences based on foreign policy affinity.

None of the three types of Russian media had outsize effects on attitudes. Previous work has focused on television as the primary instrument for the Kremlin to spread information to Russian citizens as well as audiences broad (Hutchings and Rolyova 2009). The use of television to target audiences abroad has been evident in the deployment of RT to promote conspiracy theories as well as to build support for Russia’s narrative during the war in Ukraine (Ostrovsky 2015; Yablokov 2015). Yet television was only a significant predictor of CT belief when linked to a deliberate propaganda campaign, and was not associated with a more general habituation to conspiratorial sentiment. Social media, which has also been highlighted as a conduit for Russian

misinformation (e.g. Jamieson 2020; Polyakova and Boyer 2018), also failed to make a large impact. It was, surprisingly, Georgians and not Kazakhstanis whose use of Russian social media made them more prone to believe the CT about 9/11. The persuasiveness of such information in this case likely hinges on the fact that it does not come from the Russian government, at least directly, and does not touch on Russian foreign policy, unlike claims about the Ukraine war. This may have made such claims more palatable to Georgians.

Where either Russian media or ethnicity was significant in Kazakhstan, the mechanisms cannot be fully explicated because we do not know the direction of causality. However, the content of conspiracy claims suggests that persuasion may have occurred. In a country typically sympathetic with Russia's foreign policy, and with a diasporic population keyed in to Russian-language and specifically Russian media, it is not surprising that Russians would be receptive to the Kremlin's heavily promoted tropes about the Ukraine conflict. By contrast, the Russian government did not aggressively assert claims about Jews, Masons, global warming, or Gorbachev during this period, although these were accessible through other media for those who sought it out. The discrepancy in the supply of messages from the Kremlin suggests that Kazakhstani Russians were more likely than other groups to adopt salient Russian conspiracy narratives as a result of their exposure to those narratives through multiple and largely informal channels (Szostek 2017). This results highlight how ethnicity shapes conspiracy perceptions in nuanced ways. Although Kazakhstanis are able to see the world from Russia's perspective, they part ways on one issue: territorial sovereignty. Thus, when Russia demonized Ukraine, and the West by proxy, Kazakhstani Russians may have seen the issue much as Russian citizens did, whereas ethnic Kazakhs bridled at the pretext Russia used to invade Ukrainian territory.



The implications of this analysis point to challenges in promoting propaganda abroad. The absence of a clear relationship between Russian media and attitudes avoids the vexed question of causal identification, since even correlations were not found. Russia has many levers to pull to coax states to support its geopolitical goals, not all of which are informational. And some of its actions, like the annexation of Crimea, are counter-productive, as evidenced by the lukewarm support this move received in the UN among post-Soviet states. As other great powers have discovered, soft power cannot be not promoted in a vacuum: Foreign audiences are subject to countervailing information from many sources, and a state's policies and image abroad can work at cross-purposes with its intentions (Nye 2004b). Russia in many ways represents a "best case" for spreading soft power, as it possesses structural advantages in geography and cultural ties in the near abroad (Tsygankov 2006). This is especially the case in Kazakhstan. Its mixed success bodes poorly for states with more tenuous connections, such as the U.S. in regions where it seeks to project power, like the Middle East.

It is possible that the exclusive focus on CTs in this paper misses other types of Russian propaganda that might be more effective. If CTs are essentially negative because they allege nefarious actions, positive propaganda that is more often associated with soft power might be more effective (Huang 2018). For example, Russian news consumers might develop a positive opinion of Putin by watching carefully crafted footage of him in action, empathizing with pensioners, excoriating corrupt local officials, and performing Russian masculinity (Sperling 2014). People might also be swayed by critical but non-conspiratorial salvos against actions Russia deems unfair, like American support for NATO enlargement or democracy promotion in the post-Soviet region. At the same time, neither Russia nor other aggrieved powers is necessary to inculcate greater cynicism toward authority. The weakening of political parties, rising

inequality, and economic stagnation have caused people to be suspicious of elites on a global scale. It remains the case that citizens are well suited to believe conspiracies are afoot based exclusively on their own experiences, and without the need for any external prodding.

## References

- Barkun, Michael. *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Univ of California Press, 2013.
- Bartlett, Jamie, and Carl Miller. "A bestiary of the 9/11 truth movement: notes from the front line." *Skeptical Inquirer* 35, no. 4 (2011).
- Bigg, Claire. "World: Was Soviet Collapse Last Century's Worst Geopolitical Catastrophe?" RFE/RL, April 29, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058688.html>
- Brotherton, Rob. *Suspicious minds: Why we believe conspiracy theories*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- Brotherton, Robert, Christopher C. French, and Alan D. Pickering. "Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: The generic conspiracist beliefs scale." *Frontiers in psychology* 4 (2013): 279.
- Cantoni, Davide, Yuyu Chen, David Y. Yang, Noam Yuchtman, and Y. Jane Zhang. "Curriculum and ideology." *Journal of Political Economy* 125, no. 2 (2017): 338-392.
- Chapman, Hannah S., and Theodore P. Gerber. "Opinion-Formation and Issue-Framing Effects of Russian News in Kyrgyzstan." *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2019): 756-769.
- Chebankova, Elena. "Russia's idea of the multipolar world order: origins and main dimensions." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 217-234.
- Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. "Counterframing effects." *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013): 1-16.
- Commercio, Michele E. *Russian minority politics in post-Soviet Latvia and Kyrgyzstan: the transformative power of informal networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- Crabtree, Charles, David Darmofal, and Holger L. Kern. "A spatial analysis of the impact of West German television on protest mobilization during the East German revolution." *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 3 (2015): 269-284.
- DellaVigna, Stefano, and Ethan Kaplan. "The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (2007): 1187-1234.
- DellaVigna, Stefano, Ruben Enikolopov, Vera Mironova, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. "Cross-border effects of foreign media: Serbian radio and nationalism in Croatia." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6, no. 3 (2014): 103-132.

- Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka. "The psychology of conspiracy theories." *Current directions in psychological science* 26, no. 6 (2017): 538-542.
- Drochon, Hugo "Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories in Great Britain and Europe," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Edelson, Jack, Alexander Alduncin, Christopher Krewson, James A. Sieja, and Joseph E. Uscinski. "The effect of conspiratorial thinking and motivated reasoning on belief in election fraud." *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 933-946.
- Enikolopov, Ruben, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. "Media and political persuasion: Evidence from Russia." *American Economic Review* 101, no. 7 (2011): 3253-85.
- Gerber, Theodore P., and Jane Zavisca. "Does Russian propaganda work?." *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2016): 79-98.
- Gilley, Bruce. *The right to rule: how states win and lose legitimacy*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Gunter, Joel and Olga Robinson, "Sergei Skripal and the Russian Disinformation Game," *BBC.com*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45454142>; .
- Helmus, Todd C., et al. *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*. United States, RAND Corporation, 2018.
- Huang, Haifeng. "The pathology of hard propaganda." *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 1034-1038.
- Hutchings, Stephen, and Natalia Rulyova. *Television and culture in Putin's Russia: remote control*. Routledge, 2009.
- Imhoff, Roland, and Martin Bruder. "Speaking (un-) truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude." *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (2014): 25-43.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Cyberwar: How Russian hackers and trolls helped elect a president: what we don't, can't, and do know*. Oxford University Press, 2020
- Kern, Holger Lutz. "Foreign media and protest diffusion in authoritarian regimes: The case of the 1989 East German revolution." *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 9 (2011): 1179-1205.
- Kern, Holger Lutz, and Jens Hainmueller. "Opium for the masses: How foreign media can stabilize authoritarian regimes." *Political Analysis* (2009): 377-399.

- Koinova, Maria. "Four types of diaspora mobilization: Albanian diaspora activism for Kosovo independence in the US and the UK." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9, no. 4 (2013): 433-453.
- Kotkin, Stephen. "American Hustle: What Mueller Found-and Didn't Find-about Trump and Russia." *Foreign Affairs* 98 (2019): 62.
- Krekó, Péter. "Conspiracy theory as collective motivated cognition." In Soral, Wiktor, and Cichočka, Aleksandra. *The Psychology of Conspiracy*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2015: 62-75.
- Lacina, Bethany, and Charlotte Lee. "Culture clash or democratic peace?: Results of a survey experiment on the effect of religious culture and regime type on foreign policy opinion formation." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9, no. 2 (2013): 143-170.
- Larson, Deborah Welch, and Alexei Shevchenko. "Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to US primacy." *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 63-95.
- Laruelle, Marlene. "The "Russian World": Russia's soft power and geopolitical imagination." *Center on Global Interests* (2015): 23-25.
- Miller, Joanne M., Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart. "Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 824-844.
- NDI. "Poll: Most Georgians Continue to Support Nato and EU Membership; Majority Remains Politically Undecided." December 21, 2015, <https://www.ndi.org/NDI-Poll-Georgia-Press-Release>
- Norris, Pippa. *Making democratic governance work: How regimes shape prosperity, welfare, and peace*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Nye Jr, Joseph S. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public affairs, 2004a.
- Nye Jr, Joseph S. "The decline of America's soft power-Why Washington should worry." *Foreign Affairs*. 83 (2004b): 16.
- Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. "Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style (s) of mass opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952-966.
- O'Loughlin, John, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov. "Who identifies with the "Russian World"? Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 6 (2016): 745-778.
- Orenstein, Mitchell A. *The lands in between: Russia vs. the West and the new politics of hybrid war*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

- Ostrovsky, Arkady. *The invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's freedom to Putin's war*. Penguin, 2015.
- Parta, R. Eugene. *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War*. Hoover Press, 2013.
- Pasek, Josh, Tobias H. Stark, Jon A. Krosnick, and Trevor Tompson. "What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-Black attitudes." *Electoral Studies* 40 (2015): 482-489.
- Peisakhin, Leonid, and Arturas Rozenas. "Electoral effects of biased media: Russian television in Ukraine." *American journal of political science* 62, no. 3 (2018): 535-550.
- Peyrouse, Sébastien. "Nationhood and the minority question in Central Asia. The Russians in Kazakhstan." *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 3 (2007): 481-501.
- Polyakova, Alina, and Spencer P. Boyer. "The future of political warfare: Russia, the West, and the coming age of global digital competition." *EUROPE* (2018).
- Reuter, Ora John, and David Szakonyi. "Online social media and political awareness in authoritarian regimes." *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 1 (2015): 29-51.
- Rosenblum, Nancy L., and Russell Muirhead. *A lot of people are saying: The new conspiracism and the assault on democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Rothstein, Bo. "Creating political legitimacy: Electoral democracy versus quality of government." *American behavioral scientist* 53, no. 3 (2009): 311-330.
- Rutland, Peter, and Andrei Kazantsev. "The limits of Russia's 'soft power'." *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (2016): 395-413.
- Sakwa, Richard. *Russia against the rest: The post-cold war crisis of world order*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Schoen, Douglas E. *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*. Encounter Books, 2016.
- Smallpage, Steven M., Adam M. Enders, and Joseph E. Uscinski. "The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs." *Research & Politics* 4, no. 4 (2017): 2053168017746554.
- Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Tim Duggan Books, 2018.
- Sperling, Valerie. *Sex, politics, and Putin: Political legitimacy in Russia*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Stent, Angela. *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*. Hachette UK, 2019.
- Swami, Viren, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietschnig, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek. "Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious conspiracy theories." *British Journal of Psychology* 102, no. 3 (2011): 443-463.
- Szostek, Joanna. "The power and limits of Russia's strategic narrative in Ukraine: The role of linkage." *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (2017): 379-395.
- Toal, Gerard, and John O'Loughlin. "'Why Did MH17 Crash?': Blame attribution, television news and public opinion in Southeastern Ukraine, Crimea and the de facto states of Abkhazia, south Ossetia and Transnistria." *Geopolitics* 23, no. 4 (2018): 882-916.
- Trenin, Dmitri. "Russia leaves the West." *Foreign Affairs* 85 (2006): 87.
- Tsygankov, Andrei P. "If not by tanks, then by banks? The role of soft power in Putin's foreign policy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (2006): 1079-1099.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. What is a conspiracy Theory? Uscinski, Joseph E. *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2018.
- Uscinski, Joseph E., and Joseph M. Parent. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Van Herpen, Marcel H.. *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*. United Kingdom, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.
- van Kessel, Stijn, Javier Sajuria, and Steven M. Van Hauwaert. "Informed, uninformed or misinformed? A cross-national analysis of populist party supporters across European democracies." *West European Politics* (2020): 1-26.
- van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. "Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories." *Applied cognitive psychology* 31, no. 1 (2017): 50-58.  
<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/george-soros-russia-republicans-214938>
- Walker, Christopher. "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9-23.
- Wolfel, Richard L. "North to Astana: Nationalistic motives for the movement of the Kazakh (stani) capital." *Nationalities Papers* 30, no. 3 (2002): 485-506.
- Yablokov, Ilya. "Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT)." *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 301-315.

Yablokov, Ilya. *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet world*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

Yanagizawa-Drott, David. "Propaganda and conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan genocide." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014): 1947-1994.

Zaller, John R. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.