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PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA WAR: IS HE WINNING?

by

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March 2018

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Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has executed an information campaign that could fundamentally change its role on the international scene. Vladimir Putin, through his use of hybrid tactics, has orchestrated a narrative painting ethnic Russians throughout Moscow's near-abroad as victims of the West, which, he claims, wants to dictate immoral social practices and policies of political domination against Slavic civilization generally and Russia more specifically. Ultimately, this thesis addresses whether Russia is winning the propaganda war, and if so, where it has managed to claim victories. Putin's attempts to co-opt populations in Russia's near-abroad and in Europe have yielded varying degrees of success, but largely limited to former Soviet bloc republics. By analyzing six countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, France, Germany, and Finland) across two different regions, this thesis highlights the sources of Putin's influence as well as areas of weakness. Its conclusion suggests policies for uniting and strengthening the fight by both the United States and Europe against the Kremlin's information war, including education, tightening of access to Western media outlets, and counter-measures based on fact-checked narratives.

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PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA WAR: IS HE WINNING?

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ABSTRACT

Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has executed an information campaign that could fundamentally change its role on the international scene. Vladimir Putin, through his use of hybrid tactics, has orchestrated a narrative painting ethnic Russians throughout Moscow's near-abroad as victims of the West, which, he claims, wants to dictate immoral social practices and policies of political domination against Slavic civilization generally and Russia more specifically. Ultimately, this thesis addresses whether Russia is winning the propaganda war, and if so, where it has managed to claim victories. Putin's attempts to co-opt populations in Russia's near-abroad and in Europe have yielded varying degrees of success, but largely limited to former Soviet bloc republics. By analyzing six countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, France, Germany, and Finland) across two different regions, this thesis highlights the sources of Putin's influence as well as areas of weakness. Its conclusion suggests policies for uniting and strengthening the fight by both the United States and Europe against the Kremlin's information war, including education, tightening of access to Western media outlets, and counter-measures based on fact-checked narratives.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABDI	Advisory Board of Defence Information
AfD	Alternative for Germany
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSA	Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ENF	Europe of Nations and Freedoms party
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GNP	gross national product
IISEPS	Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies
KGB	Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ND	Northern Dimension
NEPLP	National Electronic Mass Media Council
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NGW	new generation warfare
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RT	Russia Today
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SPD	Social Democratic Party
STRATCOM	Strategic Command
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea validated his previous claim for a *Novorossiya* (new Russia). In an attempt to justify his actions to external audiences, Putin relied heavily on the media to infiltrate and attempt to sway foreign opinion in defense of his transgressions. Whether or not the rest of the world bought into the party line has yet to be answered. Is Russia winning the propaganda war following the 2014 crisis in Ukraine? If so, where has it claimed victory and why? The research will evaluate six case studies ranging from former Soviet states in the so-called near-abroad to critical partners in Europe. By analyzing public opinion within former Soviet countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia) and European countries (France, Germany, Finland), this thesis will set out to test the effectiveness of Putin's propaganda campaign and seek to determine its long-term sustainability in various groups of countries critical to Russia's resurgence as a major power.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Putin's propaganda campaign has been studied and researched extensively, generally examining its impact on European and Western countries. However, a more extensive, broad-based analysis evaluating the regime's use of soft power vis-à-vis propaganda has not been attempted. By extending the scope of research to include countries in Russia's near-abroad and Europe, one can start to surmise just how far-reaching the tentacles of Russia's influence may extend. It might also be interesting to gain a different perspective on the matter, providing a voice for those that may not otherwise be heard. By exploring these linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse regions, the answer to the question of whether Putin is winning the propaganda war can provide a more comprehensive and thorough response.

Additionally, by understanding the tools and methods Putin uses in his information campaign, the international community, from a holistic standpoint, would gain insight into Russia's duplicitous techniques. A former KGB officer, Putin has been well-trained in the

art of nefarious operations. As the master strategist, he is the man pulling all the strings, manipulating and spreading false news. As a result, investigating various geographic locations can help determine whether some of the regime's tactics are more effective in a specific region. In this way, countries that are more likely to be targeted by Putin's propaganda can take a proactive stance in countering such measures.

Furthermore, Putin's use of soft power can pose a serious risk to nation-states falling prey to non-conventional warfare, threatening to destabilize their economy or undermine their political elite. By concentrating efforts on combating Russian propaganda, states can work collaboratively to enforce rules where offenses are addressed and the transgressors are punished. My investigation also offers a glimpse into the regime's struggle to re-establish its role as superpower, by evaluating Putin's level of influence abroad. My research may help answer the overarching question that scholars have been asking: Is Russia really a force to be reckoned with or is it merely a display of saber rattling and idle self-promotion?

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Leaders who rely on the mass media for instrumental purposes, such as negatively influencing public opinion, are a cause for concern.[1] Putin is a prime example of a politician abusing his power in office, by manipulating a branch long held to be an extension of government itself—the mass media. In order to comprehend the extent of Putin's unscrupulousness as a threat to the U.S. and other democracies, I must first establish the parameters of propaganda under which this thesis will operate. Here, I will attempt to define the term and provide a discourse for how to spot it. I will also simultaneously draw parallels based on this definition of propaganda to Putin's utilization of it. Then, I will explore how propaganda relates to Russia's version of hybrid warfare and analyze the effectiveness of Putin's policies to execute those measures.

There are a number of variations categorizing propaganda—what it is or is not, the types, and their differences. The scholar Jacques Ellul distinguished between political and

[1] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, "Introduction," in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), ix.

sociological propaganda, propaganda of agitation and propaganda of integration, vertical and horizontal propaganda, and rational and irrational propaganda.[2] I will not be addressing any one specific category in my thesis for it is outside the scope of my research. Rather, while the list of definitions for propaganda is exhaustive, I will be focusing on propaganda in its most traditional sense.

According to Ellul, "Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization."[3] In the simplest of terms, it attempts to lead the public into participating in some sort of action by spreading an ideology via mass media.[4] Another scholar, Philip Taylor, has followed suit with his interpretation, arguing that "propaganda is a social phenomenon and therefore operates in several directions, that it is not simply a message communicated from the powers to the public but also a reciprocal message, self-reinforcing and flexible, which must contain the logic and elements of truth, which must explain and make sense of political reality to the point that the propaganda message will become significant of a whole political cosmology."[5] Fast forward to the early 2000s and the definition of propaganda had once again morphed, this time with a distinction between propaganda and rhetoric. In an annual History of Rhetoric conference, the attendees held that "rhetoric" aligned with the notion of "public participation in newly emerging democratic governments," while "propaganda" was associated with "the threats posed by government controlled media."[6] Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell take the definition of propaganda even a step further: "The deliberate and systematic attempt to shape

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[2] Jacques Ellul, "The Characteristics of Propaganda," in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 31–43.

[3] Ibid., 31.

[4] Ibid., 32.

[5] Bertrand Taithe and Tim Thornton, "Propaganda: A Misnomer of Rhetoric and Persuasion?" in *Propaganda: Political Rhetoric and Identity, 1300–2000*, ed. Bertrand Taithe and Tim Thornton (Oxford: Sutton, 2000), 3.

[6] Beth S. Bennett and Sean Patrick O'Rourke, "A Prolegomenon to the Future Study of Rhetoric and Propaganda: Critical Foundations," in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 52.

perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."[7] They proclaim that in order for propaganda to appear instructive and credible, it must be able to manipulate public opinion, control the flow of information, and conceal the identity of the propagandist.[8]

There is also a clear distinction made as to what propaganda is not—a sporadic and inconsistent use of media communications in the form of a few slogans, a random radio broadcast, or a single group chat.[9] Conversely, true propaganda must be continuous and lasting over a protracted period of time.[10] The individual will be bombarded with daily reminders of the propaganda's message through news feeds, articles, video streams, and the like. The continuous onslaught of propaganda and its repetition guarantees that the individual is both convinced and compliant, ultimately rendering him incapable of resistance.[11]

I will reference Ellul's explanation as the baseline for what constitutes propaganda. Through his definition, Ellul asserts that propaganda submits to science by using methods, tried and tested, to render the propagandee incapable of using his own judgement.[12] It is, hence, "a modern technique" that utilizes elements of psychology and sociology.[13] To drive home his point, Ellul offers an example of Pavlov's theory of the conditioned reflex to highlight the fact that Stalin's use of propaganda was rooted in this philosophy.[14] Given the scientific approach to Ellul's classification of propaganda, it would not be hard to imagine someone like Putin, a former KGB officer, being well-versed in or at least familiar with such tactics.

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[7] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 6.

[8] Bennett and O'Rourke, "A Prolegomenon to the Future Study of Rhetoric and Propaganda: Critical Foundations," 63. As cited in Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 25–35.

[9] Ellul, "The Characteristics of Propaganda," 6.

[10] Ibid., 11.

[11] Ibid., 12.

[12] Ibid., 2.

[13] Ibid., 1.

[14] Ibid., 3.

The other important characteristic of propaganda is its ability to at once relate to both the individual and the masses.[15] In other words, it touches an individual by identifying what he has in common with others through shared passions, goals, beliefs, and so on.[16] The power of propaganda lies in its ability to empower an audience by connecting with every individual in that group.[17] Therefore, modern propaganda works well when it can exploit the assembly of a group while simultaneously taking advantage of the individual's need for self-assertion within the confines of that group.[18] This process has arguably been one of the greatest achievements for the disbursement of mass media, which has been able to reach both the crowd and the individual within that crowd. Through the spread of television, radio, social media, and the Internet, individuals across the world are moved by similar causes, respond to related stimuli, experience the same emotions, and endorse the same narratives.[19] Putin has managed to capitalize on these elements, using mass media to achieve specific political objectives. Moreover, Putin's propaganda is a reaction to his perception that the Western-dominated media and Internet and their themes (globalization, human rights, etc.) are presenting anti-Russian narratives that need to be actively combatted.

Another element critical to propaganda is its need to either rewrite history entirely or present a revisionist view of history.[20] This is evident in Putin's ongoing references to a Kyivan Rus. Putin claims to be supporting the interests of all Russophones, hence his intervention in Ukraine.[21] His propaganda suggests that Russia's roots lie in Kyiv, "the

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 4.

[17] Ibid., 5.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 9.

[21] Hall Gardner, "Hybrid Warfare: Iranian and Russian Versions of 'Little Green Men,'" in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 183.

mother of all cities."[22] Such rhetoric, however, is in part a falsification of history to secure current geopolitical pursuits.[23]

Ellul also makes it very clear that in order for propaganda to be successful it must espouse unanimity, eradicating any external voice, or in any case, marginalizing opposing groups to prevent them from gaining support.[24] This brings me to his next point; propaganda must function as an administrative organization, whereby it exerts physical influence on the individual.[25] Within his context, in order for propaganda to be effectual, its operability is limited to the confines of a state. Attempts to spread propaganda to other nation-states is ineffective due to the lack of "physical organization and encirclement of the individual."[26] He contends that there is a limited capacity to propagating the message effectively abroad: "Such an effort may at best raise some doubts, plant some sense of ambiguity, make people ask themselves questions, influence them by suggestion."[27] During war, the enemy is more likely to be influenced by propaganda if it is also accompanied by the physical blows of military dominance.[28] Ellul's prescribed restrictions on propaganda's efficacy need to be caveated with the fact that the *Characteristics of Propaganda* was written in the 1960s, long before the advent of the Internet. The challenge is to then take his constraints and apply them to the Kremlin's transmission of propaganda abroad, in order to determine the efficacy of Putin's campaign.

Equally vital to a propagandist is the ability to know his audience. Doing so can ensure he can effectively alter their opinions.[29] Propaganda must be able to respond to some sort of need, whether it be material or psychological.[30] It is a give and take, a response

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ellul, "The Characteristics of Propaganda," 7.

[25] Ibid., 13.

[26] Ibid., 14.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 19.

[30] Ibid., 20.

to a grievance, a provision that commands the individual to serve.[31] In an attempt to fill a void, "hate, hunger, and pride make better levers of propaganda than do love or impartiality."[32]

This begs the question of how propaganda affects the Undecided—participants in a group who do not know what decision to make when faced with a time-sensitive issue.[33] This group of Undecideds are especially susceptible to outside influences and usually conform to public behaviors, so it is in the best interest of the propagandist to rein them in, bringing them under control, and forcing them to act.[34] With this in mind, propaganda is effective when it can appeal to the collective interests of a crowd.[35] It has the uncanny ability to integrate, striking at the core of an individual's need to feel included. An overly active crowd will consist of individuals ready to adopt ideas and mobilize bodies, as a result of the propaganda they are fed.[36] It is important to note that the Undecided could be particularly important to the public opinion surveys conducted in the various countries, as they encompass a demographic that could easily fall prey to Putin's propaganda machine.

Ellul also argues that public opinion alone is an ineffectual way to gauge propaganda.[37] The reason being that simply asking an individual what he thinks has no bearing on how he will act or behave; propaganda is only concerned with action—mobilizing individuals to act is paramount.[38] Public opinion, therefore, leaves the individual a passive observer, who may or may not choose to participate in a future action.[39] To combat an individual from becoming a mere spectator, myths (also referred to

[31] Ibid., 21.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 26.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 27.

[37] Ibid., 16.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

as “conditioned reflexes”) must be engineered and engrained into the person, ensuring he is eagerly mobilized.[40] Therefore, these myths must be slow, persistent, and reinforced.

If propaganda relies on current news, then timeliness is of the utmost importance. Allowing time for individual reflection would be a mistake for the propagandist.[41] Those deemed “current-events men” are especially at risk of falling victim to propaganda.[42] Because they are fully engrossed in the day-to-day occurrences, they have a hard time separating fact from fiction and are less concerned with receiving accurate information.[43] According to Ellul, it is a psychological weakness that puts these men and women in jeopardy.[44] In fact, Putin has done a very good job of capitalizing on the vulnerabilities of such individuals. Using TV broadcasts, such as Russia Today (RT), he targets people immersed in current affairs, a successful strategy directed at those relying on a single source for information.

Propaganda is also not a new strategy. In fact, the rise of communications media in the form of advertising and public relations was a well-documented success, especially during World War I and II, where such tools were deemed essential to winning the wars.[45] Even today, its methods are utilized by those in the most powerful positions. There are, in fact, many parallels that can be drawn between the Soviet regime’s use of propaganda and Putin’s tactful manipulations. During the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin relied heavily on propaganda to redirect his power away from the tsars.[46] His use of symbols, icons, and posters to spread his message were very effective in indoctrinating and persuading the masses and even many intellectuals both at home and abroad.[47] In 1922, Radio Moscow

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[40] Ibid., 18.

[41] Ibid., 25.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 26.

[44] Ibid., 25.

[45] Jowett and O’Donnell, “Introduction,” x.

[46] Philip Taylor, “The Bolshevik Revolution and the War of Ideologies (1917-39),” in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 111.

[47] Ibid., 112.

began to transmit information over airwaves, quickly becoming Lenin's preferred method of communication.[48] In the following years, Lenin's successors used propaganda to wage an ideological war against capitalism in the name of a worldwide class uprising and more prosaic strategies for domestic governance.[49] Putin, too, has managed to bolster his standings by supplying his audience with a scapegoat—the West and the United States—as the enemies of the Russian state, responsible for the social and economic turmoil plaguing his country. For example, when the U.S. and EU implemented economic sanctions in response to Putin's annexation of Crimea, Putin used the restrictions as an opportunity to further his narrative. Although some economists argue that Russia was already heading towards a recession even before the situation in Ukraine, Putin was able to shift the blame onto his Western counterparts for any economic slump his country sustained.[50] His centralized control of the media, therefore, ensures he is the one dictating the message's content, relying on propaganda to help shape the narrative. Radio and print media for Lenin was what the news media and Internet are to Putin.

Propaganda can also have positive or negative connotations. Some would argue that advertising and public relations, though relatively benign examples with generally positive associations, are still effective methods of influencing the public, and can, therefore, be classified as propaganda.[51] However, when referencing Putin's regime, I strictly focus on its use in the negative sense. In authoritarian regimes, for example, propaganda can produce indirect incitement. In this case, the leader of the state governs, and his citizenry is resigned to "passive acceptance and compliance."[52] Putin's illiberal democracy, therefore, employs a propaganda revolving around coercive and obedience-based methods.

Taking what the literature says about propaganda, I will attempt to determine whether Putin's dependence on non-conventional or "hybrid" warfare during the 2014

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[48] Ibid., 117.

[49] Ibid., 111.

[50] Stéfanie Babst, "What Mid-Term Future for Putin's Russia?" in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 36.

[51] Jowett and O'Donnell, "Introduction," x.

[52] Ellul, "The Characteristics of Propaganda," 11.

invasion of Ukraine also relates to propaganda. As a side note, hybrid warfare is a term generally used by U.S. and European military analysts, as opposed to Russia's arguably more ambiguous terminology "non-linear" war.[53] Let me remind the reader that I am not here to debate the semantics of terminology, but instead would like to recognize that regardless of the expressions used, both intend to achieve similar end states. From here on out, any references made to "hybrid" warfare, "non-linear" warfare, or non-conventional warfare are meant to address the same concept and will be used interchangeably.

In January 2013, Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Chief of Staff, drafted the prerequisites for engaging in "non-linear" warfare designed to achieve political victory.[54] These included, but were not limited to, "regular and irregular forces and military and non-military measures, plus the manipulation of populations…," the latter being critical to Putin's justification for the annexation of Crimea.[55] In his assessment, Diego Ruiz Palmer designates Putin's active support of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region and his illegal annexation of Crimea as hybrid warfare.[56] The employment of this line of attack gave Russia "the strategic capacity to use a mix of hard and soft power instruments to isolate and coerce weaker neighbors, while intimidating and deterring more distant, but also more capable, opponents."[57] Advances in technology have permitted deliberate actions short of all-out war, which serve to enhance Putin's political advantage.[58] Essentially, hybrid war closes the gap between the conventional elements of hard power and the absence of force through the use of soft power, benefiting the asymmetric style of war so often exercised by the Russian regime.[59] Minimal risk and marginal losses for increased reward are factors Putin will readily accept.[60]

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[53] Gardner, "Hybrid Warfare: Iranian and Russian Versions of 'Little Green Men,'" 168.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, "Back to the Future? Russia's Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 49.

[57] Ibid., 50.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

Diego Palmer notes that Russia's style of hybrid warfare is just old tactics with new packaging.[61] Putin is not trying to reinvent the wheel, and even today, he relies on an old Bolshevik tool known as "Agit Prop," an abbreviation for "agitation and propaganda," designed to influence and mobilize a specific audience.[62] Another example of Putin's recycled ideas came on December 26, 2014, when Russia published yet another version of its military doctrine. One of the major changes described Russia's domestic threat as the "'informational influence over the population…aimed at undermining spiritual and patriotic traditions.'"[63] Putin's continued fear of outside social influences is so great that potential external dangers need to be enunciated in military doctrine. Even though the "nefarious" nature of the West has been promulgated over numerous Russian communication networks and platforms, incorporating it into military code is unusual.[64] Moreover, the doctrine provides the kind of overt propaganda Putin has continuously employed, sending a clear message to his audience that Russia's role in neighboring crises and the emergence of internal social unrest is the result of the West's attempts to undermine Moscow's political standing.[65] Putin's use of military doctrine to spell out strategies for countering subversive information and communication technologies appears to be a manifestation of the exact same tactics he utilized in Ukraine.[66] Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz conclude that Russia has very successfully used hybrid elements of war in Crimea and eastern Ukraine to bring to heel those sovereign states it still considers part of its sphere of influence.[67] The major concern lies in the fact that countries not part of NATO are no

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[61] Palmer, "Back to the Future? Russia's Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons," 64. As cited in Dave Johnson, "Russia's Approach to Conflict," op. cit., 1.

[62] Palmer, "Back to the Future? Russia's Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons," 64.

[63] Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz, "Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine and Beyond: Threat Perceptions, Capabilities and Ambitions," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 74–5.

[64] Ibid., 75.

[65] Ibid., 90.

[66] Ibid., 75–76.

[67] Ibid., 91.

match for Russia's use of such non-conventional maneuvers because they simply lack the capacity to do so.[68]

Putin has arguably grown quite fond of information warfare, utilizing cyber, media, and "shock pictures" as a means of brainwashing his own population, attracting sympathizers abroad, and undermining the enemy's legitimacy.[69] Putin has also made centralization of the mass media a priority. He has invested over $1.6 billion (U.S. dollars) annually in the country's disinformation campaign both at home and abroad.[70] In March 2014, he even established the state-sponsored media agency Rossiya Sevodnya, claiming it bore "strategic importance for the country's security and defense."[71] RT is another channel that regurgitates state narratives in an effort to influence international public opinion. At its core is a heavily funded anti-U.S. campaign with the following catchphrase: "'RT: For the Second Opinion.'"[72] The irony of such a slogan is that Putin is quick to suppress second opinions or any dissenting views. Nevertheless, some estimates have shown that Russia spends as much as $136 million per year on campaigns reaching its viewers abroad.[73] As demonstrated by the unfolding of events in Ukraine, having total control over the media provides the domestic support for Putin's political agenda.[74] In fact, domestic polls showed that as of July 2014, Putin had garnered an 83% approval rating from the Russian population, a 19% increase since December 2013.[75]

So how did Putin win the Russian and Crimean propaganda war? He launched a full-fledged information campaign even before there were boots on ground, setting the

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen, "Introduction: A New Way of Warfare," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 10.

[70] Stéfanie Babst, "What Mid-Term Future for Putin's Russia?" in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 26.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Patrick M. Cronin, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 14.

[73] Babst, "What Mid-Term Future for Putin's Russia?" 27.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

stage and priming the landscape for what was to come. He needed RT, social media, and internet to act as vehicles softening the true intent of his rhetoric. As authors Heidi Reisinger and Alexander Golts elaborate, Putin's disinformation campaign included four very important elements: targeted and systematic disinformation, plausible deniability, the humanitarian narrative, and the concept of *Novorossiya*.[76]

The first component entailed rhetoric resembling WWII, which called the Euromaidan protestors "fascists," thereby reawakening some public sentiments that Ukrainians aided the Nazis during the war.[77] Then came Putin's plausible deniability. On March 4, 2014, he blatantly asserted "that the unidentified troops in Crimea were not Russian soldiers, since the green uniforms they were wearing could be purchased in any second-hand-shop."[78] Even when faced with overwhelming evidence of Russia's involvement in eastern Ukraine, i.e., the presence of "little green men," Putin continued to deny it. Only after the battle for Donetsk Airport, which occurred on May 26, did Putin's narrative shift.[79] His propaganda machine was growing desperate. There was no other way to account for Russia's sustained paratrooper casualties except to once again falsify information. Now, these soldiers were "volunteers" fighting for freedom in Ukraine while on vacation without their supervisor's or commander's knowledge.[80] Even Russian family members who lost their children in the conflict were forced to abide by the "vacation" narrative, going so far as to delete posts from a Russian Facebook group, "Gruz 200," responsible for tracking casualties.[81] Popular leaders like Aleksander Zakharchenko, prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), further reinforced the Kremlin's narrative. Mimicking the party line, he claimed that roughly 3,000-4,000 Russian military

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[76] Heidi Reisinger and Alexander Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 122–127.

[77] Ibid., 122.

[78] Ibid., 123. As cited in http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6763.

[79] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 123. As cited in Mariya Turchenkova, "Gruz 2000. Continuation," *Novaya Gazeta*, June 2, 2014, https://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/63873.html.

[80] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 123.

[81] Ibid., 124.

members were fighting with his unit against the Ukrainian forces, those "'who would rather take their vacation not on a beach but with us, among brothers, who are fighting for their freedom.'"[82]

When Ukrainian troops began to take back some of its lost territory from the separatists, Putin changed tactics and proclaimed to be the defender in a humanitarian crisis.[83] The media continuously ran unverified stories of Russians providing humanitarian aid, pledges of escape routes for innocent civilians being entrapped by Ukrainian forces, and videos of Russian minorities protesting.[84] Ironically, these protesters were Russian citizens taken to Ukraine by bus as "tourists."[85] Tactically, Putin's tourists could provoke social and political unrest, thus advancing his narrative.[86]

Putin attempted to further his agenda through his call for a *Novorossiya*. He has often alluded to this concept as a means for uniting those linguistically and ethnically Russian, in a sizable territory that Imperial Russia once conquered from the Ottomans in the 18th century.[87] Geographically, the regions of "Donetsk, Luhansk, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv and Kherson" would provide a direct link to Crimea.[88] In a speech Putin made on April 17, 2014, he referred to Eastern Ukraine, which he claims historically was not part of the original Ukraine, as *Novorossiya*, thereby

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[82] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 124. As cited in an interview on the Rossiya 24 TV channel, August 28, 2014, http://www.vesti.ru/videos?vid=onair; https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/11060559/Serving-Russian-soldiers-on-leave-fighting-Ukrainian-troops-alongside-rebels-pro-Russian-separatist-leader-says.html.

[83] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 124.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Henrik Praks, "Hybrid or Not: Deterring and Defeating Russia's Ways of Warfare in the Baltics—The Case of Estonia," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 227.

[87] Adrian A. Basora and Aleksandr Fisher, "Putin's 'Greater Rossiya'—The Dismemberment of Ukraine," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2, 2014, http://www.fpri.org/article/2014/05/putins-greater-novorossiya-the-dismemberment-of-ukraine/.

[88] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 126.

effectively truncating nearly a third of Ukraine's territory through the simple use of his words.[89]

Putin has also managed to validate his actions through the use of "democratic" institutions. In so doing, he underlines supposed U.S. and European hypocrisies. This use of legalistic propaganda, as Hall Gardner calls it, was evident in the legal justification Putin gave for annexing Crimea.[90] He was evidently taking a leaf from President George W. Bush's book, who in 2003, provided legal reasons for going into Iraq.[91]

Interestingly, not all of Russia's internal players view Putin's actions in Ukraine favorably. Commentators and critics from the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* called his tactics of sending troops into Ukraine as "'worse than a crime.'"[92] Such allegations give hope that there are still those that can read between the lines of Putin's rhetoric. However, non-state owned stations, like TV Dozhd, were relegated to internet-access only.[93]

Other critics, like Kennan Institute Director Matthew Rojansky, argue that Putin's media campaign has been ineffective. He claims Putin's political survival depends on a resurgence of state nationalism, whereby Russia is painted as the great defender of its people from foreign encroachments and the liberator of Europe during the Great War.[94] Rojansky presumes that the content of Putin's narrative is so far-fetched—i.e., the conspiracy theories that the CIA backed the Euromaidan protests or that Ukrainian nationalism is threatening to ethnic Russians—that the general public is able to discern the truth for themselves.[95] Still others, like analyst Adam Garfinkle, contend that the influence

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[89] Ibid.

[90] Gardner, "Hybrid Warfare: Iranian and Russian Versions of 'Little Green Men,'" 170.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Roger McDermott, Heidi Reisinger, and Brooke Smith-Windsor, "Cold War Déjà Vu? NATO, Russia and the Crisis in Ukraine," in *NATO's Responses to Hybrid Threats*, ed. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), 46. As cited in «Константин Сонин, Хуже, чем преступление," *Vedomosti*, March 3, 2014.

[93] Reisigner and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," 126.

[94] Matthew Rojansky, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 15.

[95] Ibid.

of Putin's propaganda has only had limited success.[96] He argues that the majority of the Kremlin's vested interests lie in its near-abroad. The connections to these regions are rooted in shared history, culture, and energy-based geopolitics, which gives the Kremlin far more leverage in influencing these particular countries than elsewhere.[97] These factors have essentially re-created another frozen conflict, drawing a hard line between NATO and the Russian sphere of influence.[98] Conflicts, such as those in Ukraine, are designed to keep Moscow's European neighbors at bay but, in actuality, are of little consequence to Russia itself.[99] At the heart of Putin's aggressive actions lies the need to keep his Western enemies out in the periphery of those lands Russia once claimed, implying that Moscow is still a credible threat to former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact members.[100] However, Putin's attempts to exert influence beyond those lines of demarcation would require additional assistance from other players.[101]

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Putin's 2014 acts of aggression vis-à-vis Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea promoted his previous claim for a *Novorossiya*. The circumstances surrounding and immediately after the conflict meant Putin directed the media to influence the general public both at home and abroad in justification of his actions. His invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea set off a chain reaction of varied responses from the international community. While primarily Western countries condemned Russia's belligerency, Russia and some of its counterparts supported the justness of the engagements. Why the divide? I hypothesize that the closer in proximity a state is to the Russian Federation or given its shared past, the more likely it is to be subjected to Putin's dubious content and biased media. Therefore, in response to my thesis question, I

[96] Adam Garfinkle, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 16.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid.

hypothesize that Russia's propaganda effectiveness is likely to be primarily limited to its near-abroad (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia). I will specifically address my hypothesis as it applies to each of the six aforementioned countries.

In Russia's near-abroad, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia are subjected to the Kremlin's propaganda campaign. Putin's call for a Russian Federation whereby the integrity of ethnic Russian populations is upheld has been at the forefront of the state's undertakings. The intimidation factor is all too familiar for countries formerly under Soviet rule. Given the nature of Putin's bold statements, territories bordering Russia seem most likely to be targeted. One would be remiss in failing to mention how Russia's strategy in light of recent affairs has affected its popularity in regions formerly part of the U.S.S.R. While all three countries border Russia, I theorize that Belarus and Kazakhstan have remained loyal to their Soviet origins. Latvia, however, has gravitated towards its NATO allies, growing increasingly fearful of Russia's looming presence.

In Europe, Germany, France, and Finland, have started to experience firsthand the impact Russia's propaganda campaign has had on each country's state of affairs. Germany and France, in particular, took a rather hardline approach to Russia's recent offensive actions against another sovereign state, recognizing that such aggression was cause for concern. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the West imposed economic sanctions on Moscow. However, with much of the Russian elite's wealth tied up in western banks, Putin still has a vested interest in ensuring European policies only span so far. In the hopes of shifting current Euro-political inclinations towards Russia, Putin has made an effort to align with various right-wing populist parties, who have resumed communication and have remained open to exchange with the Kremlin. Finland's situation may be more delicate. Having previously adopted a state of policy neutrality in dealing with Russia, Finland has been thrust into a critical position of uncertainty. On one hand, it has actively engaged with Russia on matters of economic development, relying on a partnership of mutual growth and prosperity. On the other hand, given Finland's past history, of being at times part of the Russian empire and suffering invasion during WWII, and a shared border along its eastern front with Russia, there is little doubt it has become susceptible to Putin's information war.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research will conduct six case studies, grouped according to geographic location and relative proximity to Russia. Analyzing the public opinion within former Soviet countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia) and European countries (France, Germany, Finland), the results will set out to reveal which states remain friendly and even sympathetic to Putin's Russia and which have successfully seen through Russia's propaganda regarding recent events. I have chosen to focus on the post-invasion "legitimization" attempts by Russia and foreign reactions in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. The subsequent sanctions that the EU and the U.S. imposed on Moscow have had significant impacts, resulting in secondary and tertiary foreign policy changes within certain territories. By expanding the scope of the research to six countries contained within two particular regions, the intent is to provide the reader with a wide variety of public opinion polls and reactions on Russia. Ultimately, I am going to analyze the implications that Russia's aggressive behavior towards Ukraine has had on these nation-states and their respective populations. In so doing, I intend to discover the answer to my proposed question.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

In search for the answer to my research question, I will aim to organize my thesis in such a way as to standardize the format of my paper. Since I will be conducting a two-part case study, in which a total of six countries will be evaluated, it will be critical to maintain structural congruency, providing a simple roadmap for the reader to follow. Given the extensive research that will be accomplished for each of the nation-states, the goal is to establish an outline whereby the background/history, interstate relations, public opinion, and policy implications remain constant regardless of the country being analyzed.

Based on this logic, I have a devised a framework that will be most beneficial in assessing the effectiveness of Russia's media war, following its invasion in Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea. I will first provide a brief overview of the current conflict that has transpired—its causes, major events, and the aftermath. Next, I will explore Russia's propaganda campaign and how Putin has managed to consolidate the mass

media, successfully launching his information war. Transitioning into the main body of the thesis, each region will have a dedicated chapter, in which all three countries are surveyed. As the outline below suggests, every country will have individual subheadings that examine its relationship with Russia, its public opinion on the Ukrainian conflict, and its policy implications given the current situation. Such a plan will serve best to answer the question of whether Russia is winning its propaganda war following its 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

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II. RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA EFFECTIVENESS IN THE NEAR-ABROAD

A. THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS IN BRIEF

In November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych faced two options that would prevent his country from spiraling into an economic decline.[102] He could either move closer toward cooperation with the EU, enhancing integration and promoting trade, or align closer to friend and Russian President, Vladimir Putin.[103] Yanukovych chose the latter, deciding to take a $15 billion loan from Moscow, while simultaneously entertaining the prospect of joining the Russia-dominated Eurasian Union, alongside Belarus and Kazakhstan.[104] The perceived disregard for Ukraine's best interests sparked anger and mass protests from the Ukrainian populace. Citizens felt betrayed by their government, many of whom wanted to move closer towards European integration. In an attempt to fight the rampant corruption dominating the top tier of their regime, thousands gathered on Kyiv's Independence Square, also known as the Maidan, to air their grievances.[105] The demonstrations soon turned bloody as Ukrainian riot police, the Berkut, beat and killed more than 100 protestors.[106] Yanukovych later fled to Russia and opposition coalition forces agreed to hold an election in May 2014.[107]

During the final days of these protests, unarmed forces, or "little green men" as they came to be known, lined the streets and besieged government buildings and airports in Crimea.[108] Russia denied any involvement, but soon after, Crimea's regional parliament

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[102] Alan Yuhas, "Ukraine Crisis: An Essential Guide to Everything That's Happened so Far," *Guardian*, April 13, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/11/ukraine-russia-crimea-sanctions-us-eu-guide-explainer.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid.

called for a referendum.[109] Crimea, which had previously enjoyed considerable autonomy under Ukraine, was officially ceded to Russia. According to the BBC News, 97% of voters backed Crimea's secession.[110] The EU and the U.S., however, denounced Russia's annexation of Crimea as illegal, calling the referendum a sham.[111]

In direct response to Russia's aggressive behavior, the EU and the U.S. issued sanctions against Russia and those administrators connected to events in Crimea. The EU's bans targeted 33 high-ranking Russians and Ukrainians, while the U.S. focused on a number of politicians, as well as Bank Rossiya, which housed the monetary assets of elite officials.[112] Russia responded in kind, launching counter-sanctions on certain U.S. officials. Both the EU and the U.S. pledged $16 billion to help sustain Ukraine's failing economy during this period.[113]

By early April, pro-Russian separatists staged protests in the eastern Ukrainian cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkov calling for independence from Ukraine.[114] Tensions increased as riots and fighting between Ukrainian military forces and east Ukrainian rebels reached unprecedented levels. The downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, for example, sparked much controversy because it was shot down near the rebel controlled region of Grabove.[115] By September, pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian leaders agreed to a ceasefire, signing a truce in Minsk.[116] In November, separatists held elections in Eastern Ukraine, which were criticized by Poroshenko, the newly elected Ukrainian President.[117] Despite NATO and OSCE accounts of Russia moving supplies and forces into

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[109] Ibid.

[110] "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline," BBC News, November 13, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275.

[111] Yuhas, "Ukraine Crisis: An Essential Guide to Everything That's Happened so Far."

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

[114] BBC News, "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline."

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline," Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed June 3, 2006, http://ukraine.csis.org/elections_ukr.htm.

eastern Ukraine, Putin continued to deny any Russian involvement of escalation within that region.[118] After the first attempt to achieve a lasting truce failed, the Minsk II agreement promised a complete ceasefire and long term plan for addressing future political concerns.[119] The treaty was short-lived; within days of the signed pact, conflict in Eastern Ukraine resumed.[120]

B. BELARUS, KAZAKHSTAN, AND LATVIA

Events in Ukraine have sparked much debate as to whether Russia's overt actions are indeed part of Moscow's narrative for a greater Russian state or *Novorossiya*. From Putin's perspective, the call for uniting those linguistically and ethnically Russian potentially gives him the freedom to invade other sovereign states who were once under Russia's protectorate. Undeniably, his promotion of Russian irredentism puts former Soviet republics at risk. Given the annexation of Crimea and support of pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, Putin's claims cannot be easily dismissed.

This chapter will examine how the general public, specifically within Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia, views Russia following its aggressive behavior in Ukraine. By providing background on Russia's relations with each of these respective states, one might gain a better understanding of how public opinion in these countries has changed since Russia's invasion. The results of public opinion surveys have implications in how they begin to shape the future foreign policy of these individual states.

1. Belarus and Russia's Relations

Belarus's relations with Russia have long remained one of the closest dating back to the Soviet era. Even today, the two countries share strategic, economic, and socio-cultural ties that seem to foster a relationship based more on cooperation than on divisiveness. However, President Lukashenko must walk a fine line if he is to uphold

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

Belarus's sovereignty. While he might be a friend of Putin's, Lukashenko also understands what could be at stake for his own country given recent events in Ukraine.

Belarus and Russia continue to work closely in the strategic military sense. Even when Belarus was part of the U.S.S.R., Russia used this neighboring territory to stage troops, conduct military exercises, and establish support facilities.[121] Belarus was pegged as one of the main hubs in Europe for early-warning radar and maintained the capability to transmit long-range naval communications.[122] Expectedly, not much has changed in recent decades. Russia did not work particularly hard to ensure its military needs were met following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, a mutual agreement between the two countries exists whereby Belarus provides the physical infrastructure to house military supplies and guarantees Russia mutual cooperation should conflicts arise in exchange for lowered energy costs and the occasional loans.[123] In fact, Russia recently lent Belarus 700 million dollars.[124] Interesting to note, however, is that despite the close encounters, Lukashenko has pushed back on several occasions, such as the instance when he refused to let Russia host its air base within Belarus.[125]

Turning to shared economic interests, Belarus relies on its rapport with Russia to solidify trade deals with the Kremlin. To put things in perspective, Russia remains Belarus's main trading partner, "accounting for over 45 percent of exports in the first half of 2017 and almost 60 percent of imports."[126] Despite Russia's occasional abuse of its economic relationship with Belarus (i.e., using Belarus's reliance on Russian energy as leverage), Belarus's over-dependence on its "Big Brother" runs deep. Collaborating with

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[121] Bruce McClintock and Bilyana Lilly, "Zapad 2017: What it Reveals About the Prickly Russia-Belarus Relationship," *The National Interest*, September 12, 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/zapad-2017-what-it-reveals-about-the-prickly-russia-belarus-22271.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

Rosatom (the Russian state atomic energy corporation), Belarus has even agreed to build a nuclear power facility.[127]

The cultural similarities linking the two states also seems to strengthen the Russian-Belarusian friendship. Aside from sharing a border, many Belarusians still prefer to converse in Russian over their own language.[128] Many Belarusians remain strongly connected to their Soviet past, especially the older generation for whom the time of old provided a sense of security, stability, and predictability.[129] Perhaps, there is an element of nationalistic pride that is lacking within Belarus, a factor that could easily be exploited and manipulated to suit the Russian agenda. Nevertheless, Russia's invasion of Ukraine served as a wake-up call to Lukashenko, raising concerns that Belarus could be a follow-on target.

2. Public Opinion in Belarus on Ukraine Crisis

While the conflict in Ukraine may have generated some tension among Belarusians, it failed to bring about any significant changes to the state's relations with Moscow. But the conflict created a palpable split in ideologies. Since Belarus borders Ukraine, Russia's invasion did spark visceral reactions among citizens who felt for their Ukrainian brethren. Others made their opinions heard by chanting their praises of Russia's actions. In the country's capital of Minsk, some took to the streets shouting, "'We support the recognition of Novorossiya,'" while others vandalized cars with Russian license plates.[130] A closer look at Russia's actions in Ukraine from the point of view of Belarusians is in order.

A highly regarded think tank originally based out of Belarus, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies or IISEPS, has conducted various research and polling within the region for the past twenty-five years. They have gained popularity for their unbiased and open methods to public opinion research. In order to most accurately address the public opinion of Belarusians on the events in Ukraine, annexation

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Volha Charnysh, "War of Ideology: The Ukrainian Conflict Polarizes Belarusians," *Belarus Digest*, December 16, 2014, http://belarusdigest.com/story/war-ideology-ukrainian-conflict-polarizes-belarusians-20724.

of Crimea, and on Russia as a whole, the findings from the group's September 2014 survey entitled "Ukrainian Compass for Geopolitical Poles of Belarus" will be discussed forthwith.[131]

Since events in Ukraine first transpired, the majority of Belarus's citizens have generally supported both the pro-Russian forces fighting in the Donbass region as well as Russia's annexation of Crimea.[132] Answers to the poll conducted in September revealed that their opinions on these issues really had not changed much over the quarter.[133] When asked how they viewed Russia's annexation of Crimea, nearly 60% felt that it was "a restitution of Russian lands and reestablishment of historical justice."[134] These percentages remained nearly identical in both the June and September 2014 polls. When asked whether they agree with labeling Ukraine's new government following Yanukovich's abdication as "fascist," nearly 50% of individuals said yes.[135] Interestingly enough, that number slightly increased between June and September. The willingness of Belarusians to brand Ukraine's new officials "fascists" represents a tactic reflective of the Russian media. With such rhetoric engrained into the minds of Belarusians, Moscow has evidently launched a very successful propaganda campaign.

Strongly held convictions justifying Russia's actions aside, Belarus might yet be on the fence. While many are sympathetic to the Russian cause, it does not mean that they agree with every aspect of Russia's invasion. For example, nearly 54% strongly opposed Russia sending in troops to assist armed protestors in the Donbass region.[136] Moreover, Belarusians are not personally willing to fight for the cause in Ukraine. In fact, an overwhelming 76.9% felt negatively about the idea of Belarusians taking up arms in the east of Ukraine.[137] Based on this particular answer, it seems as though Belarusians will side

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[131] "Ukrainian Compass for Geopolitical Poles of Belarus," Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, accessed March 14, 2017, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1405&lang=en.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid.

with the Kremlin as long as it does not impede their personal freedoms and rights. The need for self-preservation turns out to be a stronger factor than ideology.[138] This then turns to the next question at hand—how does the ongoing crisis in Ukraine affect economic stability in Belarus?

3. Policy Implications for Belarus

It seems as though Belarus's domestic affairs in relation to its economy have superseded concerns over Ukraine.[139] The bottom line is that most Belarusians are driven by economic factors when evaluating certain aspects of the Ukrainian conflict. Nearly 75% of Belarus's investment comes from Russia, and its economies are closely integrated.[140] As long as Moscow continues to provide a steady flow of cheap energy and conditions for a stable market, then Belarus will continue its partnership with Russia.[141] When asked whether actions in Ukraine changed their public opinion of Russia, 51.5% of Belarusians said it did not change, 24.3% said it became worse, and 21.9% said it became better.[142] Contrasting these percentages with those on the EU revealed astonishing results. While 42.4% of Belarusians said their attitude towards the EU did not change following events in Ukraine, only 5.6% said it became better and a shockingly high 47% confessed it became worse.[143] After events in Ukraine unfolded, the percentage of those both for and against Russia were nearly equal.[144] It is interesting to note as well, that between December 2013 and September 2014, there was a significant shift whereby the relative majority who had favored the EU before the start of the conflict changed to one favoring the Russian

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Artyom Shraibman, "Economy Finally, Troubling Belarusians More Than Ukraine," *Belarus Digest*, January 22, 2015, http://belarusdigest.com/story/economy-finally-troubling-belarusians-more-ukraine-21135.

[140] Clay Moltz, "Russian Policy toward the Near-Abroad: Eastern Europe" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, February 13, 2017).

[141] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "Ukrainian Compass for Geopolitical Poles of Belarus."

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

Federation in the aftermath.[145] Nearly eight times as many Belarusians looked negatively upon the EU than those who favored it in the aftermath of the crisis.[146] As the results demonstrate, Belarus is still very much aligned with its Russian counterpart.

As an assessment from Freedom House revealed, Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a significant psychological impact on the leaders of Belarus, specifically President Lukashenko.[147] Considering his authoritarianism and close friendship with President Putin, Lukashenko wanted to remain supportive of his eastern ally, and yet given the nature of Russia's aggressive actions, he felt the need to distance relations. Reeling from the immediate effects of the sanctions imposed by the EU and U.S. on Russia, Belarus sought improved relations with the West. As a sign of good will, Lukashenko even agreed to release political prisoners and lessened his persecution of opposition forces.[148] Recognizing that political changes contributed to the instability in Ukraine, however, Lukashenko remained sole executor of all areas concerning the government.[149] Lukashenko's softening of restrictions curried him just enough favor with the West, whereby he could more readily play both sides off each other.

As a result, Belarus is currently in a prime position both politically and economically. In the hopes of finding a solution to Ukraine, it has hosted a number of negotiations with members from Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France, even sponsoring the peace negotiations that culminated in the Minsk Agreement.[150] Working with Western leaders, Belarus has softened its stance on the West, thereby creating a more balanced foreign policy.[151] With sanctions still imposed on Russia, Belarus is able to repackage an

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[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Yaraslau Kryvoi, "Belarus," Freedom House, accessed March 14, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/belarus.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

influx of goods coming from the EU and send them to Russia.[152] Belarus's status as middleman, as part of the aftermath in the Ukrainian crisis, has in effect benefited and boosted its economy.

In any regard, the conflict in Ukraine has forced Belarus to take a necessary step back and assess the situation. Belarusians have spoken and while a majority still favor ties with Russia, the growing force of the minority cannot be ignored. Perhaps an even greater concern is the extent to which Russia's actions in Ukraine have affected matters at home. While loyalties remain with the Kremlin, the charade of unity will most likely persist…that is until Belarus's economic pockets become empty.

4. Kazakhstan and Russia's Relations

Kazakhstan has long been regarded as one of Russia's most supportive partners. For the most part, Russia's invasion into Ukrainian territory did not do much to change Kazakhstan's perceptions of its bordering neighbor. In fact, in a survey asking Russians to identify their state's closest ally, 39% responded Kazakhstan.[153] Such a percentage seems to align nicely with the reciprocated narrative coming from Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan and Russia have a history of mutual relations, also dating back to the Soviet period. In 1991, both countries became signatories of the declaration forming the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), just shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[154] Recognizing the independence and sovereignty of each formerly Soviet country paved the way for enhanced economic and political interactions. Today, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev and Russia's President Putin share close ties, although some might argue that theirs is a marriage of necessity.

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[152] Clay Moltz, "Russian Policy toward the Near-Abroad: Eastern Europe" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, February 13, 2017).

[153] "Russia's Friends and Enemies," Levada-Center, June 10, 2016, http://www.levada.ru/en/2016/06/10/russia-s-friends-and-enemies-2/.

[154] Clay Moltz, "Russian Policy toward the Near-Abroad: The Caucasus and Central Asia" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, February 15, 2017).

It seems fairly clear that Russia had pressured both Belarus and Kazakhstan to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which was officially implemented in 2015.[155] Following the U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its invasion of another sovereign country, critics believe Russia had gained a prime opportunity to exert its influence over its two closest allies.[156] The reluctance to join came from Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev, who specifically wanted more influence over migration policies.[157] While Russia may be willing to sacrifice its economic prosperity for the sake of its geopolitical cause, others within the EAEU may not be so ready to oblige.[158] In fact, according to a Senior Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center for International Security, Robert Manning, the impact of Russia's dwindling economy has already been felt in Central Asia.[159] With a shrinking Russian economy, countries in Central Asia have been particularly hard hit because they supply a majority of Russia's labor force and may now experience a difficult time feeding their families back home.[160] Thus, as Russia continues on its downward spiral economically, critics believe its allies will begin to look westward.[161]

It is no secret that in his meetings with Putin, Nazarbayev has blamed the crisis in Ukraine on the inability of its government to properly manage the country's economic development.[162] Kazakhstan has also publicly recognized the referendum on Crimea, thereby legitimizing Russia's forceful annexation of the territory.[163] However, with regards

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[155] Ibid.

[156] Andrew Rettman, "Russia Calls for EU Talks with Newly Born Eurasian Union," *EUobserver*, January 2, 2015, https://euobserver.com/economic/127081.

[157] Clay Moltz, "Russian Policy toward the Near-Abroad: The Caucasus and Central Asia" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, February 15, 2017).

[158] Farkhod Tolipov, "Strategic Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Post-Soviet Space: A View from Central Asia," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* XIV, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 17.

[159] Robert Manning, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 13.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Tolipov, "Strategic Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Post-Soviet Space: A View from Central Asia," 17.

[162] Emilbek Dzhuraev, "Central Asian Stances on the Ukrainian Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?" *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* XIV, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 3.

[163] Ibid.

to the situation in the Donbass region, Kazakhstan has remained mostly neutral, advocating instead for a diplomatic resolution, whereby Nazarbayev could act as broker.[164]

Additionally, Kazakhstan still maintains a sizable ethnic Russian community numbering at around 23.7% of the total population, ties that Putin can very easily exploit.[165] Not to mention, Kazakhstan is still very much an authoritarian regime, controlling most of the political institutions that could otherwise destabilize a government. Given that many of Kazakhstan's citizens still prefer to speak Russian, Moscow has found its in via mass media. If it can influence Kazakhs, then it can control Kazakhstan.

5. Public Opinion in Kazakhstan on Ukraine Crisis

Writer Valeriya Melnichuk travelled to Kazakhstan three times over the course of 2014, witnessing public discussions, reading and watching an array of media sources, and talking to the locals of towns.[166] Her insight and first-hand experience is invaluable in contributing to the overall analysis of the general public's views on Russia and the crisis in Ukraine. Melnichuk's conclusions would suggest that Nazarbayev's and Putin's relationship is secure, at least for the time being.

During her travels, she witnessed the following opinion expressed by a Kazakh: "'Kyiv junta aims to destroy part of its own people and the current regime is a reproduction of Nazi Germany, they are fascists. Our fathers and grandfathers (Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh, in other words, Soviet) fought against fascists. Who could have thought that Ukraine will be taken over by a fascist government and that such horrible people as Bandera and Pravy Sector will become their role models?…"[167] This is the same rhetoric uttered in Belarus.

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[164] Ibid.

[165] Viatcheslav Morozov, "Kazakhstan and the 'Russian World': Is a New Intervention on the Horizon?" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, no. 363 (July 2015): 1, www.ponarseurasia.org/node/7761.

[166] Valeriya Melnichuk, "Kazakhstan: Public Opinion and Russia's Propaganda in Kazakhstan," *The PULS*, no. 1, (September 2014) https://pulsofcentralasia.org/2014/09/29/kazakhstan-public-opinion-and-russias-propaganda-in-kazakhstan-2/.

[167] Ibid.

Melnichuk goes on to explain that due to the overwhelming dominance of Russian media stations in Kazakhstan, most Kazakhs source their information from among the readily available Russian channels. The information they are being fed is so biased and openly pro-Russian that it is no wonder they share publicly held views that are in line with Russia's propagandist speak. A study found that Kazakhs who received their information via news channels on television reacted positively to Russia's annexation of Crimea.[168] As Melnichuk surmises, "public opinion in Kazakhstan is manufactured by the Russian media which is made possible by language, ideological and political ties of the two countries and complemented by the absence of quality content in Kazakh media."[169] Russia has launched a successful propaganda campaign, and it has had far reaching consequences. Kazakhstan's populace has effectively been indoctrinated, and their views are a direct representation of Moscow's anti-Western stance.

Opposing viewpoints hail from the Voices from Central Asia. Interviewee Erlan Karin claims that Kazakhstan's public opinion on Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea was a bag of mixed reactions.[170] One part of the country sympathized with Russia and understood its reasoning for taking decisive military action. Another part of the country, those actively engaged in social networks and mainly young people, vehemently deplored Moscow and praised participants of the Euromaidan. Finally, there was the majority of people who stayed neutral on the matter, neither endorsing nor rejecting Russia's actions. Karin, a Kazakh by birth, personally felt that events in Ukraine dismantled the legal and collective security institutions originally designed to protect former Soviet bloc countries. The whole premise of the CIS has now been undermined.[171]

Other public opinion worth noting is Kazakhstan's youth. A survey specifically targeting the younger population of Kazakhstan was conducted to gauge their political values and identification to the Russian Federation. Collectivist in nature and sharing

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[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid.

[170] "Commenting on Ukraine: Voices from Central Asia," *Voices from Central Asia*, no. 16 (March 2014): 4, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Voices-from-CA-16-March-2014.pdf.

[171] Ibid., 2.

Soviet ideals, 46.4% of Kazakh youth aligned with left-wing views, whereby domestic state support was a necessary condition to achieving their goals.[172] On the other hand, 35.8% of respondents could be described as possessing right-wing views, upholding liberal ideas and relying on themselves or family rather than state institutions for support.[173] Moreover, a majority maintained that the political and worldly views they shared were only to some extent or very little of those expressed by their parents.[174]

The results of the first part of the survey may suggest that while a majority of young Kazakhs still identify with Soviet ideologies, a substantial amount actually value the idea of self-interest. In a country still trying to find its place in the sun, such data might actually provide the possibility that a future Kazakhstan will perhaps seek to establish even better relations with the West. Reform is key to democratization and with younger generations being the beacon of hope for their country, there is still a chance that the liberalization of various political institutions will indeed occur, but likely not until Nazarbayev is gone. As the data points out, the fact that the youth of Kazakhstan have differing opinions from the older generations could also suggest a change in the future. The shift in the mentality of younger generations could help solidify the state's progressive movement, while perhaps recognizing the need to distance themselves from their Russian counterpart once and for all.

The second part of the survey revealed that the younger generation does not feel politically or emotionally beholden to Russia, especially since many of them grew up in an independent Kazakhstan.[175] Results found that a total of 74.9% of young Kazakhs were interested in current events in Russia.[176] Given that the dominant news media is broadcast in Russian and over half use the language in their daily lives, it is not too surprising that

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[172] Tolganay Umbetaliyeva, Botagoz Rakisheva, and Peer Teschendorf, "Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation Central Asia, 2016, 133. https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_203_0_43/content/Display/32781947/YOUTHINCENTRALASIAENG301016.pdf.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid., 155.

[176] Ibid., 156.

the international events drawing most focus come from Russia. In that sense then, it seems logical that 72% of respondents felt that Kazakhstan should continue to develop a closer relationship with its neighbor to the North.[177] When asked which country Kazakhstan should model to achieve the highest rates of state success, the answers differed significantly between those living in Astana and elsewhere within the country. Of those living in the capital, 38.5% felt that the United States was the best example for Kazakhstan to follow countered with the 46.7% scattered across the country who felt that Russia should be their prime model for successful development.[178]

6. Policy Implications for Kazakhstan

At this point in time, there is little reason to doubt that Kazakhstan will continue to foster its relationship with its strategic partner, Russia. While the younger generation may not feel as bound to Russia as, say, their parents, there is still an overwhelming amount of support for Russia as a whole. When combined with the fact that Kazakhs more often converse in Russian than in their native tongue and listen to the news dominated by the Russian media, there will undoubtedly remain ties to that particular country regardless of its alleged transgressions. Overall, young people support their President, government, and Kazakhstan's current foreign policy.[179]

Still, others argue that Russia jeopardized relations with Kazakhstan when one of Putin's statements caused quite the stir. His August 2014 declaration about Kazakhstan's statehood deeply wounded the people of Kazakhstan.[180] In his arrogance, Putin exclaimed that President Nazarbayev achieved what no other could or had—creating a unified state of Kazakhstan. While complimentary of the Kazakh president, Putin's blunder was evident in the Kazakhs overwhelming response. They felt his comment negated their history and tarnished their pride.[181] It also sparked reservations among them as to whether the

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[177] Ibid., 157.

[178] Ibid., 158.

[179] Ibid., 166.

[180] Tolipov, "Strategic Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Post-Soviet Space: A View from Central Asia," 18.

[181] Ibid., 19.

statement was meant to be ominous, alluding to a possible reenactment of the Ukraine scenario in Kazakhstan.[182]

Despite the disparity in public opinion, it does not seem that Kazakhstan will be making any drastic moves to oppose Moscow. Consensus that Kazakhstan should continue its relations with Russia, despite viewing events in Ukraine through the Kremlin's lens, is a testament to its *modus operandi*. However, Kazakhstan is not prepared to surrender total control to its northern neighbor, instead relying on the West and China to counterbalance Russia's looming presence.[183] Given Russia's track record and its recent use of hard power, it is safe to say that those in the Central Asian countries have a reason to be concerned.[184]

7. Latvia and Russia's Relations

Following the devastating situation in Ukraine, Latvia has become increasingly wary of Russia as a formidable threat. The long-standing and open distrust of its eastern Slavic neighbor has continued to be a pervasive theme among Latvia's people, 26% of which are ethnic Russians.[185] Their histories run deep and the resentments abound. In fact, when a recent survey conducted among Russians asked them to identify which countries are seen as most unfriendly toward Russia, 23% answered Latvia, earning it a fifth place finish (even beating Germany and the UK) out of the 30 countries polled.[186] These results are not surprising when contrasted with a public opinion poll conducted in Latvia by the company SKDS. The study revealed that 46% of Latvians had an unfavorable view of Russians, while a fairly high 41% viewed Russia favorably given its behavior, and 13% could not answer.[187] In the same survey, the company claimed that 43% of Latvians had

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[182] Ibid.

[183] Tolipov, "Strategic Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Post-Soviet Space: A View from Central Asia, 18. As cited in Bayram Balci and Daniyar Kosnazarov, "The Ukraine Crisis's Central Asian Echoes," Carnegie Moscow Center, December 25, 2014, available at http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=57603.

[184] Ibid., 20.

[185] Heather Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (January 2016): 22, ProQuest.

[186] Levada-Center, "Russia's Friends and Enemies."

[187] "Опрос: почти половина жителей Латвии отрицательно оценивают США," *RuBaltic*, October 14, 2015, http://www.rubaltic.ru/news/131015-opros-latvii/#t20c.

an unfavorable view of the U.S. and that the EU stood out as being the most liked institution raking in an approval rating of 63%.[188] Accounting for possible deviations in public opinion, it is hard to tell whether these numbers are indeed factual or fabricated. In any case, events in Ukraine may have exacerbated Latvia's outcry over Russia's transgressions.

8. Public Opinion in Latvia on Ukraine Crisis

In the wake of the Ukraine conflict, there were fears that Russia might use its intervention in the region as a carte blanche to flex its military power in Latvia. Not to mention, Latvia has had a long-standing reputation as being the weakest link in the Baltic region.[189] Such concerns were heightened by the fact that Latvia remains home to a sizable ethnic Russian minority.[190] It is estimated that roughly 26% of the country is ethnically Russian, while 38% of its residents converse strictly in Russian.[191] The idea that Moscow would use similar ethno-centric appeals as a justification to intervene became an increasingly plausible threat to Latvian citizens after Russia's offensive in Ukraine.

Latvian suspicions were almost confirmed when throughout the course of 2014 Russia had made several overt attempts to push territorial boundaries. Russian military airplanes and warships came dangerously close to Latvian airspace and waters, raising alert levels to the Kremlin's next possible target.[192] Latvia, a member of NATO since 2004, looked westward for assistance. In an effort to respond to the growing concerns, Latvia's government quelled fears by appealing to NATO, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom, for support both politically and militarily in the event such an attack

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[188] Ibid.

[189] "Latvian Commentary: Russia Does Not Need Fake News When Thinking About How to Attack Latvian State," *Riga Delfi*, February 22, 2017, https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_203_121123_43/content/Display/EUR2017022657511353#.

[190] Karlis Bukovskis and Andris Spruds, "Latvia," Freedom House, accessed March 14, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2015/latvia.

[191] Carol J. Williams, "Latvia, with a Large Minority of Russians, Worries about Putin's Goals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-latvia-russia-next-20150502-story.html.

[192] Bukovskis and Spruds, "Latvia."

would transpire.[193] Later that year, NATO reciprocated and pledged full support to all the Baltic states.[194]

For years, there has been widespread belief that the Latvian media is a pawn of Russian propaganda.[195] Russia has already launched its information campaign within Latvia, bombarding Latvian television broadcasting agencies with "fake news" to rally its cause.[196] Its main aim is to incite doubt of Latvia's legitimacy as a prospering state. If Russia can do so effectively, while winning over the hearts and minds of Latvians, then it can begin its next step of calculatingly polarizing Latvia's people.[197] In an interview with Riga Irir, former President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said: "'For years I have been watching the Latvian news media and seen that they [Russians] are trying to reduce the trust of the people about statehood, the point of independence and the country's economic hopes. They sow doubt, insecurity, fear, distrust about leaders, the country's ability to survive and our own abilities. Please understand that this is a military weapon.'"[198] Despite the comparatively high favorable view of Russia, there is a strong opinion among the populace that Latvia is at war with Russia, whereby the latter is utilizing methods of hybrid warfare to wage its relentless and demeaning information campaign to delegitimize the Latvian state.[199]

In order to combat Russia's information war, there have been efforts to uphold the general public sentiment of minimizing Russia's influence within Latvia's borders. In 2014, Latvian media officials penalized and fined pro-Russian television stations that were

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[193] Ibid.

[194] Ibid.

[195] "Latvian Commentary Discusses Russia's Ongoing 'Hybrid War', Response Among Latvians to Same," Riga Irir.lv, April 20, 2015, https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_203_121123_43/content/Display/EUO2015042148520062#index=3&searchKey=25542126&rpp=10.

[196] *Riga Delfi*, "Latvian Commentary: Russia Does Not Need Fake News When Thinking About How to Attack Latvian State."

[197] Ibid.

[198] Riga Irir.lv, "Latvian Commentary Discusses Russia's Ongoing 'Hybrid War', Response Among Latvians to Same."

[199] Ibid.

suspected of broadcasting news that was clearly biased or overtly hate-ridden.[200] Latvia's National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) took steps to suspend the Russian channel Rossiya RTR for presenting information in a way that portrayed the use of military force against a sovereign country as warranted.[201]

9. Policy Implications for Latvia

Latvia's public opinion surveys expressing discontent for the Kremlin are manifested in outward disdain for Latvian government officials. Latvia's government approval rating is at an all-time low because of the belief that many of those in the parties forming the current coalition are loyal to Russia.[202] There is a genuine public fear that if an election in the Saeima (Latvia's parliament) were held today, the leading party Harmony could win, a worry considering its notorious ties to Russia and blatant anti-NATO rhetoric.[203] In fact, according to a January 2016 survey conducted by the Latvian newspaper, Latvijas Fakti, out of the 1,002 Latvian citizens polled, 18.7% said they would vote for Harmony in an upcoming election.[204] The leftist political party seems to be a crowd favorite among some.[205]

On the other hand, other assessments have shown that Harmony's popularity has eroded in recent years primarily among ethnic Latvians who do not agree with its hardline backing of Russia's Ukrainian invasion and its occupation of Crimea.[206] Consequently, Russian-speaking voters shared a very similar view.[207] As the situation in Ukraine worsened, there was an apparent display of public disapproval most notably in the form of

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[200] Bukovskis and Spruds, "Latvia."

[201] Ibid.

[202] *Riga Delfi*, "Latvian Commentary: Russia Does Not Need Fake News When Thinking About How to Attack Latvian State."

[203] Ibid.

[204] "Latvian Public Opinion Survey Company Releases Latest Data on Popularity of Country's Parties," *Tallinn BNS*, January 21, 2016, https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_203_121123_43/content/Display/EUL2016012165906337#index=4&searchKey=25542126&rpp=10.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Bukovskis and Spruds, "Latvia."

[207] Ibid.

Latvia's May 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections. Latvia's largest opposition group, the pro-Russian party Harmony, only managed to secure a single seat in the EP, a major blow to the social-democratic force that was expecting at minimum three seats.[208] Latvia's other Russian-leaning party, the Russian Union of Latvia, acquired one seat, while the breakdown of remaining EP seats upheld status quo.[209] Putin's actions in Ukraine mobilized Latvia's population in the 2014 EP election; voters made sure their voices were heard in retaliation for Russia's actions.[210]

Sensing its diminishing political influence, Harmony began to distance itself from Putin's administration, turning instead to its Western counterparts.[211] In an August 2014 opinion poll sampling 801 individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, 64% considered themselves Latvian patriots.[212] Given such numbers, the evidence seems to suggest that any attempts for Russia to try and exploit ethnic differences would only further fuel distrust among Latvia's population.[213]

Nevertheless, with the upcoming 2018 parliamentary elections, there is growing concern that Harmony, with the help from the Kremlin, could actually come out victorious.[214] It is this very coalition that raises Latvian fears over Russia's impending efforts to reassert its dominance over the former Soviet satellite state. It also begs the question as to whether this polling forebodes future election results. If this party actually manages to gain a stronghold in the 2018 elections, it will be interesting to see the subsequent policies they implement as well as if their relations with Russia continue.[215]

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[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid.

[210] *Riga Delfi*, "Latvian Commentary: Russia Does Not Need Fake News When Thinking About How to Attack Latvian State."

[211] Bukovskis and Spruds, "Latvia."

[212] Ibid.

[213] Ibid.

[214] *Riga Delfi*, "Latvian Commentary: Russia Does Not Need Fake News When Thinking About How to Attack Latvian State."

[215] *Tallinn BNS*, "Latvian Public Opinion Survey Company Releases Latest Data on Popularity of Country's Parties."

C. CONCLUSION

Putin's call for a Russian Federation whereby the integrity of Russo populations is upheld has been at the forefront of the state's affairs. Such bold statements suggest a nostalgic return to the former Soviet, Cold War era. The invasion of Ukraine has certainly validated Putin's claims, signaling to the rest of the world his willingness to reclaim that which was once theirs. However, how did events in Ukraine shape the overall perceptions of Russia's near-abroad: Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia?

The most obvious relevance of these particular countries is that they share a border with their Russian neighbor, and they were formerly united under the overarching umbrella of the U.S.S.R. Analyzing the data provided by the public opinion polls within each of these three countries reveals some interesting commonalities. They contain sizable ethnic Russian minorities; the Russian mass media is pervasive in their regions; current government officials are allied to the Kremlin. These shared traits seem to have had a significant impact on the general public's outlook on Russia.

While a majority of the populace in both Belarus and Kazakhstan approve of Russia's actions in Ukraine, the root of their endorsement differs. Belarus is driven by economic factors, and as long as Russia continues to line its pockets, the financial profits they stand to gain are generally positive. Kazakhstan is especially rife with the continuous bombardment of Russian media sources broadcasting their biased perspective, which has effectively debilitated its citizenry from holding opposing viewpoints to Russia's interpretations. Latvians have been most outspoken about their disdain for Russia and its illegal operations in Ukraine. However, there are concerns for the growing support of the pro-Russian political party, Harmony. With the help of the Kremlin, Harmony stands a chance of winning the upcoming 2018 parliamentary elections. In the foreseeable future, Belarus and Kazakhstan will continue to stay the course in their partnership with Russia, but Latvia faces unchartered waters if its political fate is to be realized.

III. EUROPE AND PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA

A. FRANCE, GERMANY, AND FINLAND

Singer Jim Morrison once said, "whoever controls the media, controls the mind."[216] No truer words have been spoken about Russia's attempt to co-opt a generation of TV-watching, internet-surfing, social media addicts. As analyst Heather Conley warns, "Today, Russian submarines are closely examining the locations of European undersea fiber optic cables to disrupt all internet and communication lines, military command and control, essential commerce, the functioning of critical infrastructure, and prevent government communication to its people."[217] Russia's attempt to master the art of information dominance relies on techniques utilized by Western media sources coupled with Russia's ability to insert its own version of events into the programming, however outlandish they may seem.[218] To add credibility to their narrative, European stations deemed independent have been bought out by local oligarchs whose sympathies lie with Moscow.[219] The broadcasted stories often detail accounts of widespread corruption and depravity in the West, underscore terrorism as a leading threat to create panic and exploit fears, and present Ukraine as being hijacked by fascists from the West, who bow down to their U.S. leader.[220]

Russian media channels like RT and Sputnik have marketed themselves as pro-Russian, anti-Western networks making their way into European households.[221] Putin, himself, has openly addressed the intentions of both platforms: "to break the monopoly of

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[216] Quote by lead singer Jim Morrison from the Doors. As cited in Juliana L. Daxland, "Whoever Controls the Media, Controls the Mind," *Adolescent Learners in Urban Contexts* (blog), October 16, 2016, https://wp.nyu.edu/urbanyouthnyu/2016/10/16/whoever-controls-the-media-controls-the-mind/.

[217] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 21.

[218] Ibid., 22.

[219] Ibid., 23.

[220] Ibid., 22.

[221] Jim Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War," *New York Times*, September 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html.

the Anglo-Saxon global information streams."[222] Yet, it is the very basis on which these networks operate that makes them dangerous and presumably difficult to combat. They model themselves after Western news agencies, protected by liberal democratic values of free speech and the unregulated flow of information on the internet.[223] Their intended audience is broad—targeting anyone willing to listen, appealing to those questioning the facts presented by local media sources, or narrowly focusing on groups with a specific political agenda. It is these types of vulnerabilities that Russia seeks to exploit.

As the scholar Bobo Lo explains, there has been a surge of pro-Russian groups within Europe, which are partial to the Kremlin's explanation of events in Ukraine, oppose an EU-dominated Europe, and share a penchant for authoritarianism.[224] Therefore, as is stated in the *Economist's* "The Eastern Blockage" article, their threat lies in the fact that they can be perceived "as a fifth column in a Kremlin strategy to undermine European unity, discredit democratic liberalism, and diminish Europe's regional and international weight."[225] According to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Russia utilizes the same tactics against each of its perceived enemies, which, perhaps, makes its ends predictable, but the means harder to track: As Nolan Peterson observes, "It employs hybrid warfare—so-called fake news, computer hacking, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, snap drills, direct military interventions, and so on and so forth—to undermine the Western democracies and break the transatlantic unity."[226]

As conflict in Ukraine was ramping up, Russia's ability to spread disinformation through various mediums evoked support from viewers in France and elsewhere on the European continent.[227] Foreigners flocked to Ukraine, taking up arms and fighting

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[222] Ibid.

[223] Ibid.

[224] Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London: Chatham House, 2015), 192.

[225] "The Eastern Blockage," *Economist*, May 17, 2014, https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21602277-new-europe-divided-about-russia-old-europe-bad-consequences-all-eastern.

[226] Nolan Peterson, "How Putin Uses Fake News to Wage War on Ukraine," *Newsweek*, April 3, 2017, http://www.newsweek.com/how-putin-uses-fake-news-wage-war-ukraine-577430.

[227] Ibid.

alongside their Russian comrades.[228] Sensing the level of engagement from abroad and the resumed fighting between Ukrainians and pro-Russian rebels, Western leaders threatened Russia with more aggressive sanctions if Minsk II was not upheld.[229] The accord also reflected France and Germany's distaste for Russia's proposal of a *Novorossiya*. Faced with the possibility of spiraling further into an economic depression, Moscow had no choice but to drop the concept entirely by May 2015.[230]

Despite European leaders' threats, they had little interest in placing additional sanctions on Russia. To put things in perspective, Europe and Russia engaged in annual trade worth upwards of $450 billion in 2013, a hefty sum that Europe's officials were not ready to forgo.[231] Besides, cutting Moscow off from Western banking systems would not have been an agreeable course of action for Europe, which imports much of its energy from Russia.[232] As it was, the value of the ruble had deflated, resulting in an estimated capital loss of $130 billion.[233] Given what was at stake, warnings of additional sanctions were summarily dismissed by Russian bureaucrats as unlikely.

While Putin's information operations surrounding Ukraine and Crimea were on full throttle, Europe became a convenient target of Russia's propaganda. The conflict resulted in a political fallout between Russia and many of the European countries that once shared amicable exchanges. Russia's subsequent meddling in the 2017 elections in Europe were also a factor in souring European views. This chapter will begin by examining France, Germany, and Finland's relations with Russia. Understanding the extent to which these interactions have changed following Russia's acts of aggression will highlight how public

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[228] Ibid.

[229] Philip Shishkin, "U.S. Sanctions Over Ukraine Hit Two Russian Banks Hardest," *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sanctions-over-ukraine-hit-two-russian-banks-hardest-1425597150.

[230] Gardner, "Hybrid Warfare: Iranian and Russian Versions of 'Little Green Men,'" 183–184.

[231] "Vladimir Putin's European Adventures; Russia and the West," *Economist*, June 7, 2014, https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21603483-russian-presidents-strategy-towards-ukraine-and-west-may-not-have-worked-well-he.

[232] Shishkin, "U.S. Sanctions Over Ukraine Hit Two Russian Banks Hardest."

[233] Elizabeth Pond, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West/Kundnani Replies," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 175, ProQuest.

opinion within these respective states has been affected. These findings will then illustrate the current policy implications the 2014 crisis may have on these territories, based on the reach of Russia's propaganda campaign.

1. Franco-Russian Relations

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, France, like other NATO countries, had to change its course, having lost its public enemy number one. The immediate end of the Cold War brought over a decade-long era of rapprochement between Russia and the West. On February 2, 1992, French President Francois Mitterrand and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.[234] The agreement detailed the extent of bilateral relations on matters surrounding nonproliferation, energy, economic growth, security cooperation, and foreign policy decisions.[235] France also pledged to support Russia's integration into trade organizations for which it qualified.[236] During the meeting, France recognized Russia with "most favored nation status," granting it a hefty loan.[237] Since the treaty's commencement, France and Russia have traditionally upheld good relations until Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[238]

For the most part, the French populace of today are more concerned with the Kremlin's abuses of human rights and its autocratic style of rule than with maintaining their economic relationship.[239] Nevertheless, among certain sectors, the need to conduct business with one another remains strong.[240] According to Bobo Lo, this sprouts from "a

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[234] Douglas M. Gibler, *International Military Alliances, 1648–2008* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009), 527, https://books.google.com/books?id=y3-iCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA527&lpg=PA527&dq=1992+french+russian+bilateral+relations&source=bl&ots=pfaIMnlJwA&sig=zD6zQxiEM2gb2T3GA2gKXjaZz1o&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiqnJf29dDZAhVK0FQKHQddDusQ6AEIkAEwEA#v=onepage&q=1992%20french%20russian%20bilateral%20relations&f=false.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 187.

[240] Ibid.

shared great power tradition."[241] Sharing a realist perspective, both states advocate for a multipolar world.[242] Lo goes on to document how the Russians revere France's "strategic independence"[243]: both countries have their bouts with anti-Americanism and are aligned in the conviction that U.S. dominance must be curbed, and both share a mutual admiration for each other's culture.[244]

With the election of Francois Hollande, France became dedicated to the idea of a robust EU, rallying around Germany's charge for a united Europe. Shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, France temporarily suspended a deal it had struck under former President Sarkozy on the sale of Mistral-class, amphibious warships to Russia.[245] By August 2015, that transfer had been completely canceled. The termination of the deal, involving two force-projection warships reportedly worth $1.3 billion, brought an onslaught of criticism from Hollande's opponents, who berated the president for being a pawn of the U.S. and undermining the country's independence.[246] The French government's relationship with Russia became a rather uncomfortable display of failed brinkmanship, which was hyped in the French media.[247]

2. Public Opinion in France on Ukraine Crisis

Events in Ukraine shed light on some of the public opinion that was circulating within Europe regarding the conflict and its aftermath. Some hard questions were being asked, and the responses were equally enlightening. In a 2015 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 15% of the French had confidence in Putin's ability to act

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[241] Ibid.

[242] Thomas Gomart, "France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 147, https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.2.147.

[243] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 188. As cited in Marie Mendras, "Russia-France: A Strained Political Relationship," *Russian Analytical Digest* 130, July 1, 2013, p. 2.

[244] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 188.

[245] Francois Heisbourg, "Preserving Post-Cold War Europe," *Survival* 57, no. 1 (February 2015): 38, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1008293.

[246] Kim Willsher, "France Cancels Sale of Warships to Russia, Pays Moscow Back," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-france-cancels-sale-warships-to-russia-20150806-story.html.

[247] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 188.

responsibly in global affairs, and 30% retained a favorable view of Russia.[248] When asked whether Russia was a military threat to other countries, 51% of French people surveyed agreed that Russia was a major threat.[249] An additional 40% placed Russia into the category of a minor threat.[250] Of those respondents, 63% of younger French were convinced of Russia's status as a formidable danger.[251] It is, perhaps, surprising then that only 44% of the French blamed Russia for the violence in eastern Ukraine, while 30% felt culpability lay with the pro-Russian separatists.[252] Confronted with the issue of whether NATO countries should militarily come to the rescue of their allies, 53% of the French surveyed were opposed, while 47% were in favor.[253] This is significant considering that Ukraine has never officially been an ally of NATO in the first place. If there is such a divide on military assistance to states that are official members of NATO, it is not unrealistic to expect that reservations regarding military intervention on behalf of non-NATO allies would also exist. Therefore, a 59% French opposition to supplying Ukraine with arms is consistent apropos the aforementioned logic.[254]

A year after the crisis in Ukraine, the French public was asked to weigh in on what France, as a NATO country, should do in response to Russia's actions. Roughly 67% of those surveyed agreed that providing financial aid to Ukraine would be the most appropriate response.[255] More surprising was that those on the left of the political spectrum were more supportive than those on the right.[256] Yet, as far as economic sanctions on Russia were concerned, only 25% of the French were willing to entertain increasing

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[248] Kate Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine," Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes and Trends, June 10, 2015, http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/1-nato-public-opinion-wary-of-russia-leary-of-action-on-ukraine/.

[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid.

[252] Ibid.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid.

Russia's financial ramifications, while the majority wanted to keep penalties the same.[257] However, after Russia's transgressions, 55% of French respondents (mostly younger) were in favor of Ukraine one day joining NATO.[258] Given that the Euromaidan protests erupted over the issue of Ukraine joining the EU, it was rather surprising to see that over half of those interviewed in France (53%) opposed Ukraine becoming a member of the EU.[259] The 46% that did support Ukraine's eventual membership into the EU were predominantly from the younger generation.[260] It is interesting that there was greater support for Ukraine joining a military alliance than there was for it to join the EU, the latter of which was likely seen as imposing more costs on the French.

Perhaps a more reliable network of pro-Russian supporters came from those on the political fringes, who seem to have taken a strong liking to Mr. Putin. France's Marine Le Pen of the far-right Front Nationale leads a 39-member group called the Europe of Nations and Freedoms (ENF) party, represented by eight European countries.[261] Formed in June 2015, the group has taken a particularly strong stance in support of the Kremlin and its recent political escapades.[262] Le Pen, alone, has been a staunch critic of the sanctions imposed on Russia, calling for the EU to put an end to the economic penalties that were "completely stupid," causing "major problems for the EU," and were "counterproductive."[263] According to Conley, in "August 2015, ENF members had voted 93 percent of the time in favor of the Kremlin's positions, and they have opposed the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine, backed Russia's annexation of Crimea, and refused to condemn the murder of Russian opposition leader, Boris Nemtsov."[264] Le Pen and her colleagues' sympathies towards Russia were of genuine concern, given her position as one

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[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

[259] Ibid.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 23.

[262] Ibid.

[263] Lucy Pasha-Robinson, "Marine Le Pen Meets with Vladimir Putin on Visit to Moscow," *Independent*, March 24, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-election-marine-le-pen-vladimir-putin-moscow-russia-a7647621.html.

[264] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 23.

of the front-runners during France's 2017 presidential election, not to mention that in November 2014, the First Czech-Russian Bank, based out of Moscow, had lent her 9 million dollars for her campaign.[265] Her amicability towards the Kremlin was evident, highlighted by her call for a "strategic alliance with the Kremlin, proposing a 'pan-European union' that would include Russia."[266]

Le Pen's admiration for Putin, combined with her infamous status within France's political realm, gave Moscow the wherewithal to launch its information war. Using an array of media platforms, RT was leading the charge, broadcasting pro-Russian messages throughout Europe.[267] The narrative loud and clear—Russia was the new counterbalance to America's hegemony in Europe.[268] According to pious French supporters of the Kremlin, Putin also provided a restoration of moral and Christian values to combat the wildly liberal and homosexual epidemic that plagued the West.[269] Le Pen echoed those same sentimentalities when she called Putin the defender of "the Christian heritage of European civilization."[270] It is worth noting that there is an irony in Russia's ties to far-right populist parties. Putin supports an alliance with the very groups he publicly demonizes, categorizing the whole of the Western world as one big cluster of fascists.

3. Policy Implications for France

While Putin's bromance with leading members of right-wing populist groups endures, the corollary is whether such relations are sustainable and at what cost. The parties indeed have a following, but even with the Kremlin's subsidies, achieving political dominance has proved difficult. While securing 23 seats in the May 2014 Parliamentary

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[265] Ibid.

[266] Andrew Higgins, "Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation," *New York Times*, May 30, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/world/europe/russia-finland-nato-trolls.html?_r=0.

[267] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 23.

[268] Higgins, "Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation."

[269] Ibid.

[270] Alina Polyakova, "Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right," *World Affairs* (September/October 2014), http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/strange-bedfellows-putin-and-europe%E2%80%99s-far-right.

Elections was a big success for Front Nationale, it was hardly the enduring victory they had hoped for moving forward.[271] In March 2017, Le Pen met with Putin in Moscow, supposedly to discuss France and Russia's united effort in combatting Islamist terrorism.[272] Putin also took the interaction as an opportunity to assure the public that he had no intention of meddling in the upcoming French election.[273] Having been accused of interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Putin was not successful in pulling the wool over French eyes. Le Pen, eyeing the Presidency, lost out in the 2017 presidential election to a more sprightly, centrist opponent, Emmanuel Macron.[274] His victory signaled that France was not willing to capitulate to far-right messages provoked by fear and intimidation. Putin's alliance with Le Pen was a long-planned strategy that simply failed to influence future European affairs.[275] A Europe with leading politicians keen to appease Russia would have possibly given Putin the carte blanche he needed to conduct future acts of aggression. At least for now, the French are safe from an anti-European, pro-Russian head of state who could lead their country into a foreign policy reversion.

As exchanges or initiatives between East and West during times of friction could be misconstrued or undermined, transparency and open communication are key to combatting Putin's narrative. But this undertaking may become increasingly difficult as RT recently launched its newest station in France. Currently, the channel can only be watched by subscribing to the Iliad broadband service or online, though efforts are underway to ensure France's Bouygues Telecom will begin streaming RT.[276] Nonetheless, Russia's communications presence in France has existed through online mediums prior to RT's announcement. YouTube channels with French subtitles and French websites have

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[271] "Results of the 2014 European Elections," European Parliament, accessed February 27, 2018, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-fr-2014.html#table03.

[272] Pasha-Robinson, "Marine Le Pen Meets with Vladimir Putin on Visit to Moscow."

[273] Ibid.

[274] Alissa J. Rubin, "Macron Decisively Defeats Le Pen in French Presidential Race," *New York Times*, May 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/07/world/europe/emmanuel-macron-france-election-marine-le-pen.html.

[275] Polyakova, "Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right."

[276] "Russia's RT Launches New French Channel Despite 'Propaganda' Charges," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 19, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-today-rt-launches-new-french-language-channel-paris-despite-propaganda-charges-macron/28926043.html.

promoted Russia's messages, often covering the unfolding of events in Ukraine and the bombings in Syria.[277] While the sites have managed to acquire a following of hundreds of thousands, RT has yet to hit mainstream levels of media in France. Even Macron has been a vocal critic of the news agency, dubbing both RT and Sputnik "'agents of influence…and deceitful propaganda' who spread 'defamatory untruths.'"[278] So far, RT reporters have not been granted the necessary credentials to cover news about Macron's presidency.[279] Nevertheless, France's media regulations authority, Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), has assured the public that RT will be closely monitored, prepared to step in should it observe inconsistencies or abnormalities of any kind.[280]

In an effort to move past years of contentious relations centered around Ukraine and its aftermath, France and Russia's governments have recently launched a project called the Trianon Dialogue. While publicly the program is designed to promote joint ventures, integration, and increased communication between the two states, privately, the true intentions of the initiative remain curious.[281] It is not outlandish to think that Putin has a hand to play, hoping a more positive public image will stimulate Europe to reconsider its sanctions policy.[282] Adding to the speculation is the fact that a couple of Russian board members on the project have been personal targets of the sanctions, prompting a spokesman from Macron's office to reassure the public of Trianon Dialogue's aims, despite ongoing tensions.[283] Macron, a staunch supporter of the EU sanctions imposed on Russia, felt the time was right "to encourage Franco-Russian economic relations" in spite of the sides' currently limited trade and the ensuing Russian embargo of EU foods and products.[284] Despite the generally negative turn in French public opinion, France's

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[277] Ibid.

[278] Ibid.

[279] Ibid.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Associated Press, "France Seeks Closer Ties with Russia Despite Tensions over Syria, Ukraine," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2018, http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-france-russia-talks-20180209-story.html.

[282] Ibid.

[283] Ibid.

[284] Ibid.

government officials are looking to reestablish their lines of communication with Russia in a manner that would not undermine their pact with fellow EU member states. Their commitment is to Europe, first and foremost.

4. German-Russian Relations

Germany's relationship with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been an interesting one, to the say the least. To start with, the former East Germany was the model Soviet satellite. According to Daniel Hamilton, the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) role was clear: serving as "the western outpost of the Soviet empire, the U.S.S.R.'s most important military ally, and its most important trading partner…critical to Soviet European policy and to Soviet domestic economic policies as well."[285] Following the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, Helmut Kohl became the first chancellor of a unified Germany. He, along with his successor, Gerhard Schröder, adopted a very favorable policy towards Russia. Their party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), sought ways to bring Russia into the fold through support and integration. This approach stemmed from a conviction that in order for Moscow to progress, it had to modernize both economically and politically.[286] The party even spearheaded the partnership for modernization campaign, which focused on "change through interweavement" both during the rest of the Soviet era (1989-91) and in the post-Cold War climate.[287]

Most German politicians have been well aware of the long-standing social, political, and economic overlap between the two nations and have strived to honor and preserve those shared ties for over two decades.[288] To put things in perspective, Germany is Russia's primary European trading partner, accounting for $76.5 billion in overall

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[285] Daniel Hamilton, "Dateline East Germany: The Wall behind the Wall," *Foreign Policy*, no. 76 (Autumn 1989): 177, JSTOR.

[286] Ulrich Speck, "German Power and the Ukraine Conflict," Carnegie Europe, March 26, 2015, http://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/03/26/german-power-and-ukraine-conflict-pub-59501.

[287] "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation," NATO Review, accessed February 28, 2018, https://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm.

[288] Ibid.

turnover in 2013.[289] So, when Angela Merkel took office in 2005, she along with her foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (a close friend of Schröder), saw no need for Germany to change its tune.[290] Even though Merkel was raised in East Germany and speaks fluent Russian, she has never overplayed her relationship with Putin, maintaining a cautious distance from him.[291] Her stoic approach became more critical following Putin's subsequent actions in Ukraine/Crimea.[292]

In the years following Putin's ascension, it became clear that Moscow needed a way to reassert its strength in bilateral discussions, as well as to play an active role in Germany's policy towards Russia.[293] Bobo Lo asserts that Germany is critical to Russia's position in Europe because it can impede the United States from becoming the dominant influence on the continent, serve as the intermediary for the transfer of advanced technology, and encourage Europe's continued reliance on the Russian supply of energy, for which there is already strong support from the German business lobby, which has sided with the Kremlin on a number of occasions.[294] This has created a network of business alliances, whereby former politicians are perceived to be in collusion with the Russians. Ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is a prime example; he now sits on the board of supervisors and even as chairman at Nord Stream.[295] Nord Stream is an underwater pipeline that carries natural gas, connecting Russia directly to Germany, and accounts for 40 to 50% of the gas imports into Europe.[296]

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[289] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 185.

[290] Speck, "German Power and the Ukraine Conflict."

[291] Ibid.

[292] Marco Siddi, "German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New *Ostpolitik*?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (June 2016): 670, Ebscohost.

[293] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[294] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 196.

[295] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[296] Robert Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone* (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2016), 354.

Interestingly, Schröder also works for Russia's Gazprom and has never publicly come out to condemn Putin's actions in Ukraine or Crimea.[297] Such networks and close contacts have given rise to some questionable institutions, such as the German-Russian Forum, comprised of representatives from companies and other public figures that want to promote Russo-German partnership,[298] and the Petersburg Dialogue, a civic forum established in 2001 by Putin and former Chancellor Schröder.[299] In actuality, both organizations serve as a cover to facilitate business transactions and encourage exclusive discourse.[300] Recently, Mathias Platzeck, a former SPD Chairman, took over as director of the German-Russian Forum. He has publicly supported Russia's actions in Ukraine and has demanded that "the Russian annexation of Crimea be legalised retrospectively as being 'acceptable' for both sides."[301] Ultimately, the Germans' post-Cold War approach towards Russia created unintended consequences, leaving the door wide open for the Russian infiltration of German politics and the exploitation of its people.[302] It took the crisis in Ukraine to awaken German officials to the realities of Putin's far-reaching influence.

By 2014, Merkel took a hard line against Putin, sending a clear message that his days of cozying up to former political leaders was over.[303] She saw Putin for who he was—a KGB officer at heart—and she was not about to be deceived. In April, Merkel warned Putin of the fate that awaited Russia should he choose not to comply with the conditions set forth by the West—pull back or risk financial consequences.[304] While the impact to Europe's economy would undoubtedly be felt, she said, the repercussions would be far

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[297] Pond, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West/Kundnani Replies," 174.

[298] "O Hac," Deutsch-Russisches Forum E.V., last modified March 17, 2016, http://www.deutsch-russisches-forum.de/ru/o-nas.

[299] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid.

[302] Ibid.

[303] Siddi, "German Foreign Policy towards Russia in the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis: A New *Ostpolitik*?" 670.

[304] Pond, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West/Kundnani Replies," 174.

worse on Russia's end.[305] Merkel also emphasized that she had the full backing of pro-Russian German businesses to move forward with the measures, effectively stripping Putin of one of his main support hubs.[306] In fact, Merkel was extremely successful in rounding up the German business lobby, comprised of 6,000 firms employing 300,000 people who relied on yearly trade with Russia.[307] The sacrifices that Germany had to make gave her the political leverage she needed to convince her fellow European countrymen to do the same. By a unanimous vote, all member states of the EU agreed to implement three rounds of sanctions on Putin's cronies in March 2014.[308]

In an effort to reassure Europe, Merkel's voice rang loud and clear when she announced to the Bundestag that Russia's transgressions imperiled "the peaceful international order and breach international law."[309] Merkel also encouraged "staying power to overcome the crisis," adding that the European sanctions were necessary, until a diplomatic solution could be reached.[310] According to Politbarometer's public opinion survey conducted on behalf of German Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) television, citizens defended her resolve, which garnered the public support she needed to strengthen her position on the issue.[311] Foreign Minister Steinmeier was, perhaps, the most surprising of Putin's critics, resolutely breaking from Schröder's stance by continuously denouncing Russia's annexation of Crimea.[312]

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[305] Ibid.

[306] Ibid.

[307] Ibid.

[308] Ibid.

[309] Ian Bond, William Courtney, Michael Haltzel, Kenneth Yalowitz, "The Greatest Challenge to U.S.-European Security Cooperation Today: The Ukraine Crisis," *National Interest*, December 8, 2014, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-greatest-challenge-us-european-security-cooperation-11803.

[310] Ibid.

[311] Ibid.

[312] Pond, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West/Kundnani Replies," 174.

5. Public Opinion in Germany on Ukraine Crisis

While Germany's image as Russia's biggest advocate defined its role for the first twenty years following the collapse of the U.S.S.R., such a view is no longer relevant given the Kremlin's recent provocations and invasion of Ukraine.[313] While close business associates and some German companies remain loyal to Moscow, the general public and political officials have had less sympathetic attitudes.[314] In a Pew Global publication dated June 10, 2015, only 23% of Germans felt Putin was capable of taking actions that would be supported on the world stage, while only 27% still held a favorable view of Russia. Strangely, however, this was an 8-point increase from 2014.[315] Furthermore, twice as many German men than women expressed positive opinions on Russia.[316] In the same study, over half of Germans surveyed (58%) did not support using military intervention as a means of defending other NATO allies from the Kremlin. Much like in France, the population is generally not keen on using force, especially on behalf of a country that has never been a NATO ally. It is possible that the life experiences of older German citizens have made them more opposed to German involvement in armed conflict: 65% of those aged 50 and above were more resistant to using military force against the Kremlin than their 18 to 29 year-old counterparts (50%).[317] These percentages were a contrast to the 2014 survey that found six-in-ten Germans committed in their resolve to work with Western allies in standing up to Russia.[318]

In response to the crisis, the Germans were also quite critical of Ukraine joining NATO, with 57% of respondents opposed to granting Kyiv this option.[319] As was similar

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[313] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 186.

[314] Ibid.

[315] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

[316] Ibid.

[317] Ibid.

[318] Bruce Drake, "In Germany, U.S., Polls Find Little Support for Military Aid to Ukraine," Pew Research Center, May 1, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/01/in-germany-u-s-polls-find-little-support-for-military-aid-to-ukraine/.

[319] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

in France, 51% of younger Germans were in favor of extending NATO membership to Ukraine as opposed to 32% of their elders.[320] Another institution that caused quite a bit of division among the German populace was the EU and whether Ukraine should be allowed to join it. Over half of Germans (54%), especially women, were against such a proposition, with 57% of older Germans opposed to EU membership for Ukraine while 42% of the younger generation was more open to the idea.[321] Overall, these percentages align with general German attitudes towards Ukraine joining multinational organizations and allude to the sentiment that Germany would likely have to bear increased costs for Ukraine's inclusion in the EU.

Despite German reunification, old wounds do not always heal, especially in a country that less than 30 years ago was still embroiled in the Cold War. The divide in public opinions among east and west Germans toward Russia is glaring. While as a whole, Germans do not view Russia or Putin favorably, 36% of eastern Germans see Russia in a positive light and nearly twice as many (40%) have confidence in Putin compared to 24% and 19% of western Germans, respectively.[322] Also, only 28% of Germans living in the eastern sectors see Russia as less of a military threat to neighboring countries compared to 40% of their western compatriots.[323]

While most NATO countries are in favor of providing economic aid to war-torn Ukraine, Germany is one of the most outspoken critics against arming Ukraine.[324] In fact, in an ARD-DeutschlandTREND poll conducted April 28–29, 2014, only 18% of Germans considered sending arms and military supplies to Ukraine as a viable option.[325] In the 2015 Pew research poll, the number in favor only marginally increased by 1%, as 77% of

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[320] Ibid.

[321] Ibid.

[322] Ibid.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Jacob Poushter, "Key Findings from our Poll on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," Pew Research Center, June 10, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/10/key-findings-from-our-poll-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/.

[325] Drake, "In Germany, U.S., Polls Find Little Support for Military Aid to Ukraine."

Germans still opposed sending arms to the Ukrainian government.[326] On the other hand, 69% of Germans wanted to contribute financial aid to Ukraine.[327] That number increased by 2% in 2015.[328] Other topics in the 2014 ARD study on which respondents were asked to weigh in included imposing travel restrictions and freezing assets of Russian political actors—51% agreed; economically sanctioning Russia—50% approved; and severing all political affairs with Russia—8% were on board.[329] Yet, there was quite a bit of hesitation expressed with regards to increasing sanctions on Russia, especially given the economic ties between Germany and Russia. By 2015, only one-in-five Germans favored increased economic sanctions on Russia, while 29% advocated for a decrease in the economic pressure being applied to Moscow.[330]

As tensions increased, public sentiments showed grave concern that the crisis in Ukraine could turn into another Cold War conflict. The mid-2014 ARD report reflected those concerns with 72% of respondents feeling a certain degree of worry.[331] By 2015, the percentage of Germans who viewed Russia as a major threat had subsided to 38%.[332] Still, 48% considered Russia to pose a minor threat to its neighboring countries. When presented with the question of which party was responsible for the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine, only three-in-ten Germans (29%) pointed the finger at Russia.[333] Nearly 25% attributed the fighting to pro-Russian separatists, while 12% even held Western countries responsible.[334] The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, however, sent a shock wave of emotions over Germany, resulting in nearly 61% of the population in favor of their government's strict

[326] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

[327] Drake, "In Germany, U.S., Polls Find Little Support for Military Aid to Ukraine."

[328] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

[329] Drake, "In Germany, U.S., Polls Find Little Support for Military Aid to Ukraine."

[330] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

[331] Drake, "In Germany, U.S., Polls Find Little Support for Military Aid to Ukraine."

[332] Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Public Opinion: Wary of Russia, Leery of Action on Ukraine."

[333] Ibid.

[334] Ibid.

approach towards Russia.[335] This was a sharp transformation in public opinion considering that in April 2014, 49% of the country still thought that Germany's ability to mediate between Russia and the U.S. was a viable option.[336]

6. Policy Implications for Germany

Now more than ever, there is doubt about the renewal of bilateral relations between Germany and Russia.[337] As in France, Putin has used right-wing groups as a platform to promote his message of "anti-EU, anti-US and anti-establishment" policies to influence the very core of German society.[338] Leaders of these groups have responded in kind, leading to an increase of Russian media and political activity within Germany. Members of "Die Linke," a leading opposition group in the Bundestag, and the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) party are no strangers to Moscow. On one occasion, Wolfgang Gehrke (deputy party leader of "Die Linke") traveled to Donetsk in support of the "People's Republic," bringing aid.[339] In another demonstration of Russian deference, Alexander Gauland, an AfD party spokesman, met with representatives at the Russian embassy in November 2014.[340] Perhaps even more audacious was Markus Fronhmaier, leader of the AfD youth, who sat with Robert Schlegel at a pan-Slavic conference in Serbia.[341] His meeting with Schlegel was controversial, considering the latter was once a member of the pro-Putin youth group called "Nashi," and who later managed all overseas contracts for Putin's former party, United Russia.[342]

Nevertheless, Chancellor Merkel will most likely remain a strong opponent to Putin's authoritarianism, as long as he continues to dominate his country's political

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[335] Pond, "Germany's Real Role in the Ukraine Crisis: Caught between East and West/Kundnani Replies," 174.

[336] Ibid.

[337] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 187.

[338] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[339] Ibid.

[340] Ibid.

[341] Ibid.

[342] Ibid.

arena.[343] Germany has emerged from among the major powers carrying the torch in trying to find a resolution to the Ukrainian crisis. This is no small feat, considering that Merkel succeeded in putting economic pressure on Russia, all the while maintaining her level of composure and diplomacy. Her ability to secure a united front from the other 27-member states of the EU centered around the sanctions policy, a counter-response to Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea.[344] Moreover, the sanctions seem to have curbed further Russian aggression in Ukraine, at least for the time being. One of Putin's main critics, Alexei Navalny, argued that had economic measures not been taken to effectively debilitate Russia's economy, the Kremlin would have also sought to invade the southernmost region in Ukraine, Odessa.[345]

However, Merkel's interactions did highlight a particular weakness in Germany's foreign policy—a vacuum of military power.[346] While Europe was against military intervention in Ukraine, Russia's invasion came dangerously close to neighboring NATO countries. As part of its leadership role, Germany was tasked with keeping the lid on knee-jerk reactions that could lead to heightened tensions between Russia and the West, or worse, provoke an overt Russian response. Pushing back on suggestions of permanent military posturing alongside the eastern flank, Merkel instead advocated for a rapid-response force as part of NATO's reorientation towards collective defense.[347] Nevertheless, without strong military backing, Germany can hardly intimidate a nuclearized Russia or make promises guaranteeing the security of threatened states. In fact, as Ulrich Speck notes, "Germany's relative weakness in military terms makes the country naturally vulnerable to threats and blackmail itself—tactics that Moscow has used during the Ukraine crisis."[348] With regards to its military power, it seems that Germany is dependent on its NATO allies.

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[343] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 187.

[344] Speck, "German Power and the Ukraine Conflict."

[345] Ibid.

[346] Ibid.

[347] Ibid.

[348] Ibid.

Despite Germany's lack of military might, its commanding presence in light of the recent Ukrainian conflict has deemed it a primary European target of Russian propaganda. Russian media has been prevalent in Germany with platforms, such as Sputnik, RIA Novosti, the radio broadcast "Voice of Russia," RT, and its German-speaking sister-station RT Deutsch, circulating their version of current events and news.[349] Sputnik, modeled after BuzzFeed, featured a particularly disturbing news story in January 2016, falsely alleging that a girl from the Russian-German community had been gang raped by a group of Arab refugees and that the German government was orchestrating a cover up.[350] Similar narratives were corroborated by Russia's Channel One, which has loyal viewers from the Russian-German community, and RT.[351] The facts of the case had been categorically skewed. Investigations later discovered that the girl, Lisa, had willingly left home to pursue sexual relations with a man 10 years her senior.[352] Nevertheless, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov's public outcry that Germany was "covering up reality in a politically correct manner for the sake of domestic politics," sparked regional protests, attracting the likes of Germany's far-right National Democratic Party.[353] The German mainstream media's attempts to highlight inconsistencies in Russian reports, as well as German officials' denial of a cover up, fell on deaf ears. Lisa's case, as the incident came to be known, provided Russian state-controlled media the opportunity to exploit underlying ethnic tensions surrounding Chancellor Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders to Middle Eastern migrants. The temporary chaos and outrage that ensued meant that Russia had accomplished its disinformation task—"Germany had been hit."[354]

RT Deutsch is another source that has been aggressive in countering German media with the primary aim to "'build up a counter-public as well as show media manipulation in

[349] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[350] Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War."

[351] Ibid.

[352] Ibid.

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid.

the German public discourse."[355] The channel has interviewed representatives from both the right-wing and left-wing parties, providing a platform for members to openly oppose European sanctions, feed into the Russian narrative about Ukraine, and attempt to sway public sentiment in favor of Russia.[356] The impact of Russia's media campaign does not stop with extreme political groups. So-called "experts" ranging from journalists to politicians and economists have bought into the Kremlin's widespread disinformation crusade, using German stations to conduct interviews and promote arguments often voiced in the Russian media: the result—influencing German public opinion on a level more effectively than through foreign Russian channels.[357]

7. Finno-Russian Relations

Current relations between Russia and Finland can be traced back to their intertwined past. Despite nearly 140 years worth of fighting and conflict, the end of World War II was a turning point in the relationship between the two states. After the war, Juho Kusti Paasikivi became President of Finland and made it a priority to enhance relations with the Soviet Union.[358] During his tenure, Finnish-Soviet relations indeed improved. The Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed on April 6, 1948, was noteworthy.[359] It ensured military cooperation from both sides in case of another German invasion, guaranteed Finland's sovereignty, and secured Soviet protection from potential Finnish offensives.[360] Additionally, a term coined Finlandization emerged during the Cold War.[361] It described an inherent collective assurance among all parties (the West, the Soviet Union, and Finland) to maintain relations that would not signal a change to the existing

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[355] NATO Review, "'The Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation."

[356] Ibid.

[357] Ibid.

[358] Seppo Zetterberg, "Main Outlines of Finnish History," This is Finland, last modified May 2017, https://finland.fi/life-society/main-outlines-of-finnish-history/.

[359] Dominika Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis" (master's thesis, Charles University in Prague, 2016), 28.

[360] Ibid. As cited in Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Containing Coexistence: America, Russia, and the 'Finnish Solution'* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 207.

[361] Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis," 28.

state of affairs: for Westerners, this meant that joining NATO was not an option for Finland; for the Soviets, this meant respecting Finland's territorial boundaries by not invading; for the Finnish, it meant being trapped into compliance with Moscow—maintaining their independence in domestic affairs but also averting actions that might be perceived as aligning with the West.[362] In practice, it gave Finland the liberty to engage in free market trade while upholding its pluralistic form of government.[363] Likewise, it established a precedent of subservience to the Soviet Union on matters pertaining to foreign policy and security.[364]

Subsequent presidents and their policies maintained a commitment to Finland's neutrality, focusing on cordial relations with the Soviet Union. Such efforts did not go unnoticed by the Soviet elites, and, in fact, received small benefits over time. In 1955, the Soviet Union returned Finland's Porkkala peninsula, land originally leased to the Soviets for use as a naval base following the Continuation War.[365] Returning the coastal town effectively removed any remaining Soviet troops on Finland's bordering territories.[366] Finnish leaders continued to reinforce a positive image between the two states throughout the decades. President Mauno Koivisto, for example, summarized his foreign policy priorities into four simple points: "'good relations with Moscow, good relations with present Moscow leaders, cooperation with Estonian aspirations and protection of Western reputation.'"[367]

The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, began to shift Finland's policy of neutrality to one of integration and further cooperation with Europe.[368] In order to preserve

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[362] Will Inboden, "Is Finland Rejecting 'Finlandization'?" *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/01/is-finland-rejecting-finlandization/.

[363] Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis," 28.

[364] Ibid.

[365] Ibid., 29.

[366] Ibid.

[367] Ibid., 31. As cited in John Hiden, Made Vahur, and David J. Smith, *The Baltic Question during the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2008), 168.

[368] Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis," 32.

Finland's economy, government officials started inching towards assimilation on a global scale. The European Union presented a logical organization through which to advance relations and create a network of mutually dependent states.[369] Continued bilateral agreements with Russia, however, upheld the balance of power and security previously set forth.[370]

In 1999, the EU initiated a regional cooperation project called Northern Dimension (ND).[371] The program afforded Finland, among other states, the opportunity to enhance its relations with Russia, while promoting its own regional agenda.[372] In turn, Russia, too, would be given the chance to influence the region.[373] A less formal means of collaboration was established under the Euroregions cooperation program, which facilitated cultural and economic integration between member states of the EU and bordering non-allied countries.[374] Russia and Finland joined to form the Euregion Karelia, but its benefits seemed to be few and far between. As Professor Aleksandr Sergunin assessed, "The Euroregions are basically reduced to what common Russians call 'bureaucratic tourism' (i.e., exchanged between municipalities). With rare exceptions, they do not promote economic cooperation and horizontal links at the people-to-people or NGO levels."[375]

The attack on Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea was the next real test in bilateral relations for Russia and Finland, challenging the durability of the partnership these two countries had spent years cultivating. While Finland has relied heavily on Russia both economically and as an energy source, receiving 76% of its gas from its eastern neighbor,[376] Finland's leadership has had to maneuver a delicate situation. Since his 2012 inauguration, acting President Sauli Niinistö has advocated for amicable relations between

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[369] Ibid.

[370] Ibid.

[371] Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone*, 298.

[372] Ibid., 299.

[373] Ibid.

[374] Ibid., 301.

[375] Ibid., 301–2.

[376] Ibid., 351.

Finland and Russia, going so far as to encourage future discussions between Russia and the EU.[377] Following the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, however, President Niinistö was in a critical position. Shortly after the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, Putin responded with counter-sanctions. Finland was among the EU states hit the hardest, with Russian-Finnish trade falling "by 8 percent to $8.3 billion in the first half of 2014."[378] Such factors amplified the serious implications—the level to which Russia's violation of a state's right to self-governance was damaging Russo-Finnish bilateral ties.[379] No stranger to Russian invasion, there was no denying the Kremlin's recent offensive actions against another sovereign territory were deeply disconcerting, raising the question of whether Finland should seek NATO membership.

8. Public Opinion in Finland on Ukraine Crisis

Overall, Finnish policy makers and the general public have not shied away from condemning Russia's military actions in Ukraine and its subsequent annexation of Crimea. There is a strong consensus among Finns that Russia has acted reprehensibly, illegally meddling in the affairs of a sovereign country.[380] Despite the uncertainty of NATO membership, it is plausible that given Finland's commitment to democratic ideals and its entangled relationship with the West as an EU member, Russo-Finnish relations may be headed towards rockier times.[381]

As the crisis raged on, Finland condemned Russia's meddling and resultant atrocities in the region. In his official statement, Finnish President Niinistö declared that,

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[377] "Inauguration Speech by President of the Republic Sauli Niinnistö on 1 March 2012," The President of the Republic of Finland, accessed June 3, 2017, http://www.presidentti.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=243180&nodeid=44810&contentlan=2&cultur.

[378] "Finland's Niinisto to Putin: Sanctions Bite Both, Let's Discuss Ukraine," Reuters, August 15, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-finland-idUSKBN0GF0X920140815.

[379] Ibid.

[380] Pauli Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," International Centre for Defence and Security, January 30, 2015, https://www.icds.ee/publications/article/finland-in-2014-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place/, 4–5.

[381] "Finland—Q1 2017: Finland Country Risk Report," BMI Research, January 1, 2017, https://www.nexis.com/results/enhdocview.do?docLinkInd=true&ersKey=23_T26087867781&format=GNBFI&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=0_T26087891873&backKey=20_T26087891874&csi=252475&docNo=27.

"in Crimea, the use of force and threat thereof are to be condemned. They are in breach of the UN Charter and international law. The Russian military measures in Crimea are a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Russia's move to gain control over the Crimean peninsula cannot be accepted."[382] The Finnish public agreed, and a poll conducted in late 2014 showed two-thirds of Finns felt Russia's engagements in Ukraine caused the crisis.[383]

The current situation in Ukraine has created quite a precarious environment, so much so that Finns feel less safe following Russia's invasion.[384] The Advisory Board of Defence Information (ABDI), under the umbrella of Finland's Ministry of Defence, commissioned a market research company called Taloustutkimus Oy to conduct a study of Finnish opinions on foreign policy, defense strategies, and security issues.[385] In 2013, Ukraine was not on the radar, and 70% of those interviewed were adamant that Finland not seek NATO membership, while 21% thought that Finland should join NATO.[386] Flash forward to 2015, and 58% (60% in 2014) opposed NATO membership, while 27% (30% in 2014) of people now supported it.[387] Consequently, indecision on this issue also increased, with nearly 15% declining to respond (10% in 2013).[388] As events in Ukraine unfolded, a 2014 survey found that 75% of respondents viewed developments in Russia as worrisome (only 42% expressed similar opinions in 2013).[389] In a question asking Finns to assess how Russia's recent engagements affected Finland's security, 57% viewed it as

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[382] "President of the Republic and Cabinet Committee on Foreign and Security Policy Discussed the Situation in Ukraine," The President of the Republic of Finland, March 2, 2014, http://www.tpk.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=299614&nodeid=44809&contentlan=2&culture=en-US.

[383] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 2.

[384] Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis," 72.

[385] "Finn`s Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence and Security Issues 2013," Finland Ministry of Defence, December 17, 2013, http://www.defmin.fi/files/2672/report_text_in_english.pdf, 1.

[386] Ibid., 3.

[387] "Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence and Security Issues." Finland Ministry of Defence, January 21, 2016, http://www.defmin.fi/files/3335/MTS_2015_report_in_english.pdf, 19.

[388] Ibid., 20.

[389] "Finn`s Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence and Security Issues 2014," Finland Ministry of Defence, December 3, 2014, http://www.defmin.fi/files/2972/MTS_Raportti_in_english_nettiin.pdf, 3.

having a negative impact (a 6% decrease from 2014).[390] Even with a slight decrease, Finns could argue that the level of security in Europe had diminished once Russia invaded Ukraine.

Despite the increased awareness, the populace may not yet be sold on the idea of an alliance. Curiously, a different Gallup poll conducted March 11–22, 2014, indicated that nearly 53% of individuals would support the government's initiative to join NATO, suggesting that a sizable group would back Finnish officials in pursuit of such a policy.[391] This could imply that while the idea of joining NATO remains elusive, over half of the citizens sampled would adopt their representatives' proposal regardless of personal feelings on the issue. It does seem, though, that as other factors crept into the wake of 2015, there was less Finnish concern over the situation in Ukraine as a whole. Even so, at 56% (74% in 2014), well over half of those polled still considered the Ukrainian crisis to be of great importance.[392]

While the general public may not yet be convinced of a NATO re-alignment, the Finnish military is quite keen to see Finland join the organization. Its members see Russia as having upset the balance of power within Europe. In a poll conducted by the Association of Finnish Officers in January 2014, "more than half of all military officers and 68% of those in the rank of Colonel and above expressed the view that Finland should be a member of the Alliance."[393] The same group ran another poll in April of that year, which indicated over half of Finnish military reservists advocated for NATO membership.[394]

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[390] Finland Ministry of Defence, "Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence and Security Issues," 17.

[391] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place." As cited by Satu Schauman, "Verkkouutiset selvitti: Kansa valmis Natoon, jos valtiojohto niin haluaa," March 25, 2014, http://www.verkkouutiset.fi/kotimaa/nato%20galluppi%20julki%20ti-17919.

[392] Finland Ministry of Defence, "Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, Defence and Security Issues," 6.

[393] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place." As cited from the original Finnish source YLE Uutiset, 14 January 2014, http://yle.fi/uutiset/ylimmat_upseerit_haluavat_suomen_natoon_-_onko_se_ainoa_mahdollisuus/7031590.

[394] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place." As cited from the original Finnish source YLE Uutiset, 20 April 2014, http://yle.fi/uutiset/poll_reservist_support_for_nato_membership_clearly_on_the_rise/7188088.

9. Policy Implications for Finland

Russia's transgressions in Ukraine created quite a stir, putting border countries like Finland on alert for Moscow's next possible move. While debates have swirled regarding NATO membership, some Finnish government officials overtly expressed their reservations about joining the organization. Finnish Prime Minister Juha Petri Sipilä did not want to purposely aggravate the Kremlin, with whom Finland has significant trading deals and shares an 833-mile border.[395] Furthermore, since Finland receives most of its energy from Russia, taking an aligned stance could cause tensions in an otherwise friendly relationship.[396] As previously stated, Finland is already experiencing the repercussions of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia. The consumer goods sector has been particularly hard hit, where cross-border towns rely heavily on Russian customers to purchase their food.[397] The crisis in Ukraine has created an atmosphere of fear fueled by economic hardship and the potential of increased unemployment.[398] Former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb (2014-2015) suggested that "a 3% shrinkage in the Russian economy, would cause a 0.5% fall in the Finnish GNP."[399]

Other policy-makers argue that Russia's increased assertiveness, leading to a destabilization of European security, could shift Finland's long-standing position of neutrality to one of alliance.[400] Specifically, continued Russian violations of Finnish air and sea space, or an increase in the number of Russian troops along its European border, could be perceived by Finns as a deliberate threat to their security.[401] There have already been documented instances of Russian aircraft violating Finnish airspace not long after the

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[395] BMI Research, "Finland—Q1 2017: Finland Country Risk Report."

[396] Ibid.

[397] Tarja Cronberg, "The NATO Divide in Finnish Politics," European Leadership Network, September 2, 2014, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/the-nato-divide-in-finnish-politics_1836.html.

[398] Ibid.

[399] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 3.

[400] BMI Research, "Finland—Q1 2017: Finland Country Risk Report."

[401] Ibid.

2014 situation in Ukraine erupted.[402] Continued media coverage of such actions could actually sway public opinion, affecting the government's stance on NATO membership.[403]

By using the media as an actor, a state can mobilize a population to behave in a certain way through its influence on public opinion.[404] With this concept in mind, continued coverage of Russia's aggressive behavior could legitimize the actual threat that Russia poses to Finland, so much so that Finns might feel compelled to join a military coalition (i.e. NATO) in order to guarantee their safety and security. The Finnish government would then have to respond to those perceived threats, perhaps proposing a referendum on the NATO issue and executing the results of that vote accordingly. Interestingly, President Niinistö made it clear that Finland has not ruled out the possibility of joining NATO sometime in the future.[405] It has significantly increased its defense budget in response to Russia's belligerent actions.[406] The buildup of its national defense could be a deterrent against Russia's use of force.[407] Much like Russia and Sweden, Finland is currently only part of NATO's Partnership for Peace.[408] However, following Russia's aggressive behavior in Ukraine, Finland has not dismissed the idea of becoming a full-fledged member. According to the President, it would be up to the Finnish people to decide via a referendum,[409] though no additional steps in that direction have currently taken place.

Finland's struggle to make a decision pertaining to NATO might also be rooted in Russia's efforts to conduct a media crusade designed to undermine Finland's endeavors to join the alliance. In an attempt to gain popular support among Finland's citizens, Russia has revamped its efforts to wage an information campaign. Finland has reported an increase

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[402] Ibid.

[403] Ibid.

[404] Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, (2008): 52, doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132.

[405] BMI Research, "Finland—Q1 2017: Finland Country Risk Report."

[406] Ibid.

[407] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 4.

[408] BMI Research, "Finland—Q1 2017: Finland Country Risk Report."

[409] Kratinová, "Changing Public Opinion in Finland on NATO Membership in the Context of Ukrainian Crisis," 73.

in Russia's use of media propaganda, primarily via news outlets, to sway Finnish public opinion.[410] In fact, according to an author and researcher at the Finnish Defense Forces in Helsinki, Saara Jantunen, "'Public opinion is deeply divided, making Finland a prime target for a campaign by Russia.'"[411] The basic Russian narrative does not vary much and includes criticizing the Finnish government, questioning the grounds under which the country gained independence almost 100 years ago, encouraging cynicism about the effectiveness of the EU, making threats over NATO membership, and questioning the West's representation of facts.[412] Other recent Russian media reports have surfaced accusing the Finnish of being prejudiced against ethnic Russians living in Finland: hampering Russo-Finnish citizens from joining the military or serving in state-run positions and thwarting those dual citizens' attempts to own land located near military bases.[413] Such rhetoric instigates discord, welcomes doubt, and spurs the pro-Kremlin propaganda machine onward.

Russia is also relying on social media to conduct its information operations. Some analysts contend that the most dangerous aspect of Finnish social media's favorable views towards Moscow is Russia's continued narrative that the Finnish have somehow already pledged to stay out of NATO.[414] If Finland ever did decide to join NATO, however, Russia's concocted story would nicely play into its hands, painting Finnish government elites as traitors, which could, in turn, mobilize the public against the state.[415] In the meantime, Russia's media has found some loyal supporters among the Finnish citizenry. Those with sympathetic views towards the Kremlin have possibly even collaborated with

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[410] Paul D. Shinkman, "NATO's 'Northern Flank' Vulnerable to Russia," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 3, 2016, https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-11-03/natos-northern-flank-vulnerable-to-russia.

[411] Higgins, "Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation."

[412] Ibid.

[413] Reid Standish, "Why is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?" *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/why-is-finland-able-to-fend-off-putins-information-war/.

[414] "News Analysis: Finns Valuing Ties with Russia Risk Being Labelled as Participating in 'Information War,'" *Xinhua General News Service*, October 18, 2015, https://www.nexis.com/results/enhdocview.do?docLinkInd=true&ersKey=23_T25995218316&format=GNBFI&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=0_T25995398486&backKey=20_T25995398487&csi=8078&docNo=33&fromDocPreview=true&scrollToPosition=18091.

[415] Ibid.

various Russian sources, spreading misinformation and biased propaganda.[416] Finland's administrators are concerned that such actions could fuel polarization among the Finnish population.[417]

In addition to security considerations, Finland might also seek NATO membership for other reasons. Johan Eellend, a scholar of Eurasian studies, deduced another stipulation to Finland's joining NATO—Sweden. Despite Russia's efforts to create aggressive barriers preventing Finland from entering the alliance, Finland cannot ignore its Swedish counterpart.[418] The Finnish are too reliant on their shared historical and cultural ties with Sweden, so much so that they would not risk going against the grain and perhaps jeopardizing their relations with the Swedes.[419] In fact, public opinion suggests that, given the two states' commonalities—shared history, geographic proximity, and mutual cooperation—they would either both join or stay out of NATO.[420] Any alternative risks upsetting the current European balance. If Finland were to join but not Sweden, NATO would gain another country not easily accessible.[421] If Sweden were to join but not Finland, the decision would potentially give Russia a false sense of Finnish passivity.[422] Also noteworthy are Swedish security police reports that hint at Russia's external operations influencing public opinion on the matter, which suggest that Finland may be experiencing a similar problem.[423]

As with Finland, Sweden's public opinion on joining NATO changed after Russia's annexation of Crimea.[424] In Sweden, at least as of 2016, those in favor of a NATO alliance

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[416] Ibid.

[417] Ibid.

[418] Johan Eellend, "Friends, But Not Allies: Finland, Sweden, and NATO in the Baltic Sea," *Eurasia Review*, June 14, 2016, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=5K0W-P1W1-JDJN-60RJ&csi=8399&oc=00240&perma=true.

[419] Ibid.

[420] Ibid.

[421] Ibid.

[422] Ibid.

[423] Ibid.

[424] Ibid.

outnumbered those against it.[425] The Finnish remain more skeptical, but do acknowledge the protection that NATO can offer in a region plagued by uncertainty.[426] Nevertheless, there is a mutual understanding between the countries that a looming Russian threat to the Baltic Sea may be on the horizon, necessitating a defense that is well suited to joint cooperation.[427]

Still, some observers have criticized Finland's failure to take a more hardline approach towards Russia's transgressions, which was reminiscent of Finland's Cold War behavior, nicknamed "neo-Finlandization."[428] As a side note, former statesmen, such as Henry Kissinger, often applied this term to Ukraine, specifically calling on Ukraine to take a page out of Finland's playbook with regards to how it conducts its foreign policy: Finland remains unquestionably independent, yet has managed to tread the line of cooperation with the West while avoiding any overt hostility to Russia.[429] Ultimately, Finland echoed the EU's disapproval of Russia's invasion, taking great precaution not to deliberately antagonize the Kremlin.[430]

So why does Russia need to constantly provoke a reaction by providing an altered and skewed account of events? Most journalists can agree that Russia is desperate to reassert its role as a major player in the international community.[431] By openly throwing disinformation out into the public sphere, the hope is that some of it might actually stick. Russia is notorious for preying on states that enjoy freedom of the press.[432] Its perceived intentions are to deliberately bombard various media outlets with ideas that promote its *modus operandi*. Yet, some experts would argue that Russia acts out of fear—fear that is deeply rooted in an aversion of change to the security environment, which could include

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[425] Ibid.

[426] Ibid.

[427] Ibid.

[428] Järvenpää, "Finland in 2014: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 2.

[429] Ibid.

[430] Ibid.

[431] Shinkman, "NATO's 'Northern Flank' Vulnerable to Russia."

[432] Ibid.

Finland and Sweden joining NATO or the organization's encroachment into the Baltic peninsula.[433]

B. CONCLUSION

Through its various channels, Russia has promulgated a message of the godless West in the hopes of undermining institutions like the EU and NATO, which it seeks to divide and discredit. RT, in particular, has provided around-the-clock coverage of Western politicians whose ideas and policies intersect with Moscow's storyline—the West's hypocrisy in meddling in international affairs (i.e., Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, etc.) and NATO's irrelevance in today's post-Cold War.[434] A Russia expert at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Igor Sutyagin, perfectly summarized the extent of Russia's influence in Europe: "The Russian campaign exists in a grey area, operating covertly—and often legally—to avoid political blowback, but with the clear aim of weakening Western will to fight, maturing doubts over NATO, the EU, Trident and economic sanctions."[435] The Western sanctions on Russia only further inflame Putin's information campaign. The West has now become an additional scapegoat for the domestic hardships the Russian people endure. As European analysts Iana Dreyer and Nicu Popescu emphasize, "…the worse the economic pressure, the more the Kremlin's propaganda will drum home the message that it is the Evil West, denying Russia its holy Crimean birthright, that is to blame."[436]

Ultimately, Russia's push to spread disinformation encompasses a range of modalities from fake news to conspiracy theories and everything in between, with the goal of eroding the general public's belief in both its institutions and government.[437] Russia has also employed "troll armies" to intimidate members of academia and reporters,

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[433] Ibid.

[434] Peter Foster, "Russia Accused of Clandestine Funding of European Parties as U.S. Conducts Major Review of Vladimir Putin's Strategy," *Telegraph*, January 16, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12103602/America-to-investigate-Russian-meddling-in-EU.html.

[435] Ibid.

[436] Iana Dreyer and Nicu Popescu, "Do Sanctions against Russia Work?" European Union Institute for Security Studies, December 12, 2014, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_35_Russia_sanctions.pdf.

[437] Standish, "Why is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?"

commandeered Twitter accounts, and promoted pro-Kremlin NGOs, all aimed at influencing policy-making within European political spheres.[438] While Russia has not shied away from unleashing its propaganda campaign on the whole of Europe, certain countries seem to be facing the majority of its wrath. Such is the case with Germany, which appears to be its primary target. As former Finnish ambassador to Moscow, René Nyberg explained, concerning weakening European resolve, "The real intensity is Germany…Merkel is the main course…We're [Finland] just a side dish."[439]

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's push to undermine Europe's power has resulted in unusually close ties to far-right parties. Aligning with populist groups that espouse extreme ideals— traditionally rooted in anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, and "us" versus "them" rhetoric—has created an exploitable window of opportunity for Russia. In France, Putin struck up a curious relationship with members of the Front Nationale.[440] In Germany, Putin provided financial support to a neo-Nazi group called National Democratic Party.[441] Close ties to Finnish populist entities were not as easy to come by. According to a Hungarian think tank, the Political Capital Institute, Russia's ability to influence far-right groups in European countries that share a border with its larger neighbor is restrained due to historical tensions.[442] In states like Finland, nationalism (a movement often employed by extreme political groups) is the antithesis of a pro-Russian philosophy and, therefore, the two are not compatible.[443] While Germany is wary of Moscow's future entanglements, France is currently poised to renew basic socio-economic ties with the Kremlin, so long as they do not override previous European agreements. Notwithstanding, both Germany and France have emerged from the Ukraine crisis fully committed to shaping Europe's future by thwarting Russia's influence within the continent, realizing that a united front set on

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[438] Jon Henley, "Russia Waging Information War Against Sweden, Study Finds," *Guardian*, January 11, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/11/russia-waging-information-war-in-sweden-study-finds.

[439] Ibid.

[440] Dalibor Rohac, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 10.

[441] Dan Mahaffee, "How Dangerous is Vladimir Putin?" *The International Economy*, Winter 2015, 17.

[442] Marlene Laruelle, "Dangerous Liaisons," in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 16.

[443] Ibid.

preserving the integrity of supranational organizations is stronger and less risky than exclusively bilateral relations.

While Finland's policy of non-alignment has served it well throughout much of its post-World War II history, current events in Ukraine could steer Finland away from the status quo, reshaping its relationship with Russia. Overall, the results show that the general public of Finland is not yet ready to take on the responsibilities associated with joining NATO. Even though Russia's actions have created a heightened sense of insecurity, its overt aggression is not currently enough of an impetus to radically change Finland's existing state of affairs.

Nevertheless, the events surrounding the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and Russia's attempts to execute an effective propaganda campaign did, at least somewhat, influence Finnish attitudes in considering NATO membership. However, unlike the more pro-Russian populations of the near-abroad, it seems to have backfired in Finland. It is fair to say that the Finns started to seriously think about their safety and security, understanding the gravitas of the situation Russia created. Additionally, Finland's current president, eager to re-stabilize the region's economic and political atmosphere, hopes to take on a more proactive role, seeking a resolution to the Ukrainian crisis through his continued negotiations with Putin.[444] At least in the near future, Finland may continue to stay the course, maintaining the status quo.

[444] Reuters, "Finland's Niinisto to Putin: Sanctions Bite Both, Let's Discuss Ukraine."

IV. CONCLUSION

A. SO, IS RUSSIA WINNING THE PROPAGANDA WAR?

This thesis examined the extent of Russia's influence in its near-abroad and in Europe. The intent of the research was to conduct a six-country case study across two different regions, creating a more comprehensive approach to the question that would reveal the actual magnitude of Moscow's reach. As the analysis has revealed, the answer to whether Putin is winning the propaganda war regarding Ukraine is not as clear cut. In short, it depends. While this response may seem initially inadequate, I will explain the rationale that has led me to this conclusion and how parsing the different factors involved may provide some guidelines for more effective Western responses.

In the introduction, I hypothesized that a country's geography would be critical to determining whether Putin had effectively carried out his information operations in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. Specifically, the closer a state's proximity to the Russian Federation (i.e., shared borders), the greater the susceptibility to the Kremlin's media campaign would be. Since all three countries in Russia's near-abroad (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia) share a border with their larger neighbor, the results of whether their people bought into Moscow's rhetoric went beyond purely territorial factors, but rather, pointed to each of the country's political and economic factors. Examining public opinion surveys revealed that Russia's media campaign surrounding the events in Ukraine mostly affected Belarus and Kazakhstan. Latvia's ties to its other Baltic nation-states as well as its role in NATO seems to have prevented Moscow from reaching its desired effect in its media campaign within Latvia. Further abroad, despite its best efforts, Russia's narrative of justification has held only marginal weight among the European countries of France, Germany, and Finland. Despite relying on its close-knit relationship with pro-Russian political parties and other leaders in these countries, Russia failed to gain a decisive victory in winning over the hearts and minds of the citizens within these respective states, proving that regional proximity to Russia (as is the case with Finland) is not a defining characteristic with respect to the success of the Kremlin's propaganda war.

Chapter II examined the effects of Russia's propaganda, regarding Ukraine, on its near-abroad. Belarus has remained faithful to its Soviet origin and has generally supported Russia's actions in Ukraine. Most Belarusians buy into the narrative that Russia portrays via Russian channels and other social networks. Recognizing that Moscow needs Belarus, however, the latter is no hurry to be relegated to the status of "Russia's little brother," and, therefore, keeps a line of communication open with the West. Having suffered a great blow to their economy as a result of the sanctions, Russia has sought to maintain strong ties with its former protectorate. Belarus has shown that it is willing to oblige, as long as it stands to gain financially from the partnership, signaling that Russia's influence runs deep but that Minsk's support remains contingent on economics.

Kazakhstan is also at the mercy of the Russian propaganda machine. While liberal-minded voices do exist among Kazakhs, they are few and far between, primarily isolated to the younger generations. Unwilling to divorce itself from its Soviet heritage and home to a relatively large ethnic Russian minority, Kazakhstan voluntarily subjects itself to the Kremlin's false narrative. An overwhelming majority of the population supports Russia's decision to use force in Ukraine (a necessity, they claim, given the incompetence of the Ukrainian government to properly run its state's affairs) and recognizes the Crimean referendum as legitimate. Nazarbayev's control of institutions mimics Putin's, highlighting the fact that the two have a shared history of authoritarianism, which is key to prolonging their good neighbor relations.

Latvia has proven to be the most critical of states in Russia's near-abroad as pertains to Moscow's influence. With a sizable ethnic Russian minority, Latvia's political scene has grown increasingly divided. Some members of the Saeima have proved to be loyalists of the Russian regime. There is a possibility that the pro-Russian political group, Harmony, could be the victor in the upcoming Latvian parliamentary election, raising the general public's concerns over Russia's possible meddling in state affairs. Currently, there is a palpable divide between the Latvian citizenry and their government officials. The former have been outspoken against Putin's transgressions in Ukraine and Crimea while certain representatives in the latter group have been more reluctant to condemn Russia's actions. That reluctance has fueled a level of distrust towards Latvia's own leaders, while

strengthening the populace's steadfastness in the fight against Russia's utilization of hybrid tactics. Moreover, there is only so much anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric that Latvia, as a member of NATO, can tolerate. Russian propaganda continues to strike at the very heart of the Latvian social center, playing on the supposed mistreatment of ethnic Russians residing in the region. Russia also seeks to undermine Latvia's political sector, relying on candidates who share Russia's worldview to gain a foothold in Latvia's government. Overall, however, Russia's attempts have fallen short, failing to fundamentally change the minds of Latvian citizens and the majority of their leaders, at least for the time being.

Chapter III analyzed the scope of Russia's influence concerning the Ukraine crisis in Western (non-former Soviet) Europe. Here, Russian propaganda efforts to undermine the political sphere have largely failed. While Russia has found common ground with the likes of far-right political parties, its influence remains curbed by the general populations. The extent of its successful manipulation lies within the minority communities of Russian-speakers or political conspirators. In France, Germany, and Finland, public opinion polls demonstrate that the people are resolutely opposed to Russia's recent actions. Moreover, Russia's attempts to launch more television stations and increase their viewership in Europe has been greeted with minimal returns, and even suspicion. The Finnish, especially, pride themselves on being well-educated and, therefore, not easily manipulated by foreign media efforts. A recent study done by STRATCOM, which found that "Russia is not a trusted source of information in the Baltic States, Finland, Sweden, except among Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic States,"[445] corroborates this outlook. The governments of France, Germany, and Finland apparently will not be deterred in their fight against Russia's propaganda war. As of today, France and Germany are committed in their resolve to building a more robust and unified EU, ready to fend off Russia's attempts to destabilize such organizations. Consequently, while Finland's future membership into NATO remains uncertain, Finland is likely to continue to combat Putin's information operations. Therefore, I tend to agree with other skeptics, like Russian expert M. Galeotti, about Russia's inability to wage an effective information war on Western populations. Galeotti

[445] Martin N. Murphy, *Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe*, SR-184, (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2016), http://report.heritage.org/sr184, 103.

states: "Too much is often made of the alleged influence of the English-language Sputnik news agency and RT television channel, or even of the online trolling and disinformation campaign. Evidence that they actually changed minds—rather than just pandered to existing prejudices—is still lacking."[446]

B. IN WHAT WAYS IS RUSSIA WINNING THE PROPAGANDA WAR?

While I have established the degree to which Putin has been able to execute his media campaign, it is equally important to point out the ways in which Moscow's attempts to influence have been successful. Bradley Jardine seems to share my conclusions about Russia's propaganda war. According to Jardine, Central Asia is the last region where Russia's propaganda holds any weight.[447] Kazakhstan is among the territories that have had a negative response to the U.S.'s foreign policy concerning Ukraine and Crimea.[448] It also holds some of the highest approval ratings for Russia and its subsequent actions.[449] While Russia has managed to effectively control its Central Asian audience through its disinformation campaign, journalist Casey Michel in Jardine's piece suggests that Russia's success may be short-lived: "Check your facts, check your sources, and then present it in an unbiased manner. Russian media does not, and that is to the Russian media's eventual detriment."[450]

Other scholars, like Martin Murphy, give Russia's ability to execute a successful information campaign a bit more credence. He asserts that Russia has brought back the concept of total war to Europe through its ability to employ both conventional and nonconventional methods of warfare.[451] It prefers to rely on the latter, focusing on fear to

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[446] *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, ISBN 978–9934-564-25-3, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), https://www.stratcomcoe.org/final_nb_report_14.03.2018.pdf, 83. As cited in M. Galeotti, "How Putin could yet Save Britain from Brexit," *Guardian*, Nov 2, 2017.

[447] Bradley Jardine, "Russia's Media Offensive in Central Asia," *Diplomat*, June 30, 2015, https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/russias-media-offensive-in-central-asia/.

[448] Ibid.

[449] Ibid.

[450] Ibid.

[451] Murphy, *Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe*, 8.

intimidate its targets and achieve its ultimate goals—dominance in politics, economics, information, and cyber.[452] It is then, perhaps, Russia's unpredictability that makes it so dangerous: its capability to use any of the tools at its disposal, publicly towing the line of international decrees but privately employing methods that clearly break those agreements.

Murphy then goes on to explain how Moscow launched a successful information war as events in Ukraine unfolded. Russia controls many of the media outlets within Ukraine and abroad, which meant the pro-Russian narrative was fairly easy to disseminate.[453] Additionally, Murphy mentions how Russia's operation was "successful at all levels in confusing and isolating defensive forces; the relentless denial program succeeded in sowing doubts about Ukrainian claims while meshing with Western reluctance to revise widely held opinions about Russia as an economic and political partner; political leaders and commentators in many countries found it difficult to acknowledge that a member of the G-8 was willing to tear up international norms and defy Western good opinion."[454] However, the characteristics that made Russia's immediate information campaign effective, at least locally, may not necessarily be applied to future scenarios.[455]

In an attempt to win the propaganda campaign, Putin needed to outplay his Western neighbors. He was not reinventing the wheel, just taking the basic principles of media networks in the West and applying them to the Russian state-run versions. Putin's regime, relying on the free flow of information, was free to convey its version of the truth.[456] The progression made in information technology helped foment that change, essentially transforming the way the world viewed news and facts.[457] In an interview, Putin's press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, elaborated on how a Twitter message could now reach hundreds

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[452] Ibid.

[453] Ibid., 9.

[454] Ibid., 9. As cited in Keir Giles, "Russia's Hybrid War: A Success in Propaganda," German Federal Academy for Security Policy Working Paper No. 1/2015, February 18, 2015, pp. 3–5, https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier_sicherheitspolitik_1_2015.pdf (accessed May 26, 2016).

[455] Murphy, *Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe*, 9.

[456] Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War."

[457] Ibid.

of millions across the globe in the matter of seconds.[458] It should be noted that media before the Internet was generally limited to a national audience alone, as broadcasts and newspapers had a limited reach; this made domestic propaganda easier, but foreign propaganda harder, at least without influential external allies, which were rare in the communist days. Today, the ability to "go viral" or readily address a crowd attracts a following regardless of the message. While propaganda in its various forms has existed throughout history, we are perhaps more susceptible to it now than we have ever been because of the Internet's ability to rapidly transmit information globally, with or without solid factual sources. Nevertheless, governments attempting to promote a specific agenda or provide a revisionist view of history will continue to bombard those willing to listen, and Putin's Russia is no exception. Arguably, the combination of technological advancements in the cyber realm have created the perfect environment for exploitation and audience manipulation. The information campaign knows no bounds, and its accessibility provides the medium for juxtaposing arguments, clashing interests, and conducting a possible all-out media war.[459] It cements a new reality whereby ideas shared through several outlets in a relatively short amount of time can galvanize a population into action. Consequently, Putin's propaganda has not yet managed to achieve quite this level of influence. Despite Russia's best efforts to sway public opinion, its propaganda campaign has failed to bring a resounding victory to the realm of information operations.

C. HOW TO COMBAT THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

There are limits to Russia's soft power. It becomes a matter of determining what those are and exposing them. For example, as previously mentioned, Putin publicly deplores fascists and accuses the Ukrainian government of being infiltrated by them. Yet, he does not hesitate to align with Western right-wing populist groups that support his cause, a contradiction, given the fact that he funds those he apparently abhors. The United States would also be wise not to sell short Europe's relative strength, as it is fully capable of fighting off an anti-Western narrative, which is why Putin's relations with such groups

[458] Ibid.

[459] Ibid.

should not be over-emphasized.[460] Even companies that seem in favor of advancing Russian interests are unlikely to do so at the expense of their European homeland.[461]

As Lo argues, Europe and the United States need to tap into their own ability to influence people, convincing Russians that the Western way is better.[462] Such strides are already underway, perhaps, unconsciously. The West need only look at Russia's current social class distribution. The majority of its middle class has already embraced the Western lifestyle, resulting in a brain drain of many young and talented individuals to Europe and the United States.[463] Many of Russia's elites already send their children to schools abroad, buy property in Western countries, and invest millions of dollars into their banking systems.[464] As Lo rightfully suggests: "In doing so, they act on the tacit—but unmistakable—assumption that the 'West is best.'"[465] By exposing these types of inconsistencies in Putin's rhetoric towards the West, governments would be better able to counter his hypocrisy. In turn, those regions potentially affected by Putin's propaganda campaign can begin to shield themselves from its impact.

It is also worth taking a closer look at a country like Finland, a territory often targeted by the Kremlin's propaganda, but which has been taking some imperative steps to combat Russia's pervasive media campaign. By talking about these efforts publicly, they are making their population more aware of Russia's devious intentions.[466] For the most part, Finland resists Moscow's distortions of the truth. Markku Mantila, the head of the Finnish prime minister's communications department, insists that it is the highly educated nature of the Finnish population that makes Russia's attempts less effective.[467] In August 2014, Finnish authorities successfully denied Voice of Russia a license for a local radio

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[460] Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 193.

[461] Ibid., 194.

[462] Ibid., 224.

[463] Ibid., 198.

[464] Ibid.

[465] Ibid.

[466] Shinkman, "NATO's 'Northern Flank' Vulnerable to Russia."

[467] Standish, "Why is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?"

station.[468] Knowing full well the station's intentions, the Finns were not willing to entertain the prospect of even being subjected to its content. Also worth considering is that Finland only has a small population of Russian speakers, which could mean that Putin's message does not have the necessary bandwidth to reach its intended audience. In fact, in March 2016, the Finnish branch of Russian-operated Sputnik shut down after it was not able to garner enough followers.[469] While the size of ethnic Russian concentrations should be considered, countries should not fail to use countermeasures in order to reassure and protect those populations. In regions like the Baltic states, with large Russo minorities, governments are faced with the especially difficult task of trying to influence those populations. They should tread carefully, as inflicting bans on Russian content or platforms is often faced with backlash, which only furthers the Kremlin's disinformation attack.[470] To counter possible negative reactions, governments could use certain stopgap measures before handing out harsher punishments. For example, they could introduce a system of rigorous inspections, whereby information is fact checked before being broadcasted through open channels. If networks are found in violation of falsifying data, they will be fined. After the third strike, the station could be permanently banned from the country.

Finland has made several other attempts to limit Russia's influence. In January 2016, President Niinistö mandated that 100 civil servants attend a training course focused on the spread of false information—what it is and how to spot it.[471] Created by the director of Global Engagement at Harvard University, Jed Willard, the program combined Finnish citizens with administrators and forced them to use critical thinking, personal experiences, and government input to create a public diplomacy plan that could effectively counter foreign attempts to weaken their institutions and spread fallacies.[472] Enhanced efforts to create programs for the general public to educate themselves on disinformation operations

[468] Higgins, "Effort to Expose Russia's 'Troll Army' Draws Vicious Retaliation."

[469] Standish, "Why is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin's Information War?"

[470] Ibid.

[471] Ibid.

[472] Ibid.

presents an opportunity for open dialogue, awareness, and solutions concerning these issues.

D. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S. AND EUROPE

Russia continues to try its hand at subverting Western policies and institutions. Having a well-funded media network that has successfully operated for over two decades now has helped the Kremlin master the art of propaganda.[473] Plausible deniability, playing on the sympathies of Russophiles, and the rampant spread of disinformation have all contributed to its effectiveness. Moscow has used questionable means to launch hybrid warfare, specifically focusing on information operations to achieve its aims. Now that the United States and Europe are fully aware of its intentions, they should act fast to counter its effects.

The U.S. response to Russia's propaganda machine relies on a committed, holistic approach if it is to succeed in combating this asymmetric style of warfare. Given that Putin has taken aggressive measures to close off foreign communication channels within Russia, a U.S. attempt to launch a counternarrative campaign in Russia will do little to effect change.[474] Some of Russia's social media outlets, however, remain open to receiving independent sources through their system of social networking.[475] Heather Conley suggests utilizing RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty to strengthen these informal networks, while recognizing that their influence would be limited largely to the urban population as opposed to the whole of Russia.[476]

Russia's strength in executing new generation warfare (NGW) lies in its ability to exploit the U.S.'s weaknesses and indecisiveness.[477] As Murphy indicates, "Failure to confront Russian opportunism will validate Putin's approach. Russia is a canny opponent. It will learn from the successes and failures of its recent campaigns and the West's

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[473] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 24.

[474] Ibid.

[475] Ibid.

[476] Ibid.

[477] Murphy, *Understanding Russia's Concept for Total War in Europe*, 10.

response…and is likely to use and refine NGW to accomplish its objectives."[478] He goes on to state that the United States must employ its current resources using methods that are covert and unpredictable, relying on a "whole of government" approach across all spectrums where conflict is likely to occur.[479] The first step should be in revamping the National Security Act of 1947 to allow for more flexible responses to an adversary's multidimensional attacks.[480] To begin with, there needs to be a clearer outline representing the boundaries in cyberspace—what constitutes an attack and under what conditions a counter response is warranted. It is in this sphere where much of the unconventional tactics take place and have become increasingly difficult to combat without clear guidance. Murphy also advocates that the concept of deterrence (traditionally applied to nuclear weapons) be reevaluated and applied to countermeasures aimed at enemy engagements shy of war.[481]

Europe has already made progress in debunking the Kremlin's propaganda. In September 2015, member states of the EU initiated the East Stratcom task force, designed to further the "bloc's values and policies in the 'Eastern neighborhood.'"[482] It also set out to educate the public on Russia's deceptive techniques centered around information operations, spreading awareness, and increasing EU readiness in the form of response times.[483] In an effort to anticipate Russia's future actions, European leaders sought additional means to "improve media literacy, raise awareness, promote independent and investigative journalism, and revise the EU audiovisual directive so as to mandate national regulators to enforce zero tolerance of hate speech."[484] There was also added emphasis placed on the need for transparency in matters pertaining to media ownership and sources

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[478] Ibid., 11.

[479] Ibid.

[480] Ibid.

[481] Ibid.

[482] Rikard Jozwiak, "EU Issues Call to Action to Combat Russian 'Propaganda,'" RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, January 17, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/european-commission-russia-disinformation-propaganda-call-to-action/28981394.html.

[483] Ibid.

[484] Ibid.

of funding for political parties.[485] Just recently, in January of 2018, one of the European Commission's subject matter expert groups met to discuss the implementation of policies relating to fake news, by "defining the roles and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders and formulating recommendations."[486]

As victims of Putin's narratives, perhaps it is time that the United States and Europe regained each other's trust by uniting in a joint venture directed at combatting his version of the facts. Heather Conley seems to agree and advocates for a concerted effort between the United States and Europe in their fight against Russia's propaganda war. She suggests that the United States, with the backing of Europe, lead an initiative aimed at eradicating "Russian economic influence in Europe."[487] By rooting out corruption and kleptocracy, the U.S. can rely on one of its leading soft power mechanisms to strike Moscow where it is weakest.[488] Furthermore, greater measures should be taken to implement more stringent regulations on media outlets broadcasting biased content, doling out penalties or revoking licenses to those networks found in violation.[489] Such undertakings could act as deterrents, while providing the necessary fortitude to combat Putin's campaign.[490] As Conley, who befittingly encapsulates the collective task of battling Russia's media war, argues: "We the United States and Europe can strengthen the rule of law and transparency and improve the health in our democracies to fight against this influence. It is our vigilance and our transparency that is needed the most."[491] In a time when people are overly reliant on the media, together the United States and Europe could aim to achieve a remedy from the manipulative elements of Russia's information war.

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[485] Ibid.

[486] Ibid.

[487] Conley, "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe," 24.

[488] Ibid.

[489] Ibid.

[490] Ibid.

[491] Ibid.

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