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Russia's Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey

Implications for the United States

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This Perspective assesses some of the ways in which Russia has used media and information operations to support its foreign policy goals related to Turkey—an issue that has received little attention from officials and analysts. It also comments on the related implications for the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. It describes how Russian media have sought to undermine Turkey's political and security cooperation with the United States and Europe by exacerbating mutual skepticism and highlighting policy differences. In Turkey, Russian media have also contributed to anti-American discourse and have reinforced and informed the Turkish government's own propaganda pursuits.

This analysis examines Russian media responses to three significant events in Turkey: (1) Turkey's November 2015 shootdown of a Russian military aircraft, (2) the July 2016 Turkish coup attempt, and (3) the December 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador. For several reasons, the analysis focuses on Russian media activities in the aftermath of these specific events instead of providing a broader survey. First, these three events represent key moments in the Russia-Turkey relationship. Russian media responses to these events illuminate the broader context of Russian foreign policy response, and examining them helps illustrate overall Russian goals and methods. Furthermore, the Russian media efforts following each of these three events are revealing and representative examples of different Russian propaganda strategies and techniques in practice. Efforts in these cases are all related to pressuring Turkey or creating fissures with the West.

The Russian media sources that informed this assessment include Turkey-related Internet material produced by Russian state-supported media outlets *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik* (which has a Turkish-language edition), as well as reports from other Russian broadcasts and Russia-based websites. The specific materials consulted here were identified by examining these sources' coverage following each of the major events mentioned.

Particular attention went toward articles and reports that non-Russian sources had flagged as false or misleading, as well as items that achieved prominence through distribution beyond their original source—for example, those that gained traction on social media or inspired further media coverage.

In the aftermath of each event in Turkey, Russian media efforts (defined here as approaches to crafting and disseminating narratives) took the form of propaganda. This propaganda (defined here as intentionally spread ideas, information, or claims, particularly of a biased or misleading nature, that advance a desired message or messages)[1] involved a variety of strategies and techniques. Russian media did not employ just one strategy or technique exclusively in each case but rather used multiple, overlapping tools in combination. Nevertheless, Russian media efforts following each of the three events, respectively, exemplify different primary propaganda strategies. The three primary strategies—amplification of genuine uncertainty, creation of opportunistic fabrications, and use of multiple contradictory narratives—are explained as follows in relation to the specific events in which Russian media emphasized them:

- **Amplification of genuine uncertainty** involves taking up a topic that credible sources have identified as a legitimate, unresolved question. It entails adding a false claim to the controversy to persuade audiences that the new claim is a compelling, objective continuation of the debate already occuring in trustworthy information sources. This approach is a concerted influence effort that aims to attract attention. Moreover, it seeks to convince audiences that the new claim might be true and that it therefore merits further discussion. Russian media's allegations of Turkish sponsorship of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after the downing of the Russian plane demonstrate this propaganda strategy.
- **Opportunistic fabrications** are quick and deliberate responses to events that falsely interpret the events that actually took place. This is different from amplification of genuine uncertainty, because the false narratives are more tactical: They do not necessarily build on past reporting or attempt to convince audiences of their veracity; rather, they just inject more fabrications into an environment full of falsehoods and suspicion. This further contributes to a situation in which people do not know what to believe. This approach aims to confuse audiences and to fuel overall distrust of information sources. As Peter Pomerantsev has noted regarding Russian propaganda, "it's not so much an information war, but a war on information."[2] Russian media's generation of anti-U.S. conspiracy theories and disinformation after the Turkish coup attempt demonstrate this propaganda strategy.
- **Multiple contradictory narratives** are inconsistent accounts or explanations that each appeal to a different audience. These narratives may be mutually exclusive, but they are still offered simultaneously to appeal to audiences of various persua-

Russian media efforts exemplify different primary propaganda strategies: amplification of genuine uncertainty, creation of opportunistic fabrications, and use of multiple contradictory narratives.

sions and to make it seem as if the media source has carefully considered many possibilities. This strategy may be meant to influence audiences to feel that the desired conclusions are their own and prompt them to doubt the veracity of contrary information. The aim may be to distract audiences or dissuade them from believing an account or explanation that is *not* offered as part of the array of narratives. Russian media's promotion of various insinuations of blame after the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey demonstrate this propaganda strategy.

Russian media efforts across all three cases, regardless of the propaganda strategy employed, each supported overall Russian foreign policy aims as related to Turkey. The principal Russian foreign policy objectives that media efforts have supported include[3]

- undermining NATO and fomenting mutual suspicion between Turkey and its Western allies, particularly the United States and the European Union
- enlisting Ankara's support and impeding its opposition to Russian actions in Eurasia and the Middle East
- influencing Turkish internal political developments to make Turkey a more compliant partner.

Russian propaganda is a component of a broader, integrated Russian pursuit of these objectives and of general leverage and advantage. As a result, this analysis considers new media efforts that correspond with these broader Russian pursuits to be part of information operations.[4]

The overall purpose of this piece is to promote understanding of how Russia uses media tools to pursue its Turkey-related goals. This assessment does not attempt to determine whether such media activities were successful in influencing audiences.[5] Rather, it takes the viewpoint that recognizing how and why Russia uses these tools is necessary before it will be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of these tools or counteract them. With this in mind, the following sections describe the dynamics of Russian media responses to the three events, highlighting the main propaganda strategy employed in each case, the disinformation techniques used, and the foreign policy objectives being pursued.

Amplification of Existing Uncertainty: Allegations of Turkish Sponsorship of ISIS After Downing of Russian Plane

Following Turkey's November 24, 2015, shootdown of a Russian Su-24 bomber that had entered Turkish airspace, Russian media reports regarding Turkey—which in the months before the incident had been more dispassionate—turned sharply against Turkey.[6] Russian outlets began aggressively crafting narratives that portrayed Turkey and its leaders as supporters of terrorism that funded ISIS through illegal oil purchases.

With these allegations, Russian media employed the propaganda strategy of amplifying a genuine, preexisting uncertainty. Specifically, credible Western and Turkish domestic media sources had earlier questioned Turkey's commitment to counterterrorism, reporting that Ankara was not doing enough to stop foreign fighters from transiting Turkey, that it was failing to crack down on ISIS recruitment in Turkey, and that Turks were making money through transshipment of oil from areas under ISIS control.[7] An April 2015 Congressional Research Service report had found that the situation was complicated: ISIS did engage in oil smuggling

Russian media employed the propaganda strategy of amplifying a genuine, preexisting uncertainty.

through Turkey, but the Turkish government faced risks and difficulties in combating this, and had nevertheless begun to crack down on such operations after 2014.[8] After the plane downing, Russian media exploited, magnified, and added to this legitimate prior discourse and confusion. What was new was a concerted Russian effort to link President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his family to ISIS oil smuggling. The accompanying tone of Russian reporting, which reflected personal grievances against Turkey, was also new.

The new Russian media efforts and tone aligned with other elements of the Russian response to the shootdown. President Vladimir Putin decried the incident as a "stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists."[9] Putin suggested that he saw this act as a personal, as well as a political, affront given the close ties he and Erdoğan had developed over the years, and that Erdoğan's policy in Syria was linked to the Turkish leader's embrace of radical Islam.[10] Russia retaliated against this challenge in several ways. First, it strengthened its air defenses in Syria to deter further hostile actions by Turkish or NATO forces and undertook several shows of force around Syria and Turkey. In addition, it took steps to damage the Turkish economy, including placing an embargo on many Turkish agricultural imports, restricting Russian tourism to Turkey, ending visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, and halting construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline between the two countries.

Alongside these measures, anti-Turkey media efforts in multiple languages called into question Turkey's integrity and membership in NATO, targeted Erdoğan and his family, and glorified Russia. They did so using several disinformation techniques, including employing emotive language,[11] ridiculing, making statements without evidence, surrounding claims with misleading context, and incorporating partial truths via selective use of information and visuals.[12] For example:

- Russian television programs on state channel Rossiya 1 emphasized the theme that Turkish deceit and sponsorship of terrorism disgraced both Turkey and the NATO alliance as a whole.[13] One Rossiya 1 news show "painted Turkey under [Erdoğan] as a country that backs Islamic State, openly allows public calls to jihad, exports damaged and possibly carcinogenic produce to Russia and has purposely unleashed a wave of refugees into Europe as a 'special operation.'"[14]
- An English-language *RT* article on November 25, 2015—among similar *RT* and *Sputnik* reports following the plane incident—speculated that Turkish government officials, as well as Erdoğan's son, Bilal Erdoğan, were personally involved in illegal oil trading.[15] Yet the article offered no actual proof to connect Erdoğan's family with the oil trade. Instead, as context for its claims, the article contained such details as a real October 2014 quote from then–U.S. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen. Cohen had noted that it appeared that some ISIS oil was being resold into Turkey, and that middlemen involved in ISIS oil trade included some who were from Turkey. However, the quote made no suggestion whatsoever of Turkish government complicity. To provide additional context for its accusa-

tions, the *RT* article also included an embedded photo from Twitter claiming to show Bilal Erdoğan in an Istanbul restaurant with a purported Islamic State leader. The photo caption read, "Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son 'BILAL ERDOGAN' with his ISIS brothers."[16] The article also noted: "According to analysts, Russian airstrikes in Syria are disrupting the profitable deals for Turkish middlemen, including Ankara officials."[17]

- Turkish-language *Sputnik* ran an article on December 2, 2015, with the title "Russia: Erdoğan and His Family Directly Involved in ISIS's Illegal Oil Shipment in Syria."[18] The article covered a Russian Defense Ministry news briefing organized by then–Russian Deputy Minister of Defense, Anatoly Antonov. Narrated videos embedded in the text of the article purported to show truck flow across Turkey's border from Iraq and Syria, supposedly proving that ISIS oil was being smuggled to Turkey. Videos also depicted Russian airstrikes as having disrupted ISIS oil trade. Among other quotes, the article text included these remarks from Antonov: "Our goal is not for Erdoğan to resign, that is for the Turkish people to decide," and "Russian journalists are brave enough to tell the truth about Turkey's crimes."[19] In an English-dubbed *RT* video from the briefing embedded in the article, Antonov remarked: "nobody in the West asks the question why the president's son heads one of the leading energy companies and his son in law is the Minister of Energy—what a wonderful family business."[20] Nevertheless, neither the article nor the video provided any actual evidence of Erdoğan's family being involved in illegal oil trade with ISIS. Rather, Antonov urged other journalists to investigate Russia's claims.

Such reports exemplify the broader propaganda approach of amplifying existing uncertainty, because they concentrated their new accusations on a subject that non-Russian media had earlier flagged as an area of true potential concern. International and Turkish outlets had already indicated their interest in and willingness to report on the topic of ISIS oil trade. As a December 2015 *New Yorker* piece pointed out, "The Russian defense ministry might have embarrassed Turkey in any number of accurate ways . . . . Instead, Russia approached the nebulous topic of ISIS oil smuggling with radical specificity."[21] In focusing on this particular area of doubt and confusion, Russian media may have sought to generate curiosity and fuel further discussion beyond just Russian outlets.[22]

Indeed, the allegations did gain traction in Western sources, which helped spread the Russian narrative. For instance, a December 2, 2015, BBC article covered Putin's allegations that Turkey had shot down the Russian plane in order to protect its oil trade. It also described the Russian Defense Ministry's claims that Erdoğan's family conducted oil business with ISIS.[23] Despite

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noting that Russia had not provided direct proof of the allegations, the article gave the Russian claims further publicity. Turkish media and officials also responded to the Russian approach. For example, a *Hurriyet* article, "Putin and Erdoğan's 'ISIS Oil' Spat," reported that each leader was accusing the other of having a connection to ISIS oil sales.[24]

Russian media had also supplied a ready-made, intriguing hook to attract readership by framing the oil smuggling issue as an unsettled controversy. Non-Russian outlets could themselves take advantage of this same hook—and they did so. For example, a *Time* article that ultimately discounted Russian claims (noting that while criminal networks and middlemen were selling oil generated in ISIS-held territories to buyers in Turkey and elsewhere in the region, this illicit trade was not sanctioned by the Turkish government) nevertheless employed the catchy title, "Is Turkey Really Benefiting from Oil Trade with ISIS?"[25]

Accordingly, Russian media efforts after the plane shootdown succeeded in provoking further reports in mainstream European, U.S., and Turkish media sources. Thus, they amplified existing domestic and international discourse that cast doubt on the Turkish government's dedication to counterterrorism and to security—and that by extension questioned its commitment to its public and to its allies.

Media sources and media consumers, meanwhile, may not have been aware of the way in which Russian media was spreading its desired messages by infiltrating their own communication of information. While unwitting dissemination of propaganda is a problem in itself, the proliferation of false narratives through this dissemination could also have wider negative consequences. As noted in prior RAND analysis, the psychology literature on misinformation indicates that for various reasons, "repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads to acceptance."[26] And when "seemingly credible sources disseminate the falsehoods, the messages are even more likely to be accepted."[27] Thus, legitimate news sources' repetition of false information—even if they ultimately acknowledge that the information is false—could have problematic effects, in this case as related to impressions of Turkey and its government.

Opportunistic Fabrications: Anti-U.S. Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation After Turkey's Coup Attempt

After the July 15, 2016, coup attempt in Turkey, Russian media generated anti-U.S. conspiracy theories and disinformation. They did so by contributing opportunistic fabrications to the post-coup environment in which many people, both in Turkey and abroad, did not know what to believe. Though much confusion still surrounds the circumstances of the coup attempt, the view that the United States played some role in it enjoys mainstream acceptance in Turkey among Turks across the political spectrum.[28] A survey following the attempt found that nearly two-thirds of Turks believed that Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim preacher who has lived in the United States since 1999, perpetrated the coup plot,[29] along with his network of followers, who they claim have been infiltrating Turkish state institutions for decades with the ultimate goal of ousting Turkey's government.[30] For many Turks, Gülen's continued presence in the United States fuels suspicion of the United States and feelings of betrayal.[31] Russian media took advantage of this situation.

Russian media responses to the coup were part of a broader context of rapid Russian reactions to the events. Turkish officials

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consistently referred positively to Putin and Russia's nearly immediate expression of solidarity with Turkey's government following the attempt. (The two countries had begun reconciliation a few weeks before the coup attempt, after Erdoğan sent Putin a letter expressing regret over the plane incident.)[32] Unconfirmed reports circulated in Russian media that Russia had even warned Turkey of the coup prior to its unfolding.[33] Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian political scientist and "special representative" of Putin, claimed that "he himself helped save Turkey from the military coup by informing Turkish authorities about some 'unusual activity' in the military July 14, a day before the coup attempt."[34] In contrast, Turkish leaders noted that the United States failed to express support for Turkey's elected government until the day after the coup attempt, as if pausing to see what would happen before reacting.[35] President Barack Obama, they noted, waited even longer to address the coup, and Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Turkey did not occur until more than a month after the events and two weeks after Putin and Erdoğan met in St. Petersburg on August 9 to further advance their bilateral rapprochement.[36] Many Turks—and Russian media—interpreted these delays as evidence of U.S. duplicity and indifference toward its longtime ally.[37]

Within this context, Russian media disseminated conspiracy theories alleging U.S. involvement in Turkey's coup attempt. These conspiracy theories also suggested that the coup may have been related to a desire to undermine Turkish-Russian reconciliation. Two primary instances demonstrate how Russian media used a variety of disinformation techniques to disseminate such theories. The first instance employed false authorship, and the second employed "narrative laundering" in which "a so-called expert of dubious integrity presents false facts or narratives as the truth."[38] Both examples were formatted as if they were credible analysis, and their affiliations with Russia were not immediately apparent. Like the reports following the plane shootdown, these reports also lacked evidence and employed ridicule, emotive language, and false facts.

First, the Moscow-based website *Oriental Review* published an article alleging that the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate was involved in the coup attempt.[39] The piece highlighted supposed good relations between Gülen and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. It falsely claimed to be authored by Arthur Hughes, former U.S. ambassador to Yemen.[40] The article inspired Turkish pro-government newspaper *Akşam* to run the August 30, 2016, headline: "The Patriarchate-CIA-Gülen Alliance."[41] Turkish journalist Mustafa Akyol investigated both the *Oriental Review* and the *Akşam* articles, finding that although *Oriental Review* did remove the original false article at the request of Hughes, "in Turkey the damage was already done. Readers of daily *Akşam*, along with many other conspiracy-obsessed Turks on social media, had

already added to their pre-existing biases against the Patriarchate, 'the Christians,' and the West."[42] Akyol notes the absence of anti-Russian sentiment in the *Akşam* article—in fact, quite the contrary: "After all, the shameful 'news report' in Akşam had carefully underlined that the coup plot was an attempt 'to sabotage Turkish-Russian rapprochement.'"[43]

Second, on August 31, 2016, Moscow-based website *New Eastern Outlook* published an article titled "Top USA National Security Officials Admit Turkey Coup."[44] The piece was widely circulated on Turkish social media.[45] It falsely reported that the late former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had acknowledged U.S. backing of the Turkish coup attempt. Brzezinski supposedly did so through "a Twitter tweet from his own blog," where he had written "a precis of a new article he wrote for The American Interest magazine" that criticized U.S. support of the coup.[46] Akyol again performed a fact-check of the *New Eastern Outlook* article's claim, noting: "These are, of course, very impressive details—until you figure out that the piece is completely fake. There is no such article either on *The American Interest* magazine's website or on Brzezinski's Twitter feed."[47] Nevertheless, the *New Eastern Outlook* article provided material suggesting U.S. meddling in Turkish affairs, a narrative that Turkish social media and Turkish journalists themselves could further spread.[48] In addition, the article added to this narrative that the coup may have been an attempt to undermine Turkey and Russia's restoration of relations. As Akyol also notes, the article highlights that the coup was "launched just days after Erdogan announced a major strategic shift away from NATO and towards Russia."[49] The article goes on to state: "For once, Brzezinski is right. The CIA-Gülen coup d'etat attempt to topple Erdogan after his turn towards rapprochement with Moscow was 'a grave mistake.'"[50] Finally, below the article, the academic and professional qualifications of its author, F. William Engdahl (a frequent *RT* commentator and anti-U.S. conspiracy theorist[51]), are listed as if to suggest the credibility of the article's content and to resemble the format of legitimate commentary columns.

These conspiracy theories alleging U.S. involvement in the coup target Turkish public opinion in an attempt to direct negative attention toward the United States and away from Russia. This influence campaign is being pursued in support of Turkey-Russia cooperation. Such a campaign is necessary because many Turks oppose and have protested Russia's actions in Syria and elsewhere, and many Turks see Russia as a threat to their nation as well.[52] Nevertheless, while not necessarily a result of Russian propaganda efforts, public opinion in Turkey may be shifting in the direction that Russia desires. A recurring poll by Kadir Has University revealed that the percentage of Turks who identified the United States as posing a threat to their country grew from 44.1 percent in 2016 to 66.5 percent in 2017, while the percentage of Turks who

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identified Russia as posing a threat declined from 34.9 percent in 2016 to 18.5 percent in 2017.[53] Though a variety of dynamics were likely involved in this public opinion shift, it provides important context about the environment in which pro-Russian and anti-U.S. propaganda is received in Turkey.

Also important, conspiracy theories alleging U.S. plots have been mainstream in Turkey for decades. While the ability of Russian-origin conspiracy theories to infiltrate Turkish news reports and social media feeds is cause for concern, Turkish-origin anti-U.S. conspiracy theories are often even more creative and compelling than the Russian ones described above. They also have many adherents. As Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy at the United States Naval War College Burak Kadercan points out, "an overwhelming majority of Turkish people—regardless of age, education, economic background, or religious or political beliefs—are conspiracy-theory junkies," and, in Turkey, "Even 'experts' and 'analysts' participate in conspiracy theorizing; in fact, being a successful (read: popular) political analyst in Turkey requires alpha-level skills in constructing or verifying sophisticated conspiracy theories."[54]

This fact can be used by anyone seeking to operationalize public opinion. In the post-coup environment, Erdoğan himself took advantage of popular conspiracy theorizing and the related anti-American sentiments among the Turkish people to fortify political support for his leadership.[55] Meanwhile, Turkish journalists continued to invent, pick up, and spread inaccurate stories either to please the Turkish government or to attract readership through "click-bait" and viral sharing of sensational items. Russian reports jumped on this bandwagon, providing extra false narratives to an already-established stream of fabrications in Turkish media. Thus,

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negative and false Russian and Turkish media narratives about U.S. policy reinforced one another.

Another Russian media effort soon after the failed coup also demonstrated the propaganda strategy of opportunistic fabrications. In this case, Russian media spread disinformation that thousands of Turkish forces were surrounding Incirlik Air Base amid rumors of a second coup attempt.[56] This effort took advantage of and put a false spin on several facts. In reality:

- Turkish security was present around the base at the time of Russian reports but not because a second coup attempt was occurring. Rather, these forces were working to secure the area for the upcoming visit of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford.[57]
- While Turkish demonstrators had assembled outside Incirlik earlier in the week, the U.S. military had received advanced warning of the protest, which did not disrupt Incirlik activities.[58]

A key *RT* article in the Incirlik disinformation effort actually acknowledged these facts in the article text.[59] The problem was

the article's misleading and panic-inducing title: "1,000s Turkish Forces Surround NATO's Incirlik Air Base for 'Inspection' Amid Rumors of Coup Attempt."[60] The insinuation in the title that Turkish security was ominously "surrounding" Incirlik was what gained further traction. According to a subsequent analysis of the Incirlik hoax,[61] the aforementioned *RT* story as well as a *Sputnik* story titled "Turkish Police Block Access to NATO's Incirlik Air Base—Home of US Nukes,"[62] were "picked up by a popular online aggregator of breaking news and prompted hours-long storm of activity from a small, vocal circle of users."[63] These users, according to the analysis, commented in English and made three types of remarks: "The first were panicky expressions of concern about nuclear weapons allegedly stored at Incirlik. . . . The second group compared the situation to Benghazi. . . . A third group wondered aloud and repeatedly about why the media wasn't covering the alleged activity."[64] It quickly became clear (and was even suggested in the text of the original *RT* and *Sputnik* articles themselves) that the narrative about Incirlik being "surrounded" was false. Thus, the Russian goal was not necessarily to persuade audiences in the long term that its original insinuations were true. Rather, Russian objectives may have included provoking both Turkish and Western anxiety. Other aims may have included sowing general confusion and distrust in the post-coup environment.

Both the anti-U.S. conspiracy theories and the Incirlik story fit into Russian propaganda's broader goal noted above of discrediting the very idea of objectivity and accurate information. As former U.S. Under Secretary of State Richard Stengel observed about such Russian media outlets as *RT* and *Sputnik,* "They're not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They're saying: 'Everybody's lying! Nobody's telling you the truth!'"[65] Russian media's use of opportunistic fabrications after the coup differed from its previous strategy following the plane shootdown. Unlike the prior allegations targeting Erdoğan's family, the anti-U.S. conspiracy theories and Incirlik disinformation did not necessarily aim to achieve sustained audience belief in their potential veracity. Rather, the fabrications seized the opportunity to add to the noise of already widespread mutual suspicions and confusion in Turkey and in the United States.

Though the fabrications did not necessarily intend to persuade, this strategy is still concerning. As prior RAND analysis has noted, for various reasons, "Familiar themes or messages can be appealing even if they are false. Information that connects with group identities or familiar narratives—or that arouses emotion—can be particularly persuasive."[66] In an environment in which belief in objective information is eroded, this tendency could become even more concerning, because familiar and emotionally appealing explanations may seem like the best or the only available options. Russia's strategy of using opportunistic fabrications, in that it aims to contribute to the atmosphere of eroded faith in objective information in Turkey, could be problematic in Turkey if the conspiracy theory–prone audience indeed turned to the familiar. It could also be problematic for Turkey's allies, who could turn to a familiar narrative of suspicion of Turkey and its stability.

Multiple Contradictory Narratives: Various Insinuations of Blame After the Assassination of the Russian Ambassador

Following the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey on December 19, 2016, Russian media promoted an array of conflicting narratives to describe possible motivations for the kill-

ing. These narratives emphasized that the Gülen network, Islamic terrorists, and Western powers all had something to gain from the event. Thus, they insinuated that any one of those groups could be responsible for the act. These points focused potential blame away from failures of the Turkish police and security services and offered more sinister, alternative explanations, each of which held appeal for a different audience (detailed below). The multiple narratives provided a context that supported the Russian government's decision to continue its rapprochement with Turkey, despite this damaging incident, which it portrayed as caused by forces that want to disrupt the relationship.

An op-ed published in *RT* the day after the assassination, titled "Who Profits from Turkey's 'Sarajevo Moment'?" offers a particularly representative example of four key (and contradictory) interpretations promoted by Russian media following the event:[67]

- First, the op-ed reported that the assassin, a Turkish National Police officer, had suspected links to the Gülen network. It then implied that an intensification of the post-coup crackdowns in Turkey would thus be reasonable. This narrative might appeal to those who oppose Gülen.
- Second, the op-ed stated that the assassin "shouted slogans about revenge 'for Aleppo'—the requisite 'Allahu Akbar' . . . something that might establish a connection to an Islamist group's rhetoric, although that's not conclusive evidence," thus insinuating that the attack could have been terrorist-motivated. This narrative might appeal to those who are concerned about Islamism and Islamist terrorist groups.
- Third, it pointed out that the assassination occurred one day before Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran were set to meet regarding Syria's future—to NATO's consternation. It noted: "Ankara slowly but surely is veering the Eurasianist way; bye bye to the EU, and eventually NATO; welcome to the New Silk Roads, a.k.a. the China-driven One Belt, One Road (OBOR); the Russia-driven Eurasia Economic Union (EEU); the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); the Russia-China strategic partnership; and Turkey as a key hub in Eurasia integration." Accordingly, it hinted that the assassination could relate to the dissatisfaction of some Turks and the West with intensifying Russian-Turkish cooperation in the counterterrorism, defense, and economic arenas. This narrative might appeal to those who oppose the West and NATO.
- Fourth, it notes that the attack occurred immediately following a Putin-Erdoğan agreement regarding Aleppo, stating: "Ankara was fully on board with the plan. That in itself eliminates the possibility of an Ankara-provoked false flag." In other words, it discounts the idea that elements in the Turkish government orchestrated the attack as a covert operation. This narrative

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might appeal to those who did not want to blame the Turkish government for the incident.

Each of the above narratives offered a different possibility of blame (or innocence) for the assassination, each potentially appealing to a different audience. Moreover, by casting suspicion on various groups, this type of narrative paved the way for continued Russia-Turkey collaboration. This cooperation with Russia was controversial in Turkey—after all, the assassination "happened a day after protests in Turkey over Russian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad."[68] The Russian narrative portrayed the assassination as a plot to disrupt this Turkey-Russia cooperation—a plot by which neither Putin nor Erdoğan would be fooled. The *RT* op-ed states: "President Putin for his part made it very clear he wants to be informed on who '*directed*' the killer. That's something that could be interpreted as subtle code for Russian intel already very much in the know."[69] Erdoğan reportedly agreed with Putin that the assassination was a "provocation."[70]

The propaganda strategy of presenting multiple contradictory narratives is concerning for several reasons. For one, as mentioned in earlier sections, audiences are more likely to believe familiar messages, and latching onto familiar messages is perhaps particularly appealing in a confusing environment in which people do not know what to believe. Accordingly, Russian media's insinuation of potential duplicity on the part of Gülen supporters, Islamist terrorists, and the West could appeal to those who are already predisposed to emotional and negative narratives about those groups.

Nonetheless, the various possibilities of responsibility for the assassination, though presented together, were conflicting. They could not all be true at once. Yet, as prior RAND analysis has noted, contradiction is not necessarily detrimental to the persuasive ability of propaganda. In fact, "When a source appears to have considered different perspectives, consumer attitudinal confidence is greater."[71] So, by considering multiple possibilities for a motive behind the assassination, Russian reporting may even have appeared convincing, or at least objective.

Finally, Russian media's strategy of promoting multiple inconsistent narratives allows Russia to play multiple sides of issues. This theme is common beyond the example of the post-assassination narratives. During both the breakdown and restoration of Turkey's relations with Russia, Russian media played a double game in amplifying Kremlin messages. Reflecting the Kremlin's lingering concerns about Erdoğan's embrace of political Islam and policies in Syria, *Sputnik* ran articles both supporting and opposing the April 2017 constitutional referendum that Erdoğan sought to enhance his power.[72] This strategy of promoting multiple angles allows Russia to keep its options open to preserve the ability to quickly seize upon already-created narratives when a specific standpoint seems beneficial.

Implications for the United States and Other NATO Allies

Russian media and information operations seek to sow discord within NATO and to manipulate discussion in Turkey, the United States, and Europe. The media activities associated with the three events described above are part of what is an ongoing, wide-reaching, and opportunistic propaganda effort. Russian media take action whenever a Turkey-related subject can be shaped or an event exploited to Russia's advantage. These efforts employ both strategic and tactical propaganda approaches, and they are constant

and continuing. For example, recent Turkey-related Russian media stories have included extensive coverage of Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, with reports highlighting that Turkey should not have to depend on NATO for protection when it can instead turn to Russia.[73] Russian media also zeroed in on an incident that occurred during NATO's November 2017 Trident Javelin war games in which Erdoğan as well as Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, were allegedly depicted as "enemies" during the exercises.[74] Russia used the blowback in Turkey from this event to run articles with such titles as "Erdogan's Chief Adviser Calls for Turkey's NATO Membership to Be Reconsidered."[75] Incessantly, reports like these sow doubts both in Turkey and among its allies about each other's intentions and about the value of Turkey's NATO membership.

In Turkey, Russian media efforts have contributed to anti-American discourse, which some Turkish politicians employ for their own purposes and popularity.[76] Kadercan points out that Erdoğan has used "anti-Americanism as a foreign-policy tool, to exert further pressure on the U.S. government, signaling that if the United States does not extradite Gülen (or, alternatively, make his life in the United States infinitely more uncomfortable), he might just be unable to contain the anti-Americanism that is becoming even more widespread and robust among the Turkish people."[77] Turkish leaders can use this anti-American discourse to justify foreign policy actions that undermine U.S.-Turkey security cooperation. Such a situation occurred previously when Turkish politicians cited strong public opposition as a key reason behind the 2003 Turkish parliamentary decision that failed to allow U.S. troops access to Iraq through Turkey.[78]

Future Turkish foreign policy decisions relating to NATO and Incirlik could be influenced by similar dynamics. Former Turkish military adviser and *Al Monitor* columnist Metin Gurcan wrote in November 2017 that he has "frequently been hearing in Ankara an increasing dose of 'Isn't it time for Turkey to withdraw from the military wing of NATO?'"[79] Gurcan states, "If these whispers gain traction and Turkey's ties to the Western security bloc weaken, it is likely that calls for Turkey to leave the military wing, if not NATO itself, will intensify."[80] Russian media are hard at work to inspire and reinforce such trends and to promote the idea that Turkey's most valuable ally is actually Russia.[81]

The United States and NATO have started developing countermessaging mechanisms through entities such as the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) and NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE).[82] In December 2016, Congress took action to expand the GEC mission beyond countering the messaging of ISIS and other violent extremist groups to also include identifying and countering foreign propaganda and disinformation directed against U.S. national security interests and those of its allies.[83] New GEC functions also include advancing "fact based narratives that support United States allies and interests,"[84] with up to $60 million authorized to be spent on countering Russian influence operations.[85] For its part, StratCom COE, established in 2014 in Riga, Latvia, has

Turkish leaders can use Russian-influenced anti-American discourse to justify foreign policy actions that undermine U.S.-Turkey security cooperation.

a mission to improve the strategic communications capabilities of NATO, its member governments, and NATO partners. As part of that mission, it seeks to enhance allied and partner understanding of hostile information campaigns through exchanges among civilian officials, military leaders, and scholars and by disseminating relevant independent studies. StratCom COE's recent regional activities have focused on Russian information campaigns in the Nordic and Baltic counties.[86] The analysis in this paper suggests that both GEC and StratCom COE should make it a priority to study and monitor Russian media influence in Turkey and Russian efforts to undermine Turkey's relations with NATO countries. Doing so could contribute to the development of methods to counter these efforts.

Moreover, trends in Turkish media itself are potentially as concerning as the Russian efforts. In the aftermath of government shutdowns of opposition media and continuing intimidation, surviving Turkish news outlets offer increasingly one-sided and sometimes blatantly false reports favorable to the government. The Turkish government is also developing its own propaganda arm, *TRT World*, a new television channel of the Turkish state broadcasting corporation that aims within five years to become one of "the top three international news channels which broadcast in Europe, the Middle East and in near Asia."[87] *TRT World* resembles *RT* in a number of respects, including reinforcing official Turkish government positions and hiring expatriate staff.[88] In March 2017, Putin and Erdoğan endorsed an agreement between their two countries' official news agencies, TASS and Anadolu, to exchange information and photos, with the prospect for expanded cooperation.[89]

While it is too soon to tell exactly where these initiatives will lead, the U.S. government and independent media watch groups should continue to monitor the Turkish government's efforts to stifle independent media in the country and also Russian influence on Turkish government efforts to create propaganda that may emulate well-honed Russian practices. An enhanced understanding of state-supported Russian and Turkish media efforts would enable policymakers to better identify when propaganda infiltrates discourse that may affect their impressions and their policy decisions. It would also enable future research about these media efforts' effectiveness and could inform current and future initiatives to counter these efforts. Overall, closer attention to these areas could help safeguard Turkey's ties to NATO and impede the efforts of those who would like to disrupt the longstanding U.S.-Turkey alliance.

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This Perspective assesses how Russia has used media and information operations to support its foreign policy goals related to Turkey—an issue that has received little attention from officials and analysts. It also comments on the implications of these Russian efforts for the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. The analysis examines Russian media responses to three recent events in Turkey. First, it scrutinizes Russian accusations of Turkish sponsorship of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria following Turkey's November 2015 shootdown of a Russian military aircraft. Second, it examines anti-U.S. conspiracy theories and disinformation that originated in Russian outlets after the July 2016 Turkish coup attempt. Third, it evaluates Russian media's deflection of blame for the December 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador away from Turkey and toward others. Russian media efforts following these events exemplify the propaganda strategies of amplification of genuine uncertainty, creation of opportunistic fabrications, and use of multiple contradictory narratives. These approaches have sought to undermine Turkey's political and security cooperation with the United States and Europe by exacerbating mutual skepticism and highlighting policy differences. In Turkey, Russian media have contributed to anti-American discourse and have reinforced and informed the Turkish government's own propaganda pursuits. The U.S. government, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, and independent media watch groups should take steps to monitor Russian media efforts in Turkey and outside coverage of Turkey. In addition, the U.S. government, other governments, and media watch groups should continue to monitor the Turkish government's efforts to stifle independent media in the country and to create a propaganda arm that may emulate well-honed Russian practices.

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