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Life through grey-tinted glasses: how do audiences in Latvia psychologically respond to Sputnik Latvia's destruction narratives of a failed Latvia?

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ABSTRACT

Although concern about the effects of international audiences consuming Russian state-sponsored media has been expressed, little empirical research examines this. The current study asks how audiences in Latvia respond to narratives projected by Sputnik Latvia – a Kremlin-financed news outlet. We begin a tripartite methodological approach with an analysis of the types of narratives the outlet projects. We then test how ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking participants in Latvia respond to *destruction narratives* that portray Latvia as “failing,” the most prominent type in our analysis. We use two survey experiments that test an existing hypothetical mediation model predicting an array of affective and trust responses. We find evidence that exposure to destruction narratives triggered largely similar responses in both groups; however, exploratory analyses and post-survey focus groups are used to show that their motivations may be different. We conclude by discussing potential reasons for these differences, and the ramifications of these results.

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It is widely acknowledged that the Kremlin pursues information influence as a tool to destabilize foreign states in and beyond the post-Soviet space. The use of international broadcasting through seemingly “normal” media outlets, such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, has been outlined as a way the Russian state cultivates tensions abroad (Elsawah and Howard 2020). Indeed, several studies have examined the types of antagonistic strategic narratives – those intended to harm the image of their subject – that these outlets have produced about foreign states (e.g. Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson 2021), and how these are reproduced to reach a larger audience (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019). The outlets’ recent banning in the European Union (EU) demonstrates that the threat these outlets pose is taken seriously by policymakers (European Council 2022).

Despite these concerns, little is known about the (types of) psychological responses that these outlets’ narrative agendas can trigger. Generally, research examining the reception of strategic narratives is limited and systematic empirical research investigative responses are lacking (Hoyle et al. 2021a). Though some research has evidenced that antagonistic content from RT or Sputnik can

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trigger attitudinal change (e.g. Carter and Carter 2021; Fisher 2020), other psychological responses, such as on trust or different emotions, are currently critically underexplored. Yet the erosion of trust or priming of certain emotions are considered fundamental aspects of exacerbating a society's volatility and intergroup tensions (Bertsou 2019; Iyer and Leach 2008). Knowledge of the affective or trust responses triggered by common types of Kremlin narratives, therefore, has value, potentially delivering key practical insights into countering Russian information influence, including how to construct efficient counternarratives (Hoyle et al. 2021a).

The current study examines how the Latvian-language and Russian-language versions of the Russian state-sponsored media outlet Sputnik Latvia narrated domestic life in Latvia to audiences within Latvia, and how these audiences psychologically respond to this narration. Focusing on Latvia is particularly relevant due to it being part of what Russia considers its “near abroad” – a term frequently employed by the Kremlin to intimate an envisaged special relationship with now-independent republics that previously were in the Soviet Union. To analyze the outlet's narrative output, we apply a theoretical framework of antagonistic narrative strategies proposed by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2019). To examine audience responses, we use experimental methods to assess how different ethnolinguistic audiences react to a particular type of narrative prevalent in Sputnik Latvia's output: destruction narratives.

Previous research on Russian antagonistic narrative strategies

Research analyzing the (antagonistic) strategic narratives projected by Russian state-sponsored media has flourished in recent years (e.g. Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019; Rebegea 2019). Moving beyond this, Wagnsson and Barzanje (2019) advanced an overarching theoretical framework of narrative strategies that Russian state-sponsored media outlets utilize when narrating foreign states. They uncovered overarching categories of narratives, each motivated by a different strategic motivation for the Kremlin. These strategies include *destruction* narratives, which strive to mar perceptions of the state's governmentality, economic strength and military resolve, and paint it as a failing state, and *suppression* narratives, which aim to skew perceptions of the state's cultural or religious values and portray it as immoral and perverse. These strategies are emblematic of the Kremlin's ambitions to promote Russia's international image as a Great Power and global defender of traditional values (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016).

These strategies have been robustly observed in the narration of several states, including Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark (Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson 2021), the Netherlands (Hoyle et al. 2021b) and Ukraine (Chaban, Zhabotynska, and Knodt 2023). Moreover, they capture themes of political dysfunction identified in other analyses of how RT/Sputnik narrates different European states (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019). States may view destruction or suppression narratives as potentially threatening to their national security. For example, destruction narratives seem oriented towards inciting frustration or fear, or to corroding trust in state institutions by portraying the state as weak and disorganized. Meanwhile, suppression narratives may goad culture wars and drive affective polarization between societal cleavages by provoking grievances regarding hot-button societal topics. These types of narratives, therefore, might be considered threats to a state's societal stability and national cohesion.

Hoyle et al. (2023) examined the destabilizing capacity of destruction and suppression narratives by testing the trust and emotional responses to these narratives in Dutch and Swedish audiences. The authors made a transdisciplinary link between destruction narratives and *realistic threat perceptions*—threats to an individual or their in-group's power, physical well-being, or economic prospects, and between suppression narratives and *symbolic threat perceptions*—threats to one's identity, values, or way of life (Stephan and Stephan 2000). They hypothesized that the narrative strategies can be reconceptualized as mechanisms that increase these perceptions, which should act as indirect pathways for narratives to trigger an array of trust and affective responses. While indirect effects were not supported, the narrative

strategies did trigger responses. Compared to participants who read control texts, Swedish participants were significantly higher in anger after consuming destruction narratives, and anger and disgust after consuming suppression narratives. Similarly, Dutch participants indicated higher levels of anger and fear and lower levels of institutional trust after consuming destruction narratives, and significantly higher levels of shame and disgust after consuming suppression narratives.

The results provided preliminary empirical insights into the destabilizing responses that destruction or suppression narratives can trigger. However, several methodological improvements, including a more specific measure of the perceived threats or presenting the same articles in different languages to aid comparison and remove possible article-specific responses, were suggested. The importance of researching audience responses in states that Russia considers as its “near abroad,” where the Kremlin uses news media as a means of preserving (or re-establishing) soft power in post-Soviet republics (Rotaru 2018), was also highlighted. The current study, therefore, seeks to replicate and extend Hoyle et al. (2023) while heeding these suggestions.

Examining audience responses in Latvia

The Baltic state of Latvia is therefore particularly relevant. Located in northeast Europe, Latvia was part of the Soviet Union until 1991 and is seen as still strategically important for Russia – now broadly encompassed in what Russia terms its “near abroad.” Latvia and its Baltic neighbors Estonia and Lithuania occupy unique positions among the 14 “near abroad” states. All three withheld from joining any of the new economic and collective security organizations set up by Russia with the other former constituent Soviet Union members, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Instead, they pursued a more Western-oriented approach, seeking membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). They, therefore, lie at the frontier between Russia and these Euro-Atlantic organizations and can be viewed as distinct from other “near abroad” states.

With 37% of the population using Russian as their primary language, Latvia houses the largest proportion of Russophones in the Baltic states (Government of Latvia 2019). Moreover, while nostalgic sentiment for the Soviet Union has decreased over the last two decades in these states, some has persisted – particularly in elderly populations. The Kremlin is therefore thought to view Latvia as a region where it might cultivate tensions and subvert EU or NATO unity and a target for information influence (Lanoszka 2019). This influence is aided by the presence of several Russian-financed or Russian-language media outlets that lean, to varying degrees, pro-Kremlin (de Jong et al. 2017). The plainest example of this is Sputnik Latvia – a Latvia-focused news outlet funded by the Kremlin. According to Gemius (2022), Sputnik Latvia was the 10th most popular news site in Latvia in 2021. Although the outlet is now inaccessible due to the aforementioned European ban, there is relevancy to studying how a Kremlin-financed media outlet communicates with audiences in Latvia – not least because analysts have identified many cases of mirror websites copying content from RT or Sputnik (ISD 2022), and narration from RT or Sputnik is known to be frequently further dispersed by other smaller news sites (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019).

One might predict an enthusiasm for Russian state-sponsored media to employ destruction or suppression narratives in their portrayal of Latvia. Destruction narratives fit with representations of post-Soviet states as “failing,” which are common in Russian media. Portraying these states as “failed” and, in contrast, glorifying the Soviet Union can be considered part of the Kremlin’s strategic ambition to reassert its influence over the post-Soviet space. In this imagined reality, these now independent countries are struggling and are better off maintaining closer ties with Russia (Kaprāns and Mierīņa 2019b). Suppression narratives also rhyme with long-standing portrayals of Europe as overly liberal and lacking traditional values (Tyushka 2022). Several terms encapsulate this portrayal, including “Rotten Europe” (Neumann 2016) and “Gayropa” (Foxall 2019). For the Baltics, this often

relates to their “westernization” and shift away from Russia’s sphere of influence (Denisa-Liepniece 2017).

Moreover, insights from recent national surveys indicate receptiveness to these types of narratives in Latvian audiences. For example, Kaprāns and Mieriņa (2019a) show that 40% of respondents agreed that Latvia could not exist as an independent state (the largest proportion in the Baltic states). Meanwhile, 61% tended to or completely agreed that the Latvian economy is underdeveloped and cannot ensure sufficient trading. A similarly strong consensus regarded Latvia as economically dependent on the EU, with over three-quarters of respondents agreeing. Finally, just over half of the respondents supported the claim that poverty and unemployment prevail in Latvia, while 85% partially or fully agreed that Latvian politicians are corrupt. Such results demonstrate a prevailing pessimism in Latvian residents – potential fertile ground for destruction narratives.

A similar trend emerged regarding suppression themes, with moderate support for statements focusing on threats to the values or cultural identity of Latvia. Half of the respondents agreed that it is impossible for people not sharing Latvia’s customs and traditions to become fully integrated, indicating a rigid view of Latvia’s cultural identity and diversity. Moreover, 36% saw a societal conflict between more traditional Latvian values and the values of the West – again the highest proportion in the Baltic states. Lastly, a third of respondents agreed that Latvian culture is generally undermined by immigrants. Again, these results indicate that a significant portion of Latvian society is receptive to themes promoted by suppression narratives.

Yet, nuancing this further, socio-demographic analyses indicate a divide in support for Russian media narratives. Predominantly Russophone areas of Latvia, such as the Latgale region, were more readily accepting of narratives that portrayed Latvia as failing (Kaprāns and Mieriņa 2019a, 33). This echoes other survey data showing that Russophonic areas are generally more critical of the Latvian state (Berzina 2016). Such statistics are indicative of an ethnolinguistic aspect to supporting Russian narratives, with Russian speakers more agreeable to the content. Although contested, most research agrees that a distinct and meaningful Russian-speaking minority identity, contrasted against the ethnic Latvian population identity, exists in Latvia (Laitin 1998). Some have highlighted the socio-economic precarity faced by this minority as increasing their susceptibility to such narration (Hynek 2020). Indeed, support for “failed state” narratives garnered more support outside capitals or big cities, particularly in poorer, more Russophonic regions of Latvia (Kaprāns and Mieriņa 2019a, 33).

The current study

Clearly, there are grounds to assume that audiences in Latvia would be responsive to the types of Russian narratives dispersed by Kremlin-sponsored media. In this study, we seek to examine what these responses are, implementing a three-phase investigation. First, we analyze Sputnik Latvia’s narrative output in their Latvian and Russian-language outlets, scrutinizing their published content across the three months before the EU ban. Here, we ask the question: what narrative strategies does Sputnik Latvia use to narrate life in Latvia to Latvian residents? Using content identified in this stage, we proceed to the study’s second and main phase: a survey experiment testing how ethnic Latvians and Russian speakers in Latvia psychologically respond to articles representative of the narratives propagated by Sputnik Latvia. Lastly, we discuss these insights in conjunction with examining insights gleaned from two focus groups.

An analysis of Sputnik Latvia’s destruction and suppression narration

Our analysis focused on articles published by Sputnik Latvia between 1 December 2021 and 28 February 2022—the three months before the implementation of the ban on 2 March 2022. For conciseness, details about data selection and the analytical procedure are in the online supplementary material (S1). We center our discussion on narratives that represent either the destruction or suppression narrative strategies. Though this encompasses the majority of identified narratives,

some narratives did not cleanly represent the strategies and were not incorporated, including narrative efforts to promote Soviet nostalgia and positively render the USSR's occupation of Latvia and the Red Army's role in World War II, or to depict Nazism/fascism brewing in Latvia. Another narrative portraying Russophobia as incontrovertible and endemic to Latvian society is the focus of a separate forthcoming article. Although these narratives are not fully examined here, moments where they intersect with discussed narratives will be stressed.

Importantly, there were few – if any – cases of articles contributing to an identified narrative featuring solely on the Latvian-language site. The reverse, however, did not hold; many articles published only by the Russian-language site contributed to the identified narratives. This is logical given the large discrepancy in publishing frequency between the two outlets (see the online supplementary material) and reinforces the idea that the Russophonic audience is likely seen as more impressionable for Sputnik Latvia's content.

Destruction narratives

As discussed, the destruction narrative strategy is concerned with undermining a state's capabilities (Wagnsson and Barzanje 2019, 250). In this, destruction narratives should render an image of a state as failing and in disarray, focusing on the incompetence of state leadership and discontent within the society. Examples in Sputnik Latvia's narration are plentiful; destruction narratives were the most prominent narrative strategy in both language versions.

The most prominent destruction narrative depicts life in Latvia as depressing and miserable, creating an image of "doom and gloom" and depicting much, if not most, of the society as frustrated and unhappy. Many articles contributing to this narrative focus on problems existing within the mundane reality of day-to-day Latvian life. For example, the financial burden that the current and predicted rise in the cost of living will cause residents is discussed across many articles in both language versions, with several relaying the population's outrage at the price of different food products, the forecast of bills or the level of poverty in the country (Sputnik Latvia 2022a–2022f; see online supplementary material).¹ This "doom and gloom" narrative also discusses the dire state of employment in the country, where national salaries are low and workers are underappreciated (Sputnik Latvia 2022g).

At times, the Russian-language Sputnik Latvia uses this "doom and gloom" narrative to construct a more general image of nihilistic malaise permeating Latvian society. In this, articles refer to polls and surveys to undergird their depiction of a latent dissatisfaction festering within the Latvian population. Some illustrations of this were found in articles that discuss, for example, that over half of Latvia's population is suffering from brain fog (Sputnik Latvia 2022h), that a third of the country is dissatisfied with the quality of life in Latvia (Sputnik Latvia 2022i), or about half of the young people in Latvia feel helpless (Sputnik Latvia 2021a).

The "doom and gloom" narrative heavily intersects with other destruction narratives that emphasize the Latvian government's incompetence and more general institutional failure in the country. In the anti-government narrative, both the national government and key political figures such as President Egils Levits or Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins are blamed for the negative aspects of Latvian society. At their least destructive, these portrayals depict the government as hypocritical or out of touch. Levits is, for example, a fraud for avoiding a fine for breaking COVID rules (Sputnik Latvia 2022j), or selfish for increasing his salary while Latvian citizens suffer during the pandemic (Sputnik Latvia 2021b). Karins is afforded a similar portrayal. He is also accused of exploiting the pandemic to benefit his personal wealth (Sputnik Latvia 2021b), but his transgressions extend further – fumbling vaccination efforts and the removal of restrictions (Sputnik Latvia 2022k), wasting the public's time, and betraying business owners (Sputnik Latvia 2022l).

At their most destructive, however, articles portray the government as corrupt, deceitful, and negligent. For example, it is depicted as obfuscating a parliamentary commission investigating mistakes made in the pandemic, turning the process into a "kind of political show in its circle, with

zero (if you look at the legal consequences) practical exhaust” (Sputnik Latvia 2022m). Regional governments are shown similarly, cunningly evading responsibility for poor city management. For example, when the Riga city council cannot cope with unprecedented snowfall (Sputnik Latvia 2021c), they are sarcastically described as blaming the former authorities – “as it turned out, the former authorities of Riga, that is, ‘Harmony’, are to blame for all this” (Sputnik Latvia 2021d). Importantly, the council – headed by Mārtiņš Staķis, (at that point) part of the pro-European party Development/For! and a coalition with other pro-European parties – are narrated as blaming the pro-Russian party Saskaņa (“Harmony”). A Sputnik Latvia columnist, writing in Russian, notes that “this is a common feature of politicians – shifting the responsibility for current problems to predecessors” (Sputnik Latvia 2021e).

The most troubling anti-government depiction appears in one article replicated in both languages, quoting statements by the Russian Union of Latvia’s co-chairman Miroslav Mitrofanov. He equates Levits’s stance on the Russian language to Nazism, invoking the memory of the Nazi occupation of Latvia: “Mr Levits uses the reasoning and partly also the vocabulary actively used by the occupation administration in Latvia in 1941–1944 to justify his Russophobic initiatives.” Sputnik Latvia goes on to print claims from the chairman that Levits has “revived the propaganda techniques of the German Nazis, who justified the war against the Russians with the help of the argument about the ‘non-European’ nature of Russian culture” (Sputnik Latvia 2022n, 2022o). Although the most disturbing aspects are quotes, the outlet does not challenge or offer alternative perspectives on the statements.

Returning to the institutional failure narrative, articles in Sputnik Latvia render most public institutions in Latvia as failing and undependable, unable to provide for or protect the Latvian society. For example, in his annual review for the Russian-language site – which gives a sweeping overview of the Latvian state’s shortcomings – a Sputnik Latvia columnist bemoans the overburdened healthcare system, suggesting it lacks resources because “in Latvia, they prefer to spend money on the military budget” (Sputnik Latvia 2022p). Yet, the Latvian military is later described similarly in an article for both language versions, apparently lacking the manpower to provide adequate protection in the event of a hypothetical attack. In the article, the crippling of Latvian defense stems from the Latvian population’s reticence, whereby they are reluctant to fight after being “stuffed ... so much with propaganda” about a looming Russian threat, and chronic underfunding by the Latvian state (Sputnik Latvia 2022q; 2022r).

Yet the most derision is saved for the Latvian education system. Here, the capacity for providing education to Latvia’s youth is portrayed as decimated by government policies. One Russian-language article, titled “At least eat at work!”, discusses the online furor around a teaching aide revealing their low salary (Sputnik Latvia 2022s). Several articles discuss the “catastrophic” teaching shortage, brought on by, among other things, the vaccination mandate (Sputnik Latvia 2021f, 2021g, 2021h, 2022t). However, the majority of articles focus on the transfer of Russian-language schools to the Latvian language. Within this, Russian-language education is being “killed” by the government, and Russian-speaking children are being betrayed (Sputnik Latvia 2022u, 2022v). One Russian-language article interviews an activist for Russian-language education, who speaks up to “defend the interests of children” (Sputnik Latvia 2021i). She laments the unfair pressures that Russian-speaking children are put under due to the reform (Sputnik Latvia 2021i). Another quotes a Russian teacher, who warns of “psychoemotional instability, stress, tear” and calls the reform “a destructive factor” (Sputnik Latvia 2022w).

A final narrative – portraying an imbalanced and exploitative relationship between Latvia and “the West” identified – is the best example of the “weak” aspect that is central to defining destruction narration. Here, Latvia is a vassal that has been “colonized,” again drawing on parallels with Latvia’s history of occupation. For example, one Russian-language article focusing on the erection of a monument depicting Gunars Astra, a Latvian human-rights activist and anti-Soviet dissident, draws a contrast between Astra as a symbol of freedom, and the “occupied” Latvia of today that suffers under European democracy. Here, the outlet quotes demonstrators angry at Latvian

integration with NATO and the EU, describing Latvia as “under the colonial rule of Washington and Brussels” and “occupied” by “minions of neo-colonial politics” (Sputnik Latvia 2022x).

The West’s self-centered approach to Latvia is particularly underlined. For example, one article repeated in both language versions depicts the United States’ (US) interest in Latvia as fleeting and centred solely around using Latvia as a pawn amidst its ongoing tensions with Russia (Sputnik Latvia 2022q, 2022r). Here, the destruction aspect for Latvia is apparent – Latvia is shown as a lapdog, desperate for protection from the US. Other Russian-language articles describe the US, specifically, as interfering in Latvian political affairs to rebalance its loss of dominance on the world stage (Sputnik Latvia 2021e). NATO is described similarly, flippantly hesitating to protect the Baltics, despite gradually “draining” the countries (Sputnik Latvia 2022q). Moreover, a columnist accuses NATO of being in a state of “psychosis,” whereby it “artificially inflates” the situation between Russia and itself (Sputnik Latvia 2021j). Western reporting of possible Russian aggression in Ukraine is dismissed as “ridiculous” and “dangerous,” crafted to justify military spending boosts and NATO’s increased antagonism on its Eastern border (Sputnik Latvia 2022y, 2022z) or to distract from interim US election results disappointing to the Democratic party (Sputnik Latvia, 2022aa).

Suppression narratives

Suppression narratives were defined as narratives that focus on maligning the cultural, religious, or societal values of a state (Wagnsson and Barzanje 2019, 246). In previous analyses, suppression narratives have depicted traditional, conservative values as increasingly threatened by feminist agendas and “woke culture” (Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson 2021; Hoyle et al. 2021b). Intriguingly, such narration was scarce in Sputnik Latvia’s depiction of Latvia; we could not identify any articles that fit this definition in the Latvian-language sample. In the Russian-language sample, we identified only one narrative, built across a handful of articles, that focused on Latvian society’s increasingly non-traditional political discourse. The narrative sought to depict Latvia as inherently traditional, but wrestling with an increasing imposition of overly progressive – “woke” – Western influences.

The Riga city council, for example, is criticized as “jesters of political correctness and clowns of self-censorship” for using an areligious holiday greeting (Sputnik Latvia 2022bb). Similarly, across four articles, Russian-language Sputnik Latvia discusses efforts by the state language center to evaluate the neutrality of words describing nationality and ethnicity. One article describes “most commentators” treating these efforts as “another senseless undertaking,” positioning the center’s efforts as excessive and pointless (2022cc). When the debate is discussed in the Seimas Commission, the harsh rhetoric is amplified, with the outlet dubbing the debate the “import of American Culture War into Latvia” (2022dd). Both articles refer to online discussions between Latvian citizens who debate the developments. Here, while different perspectives are offered by Sputnik Latvia, the prevailing tone is one of disdain.

Yet, a third article extends this, describing the debate as akin to US “authoritarian censorship,” where “cancel culture” has instigated the destruction of culture and sanitization of anything potentially politically incorrect. The US is often discursively constructed as “the opposite” – something that Latvia is not but that the West presses it to become. This is underlined in an article titled “Latvia – a Conservative Country: Liberal Values Have Divided Europe.” The article begins by describing survey data depicting the widespread cultural divides across Western European states, before emphasizing that conservative beliefs – such as the impermissibility of homosexual marriage or gender reassignment – still prevail in Latvia. In this, Sputnik Latvia forms a distinction between the West’s “liberal-left agenda” and the “undeniable reality” of Latvia’s majority conservative values (2022ee). Another particularly aggressive article quotes a journalist from the alternative media outlet pietiek.com, who laments how Latvians were “hoodwinked” by the West. Quoting the journalist, the article suggests that Latvia was initially attracted to a different West, and ultimately, contemporary Western values are incongruous with the true values of the population. In particular, the West’s “perverse” etiquette and norms are lambasted, which the journalist describes as “complete

degradation,” including “two bearded men [having] children” or “aggressive sodomites” questioning the constitution (2022ff).

Interim discussion

Sputnik Latvia’s depiction of Latvia is woven around an array of different destruction narratives. Life in Latvia is rendered negatively: the society lacks order, the population is miserable, and incompetent politicians limply attempt to mask their corruption. Many articles contained fairly exaggerated or heavily biased accounts of events in Latvian society and often included social media comments, implying their messaging was widely accepted. The most egregiously hostile articles often centered around disparaging the Latvian government and key figures within it. Importantly, there was little difference in how the two language versions presented the information – they utilized the same narratives in both sites. Differences arose, however, in the frequencies – the Russian-language site published much more than the Latvian-language site.

There was a clear weighting towards destruction narration over suppression narratives. This is intriguing: previous analyses of Russian state-sponsored media narration of foreign states indicated the proportion was more equal (Hoyle et al. 2021b; Wagnsson and Barzanje 2019). Why might this be? The heavy deployment of destruction narratives is, in itself, not necessarily surprising. The themes of destruction narratives fit with previous discussions of how Russian media narrates post-Soviet states (Rebegea 2019) and are likely aimed particularly at Russian-speaking audiences who may harbor a nostalgia for the Soviet Union (Kaprāns and Mieriņa 2019a, 35). Yet, while destruction narratives might indeed be particularly resonant, this does not necessarily negate the inclusion of suppression narratives.

One explanation could be that the themes of suppression narratives may not have as big a foothold in Latvia as they do elsewhere. Of course, comparing levels of discourse is difficult, but it is possible that progressive groups, based on LGBT rights or race issues, have not made as much progress in Latvian society due to its comparatively socially conservative character (European Commission 2019). One could interpret this as amplifying the Latvian population’s sensitivity to suppression narratives, which could make them a more worthwhile target. Yet, it could also mean that there is less material to wrap in suppression narration; progressive groups make less noise and, therefore, there are less salient topics to target. Another possibility stems from Latvia’s position in both the post-Soviet and EU space. The Baltic region is an area where Russia seeks to build its influence (Lanoszka 2019), and so it could be counterintuitive to fully narratively derogate the society’s moral and cultural character. Narrating the societies as weird or perverse, as seen with Northern or Western European states, may alienate the population. This might explain why the limited employment of suppression centers mainly on highlighting the encroaching US/Western influence, and not as something inherent to the culture of Latvia.

A final interpretation stems from the contemporary geopolitical context. Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson (2021) discuss how the antagonism of Kremlin-sponsored media’s narration about a state may be inversely associated with their relations with the Kremlin. Indeed, Hoyle et al. (2021b) speculate that destruction narratives are employed to depict the Netherlands as an incredible political actor, as a response to the Dutch pursuit of legal accountability regarding flight MH17—an event that deeply damaged Russia’s international image. This mechanism could also plausibly explain the imbalance in destruction narratives. Latvia was a vocal critic of Russia before Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, calling for immediate sanctions (e.g. Rinkēvičs 2022). In this scenario, Latvia is “punished” with destruction narratives, portrayed as weak, ridiculous, and lacking credibility. Content analyses of Russian media’s narration of the European Union, after the EU sanctioned Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, identified a similar mechanism (Chaban, Elgström, and Gulyaeva 2017).

Irrespective of the reason behind the large proportion of destruction narratives, a pertinent question to ask is: how do domestic residents of Latvia respond to these narratives? With this question, we shift methodological gears, adopting a more quantitative

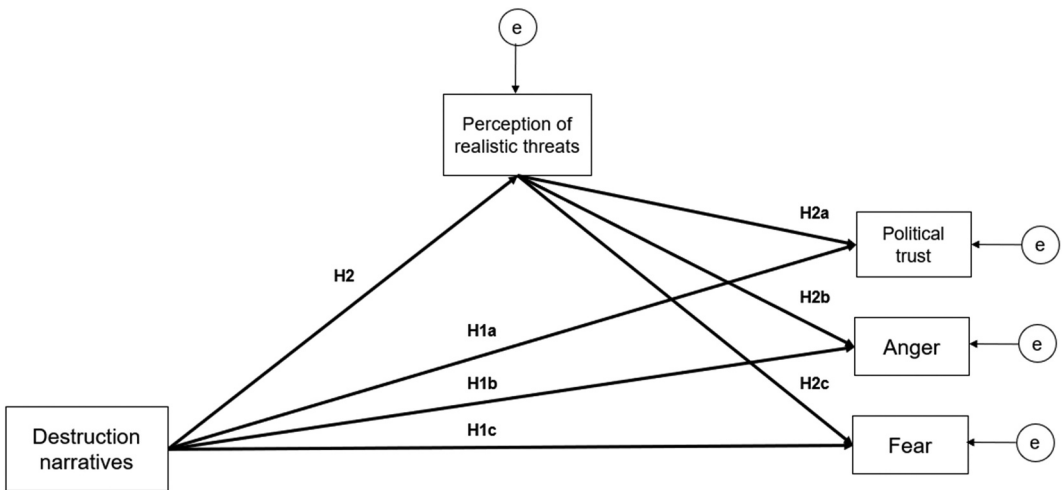


Figure 1. Path model of the expected mediation between the destruction narratives and the expected cognitive and affective responses.

approach in the form of a survey experiment. Furthermore, given the imbalance identified in the content analysis, we refine our focus to solely looking at the effects of destruction narratives, and not suppression narratives.

In this survey experiment, the first sub-question we ask is: does exposure to destruction narratives about Latvia elicit psychological responses in ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking audiences? Moreover, orienting around the model advanced by Hoyle et al. (2023), a related question might be: do realistic threat perceptions mediate the relationship between the destruction narratives and the psychological responses they elicit? Based on the results obtained by Hoyle et al. (2023), and incorporating their recommended changes for future studies, we formulate two hypotheses (depicted in Figure 1):

H1: Exposure to destruction narratives about Latvia should lead to lower levels of political trust (H1a) and higher levels of anger (H1b) and fear (H1c) when compared to a control.

H2: Realistic threat perceptions will mediate the effects of exposure to destruction narratives on political trust (H2a), anger (H2b) and fear (H2c) levels.

Further, the aforementioned extant research indicated Baltic Russian-speaking audiences are more ready to receive failed state narratives about Latvia, or the Baltic states generally Kaprāns and Mieriņa (2019a). Therefore, we formulate a final question by asking: are Russian-speakers more responsive to destruction narratives than ethnic Latvians? For this sub-question, we can formulate the following hypothesis.

H3: The observed pathways will be structurally the same between ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking participants, but larger effects will be observed for the Russian-speakers than ethnic Latvian participants.

A survey experiment testing responses to the destruction narrative

We pre-registered our hypotheses and survey experiment on OSF on 26 August 2022. Ethics approval from the The University of Amsterdam Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences was

acquired on 27 September 2022,² and data collection began on 3 October 2022 and finished on 17 October 2022.

Participants

Representative samples were recruited by research company Norstat, with a target of 340 participants per audience.³ Anticipating potential drop-out, we recruited a sample of 400 participants per audience, who were all above 18 years of age and Latvian residents. After implementing our pre-registered exclusion criteria, the final sample was 381 ethnic Latvian participants and 384 Russian-speaking participants. Further demographic details can be found in S3 of the online supplementary material.

Design

The first study tested responses in ethnic Latvian and the second tested responses in Russian-speaking participants. Both used a one-factor between-participants design. Narrative exposure, our independent variable, was manipulated by asking participants in the narrative exposure condition to read two short articles from Russian state-sponsored media, while participants in the control condition read neutral, factual texts.

Materials

All variables and instruments used can be found in the online supplementary material.

Stimulus materials

Experimental conditions

The two articles were taken directly from Sputnik Latvia, and were selected by the preceding content analysis as fulfilling two criteria: they had to be representative of the destruction strategy and they must have appeared in both the Latvian-language and Russian-language versions of Sputnik Latvia. By using the same article, but in different languages, we removed any micro-level differences in the texts that could trigger specific responses, implementing the aforementioned suggestion by Hoyle et al (2023). Both can be seen in the online repository files (supplementary material).

One article was titled "Latvians Are Not Ready to Go to War," and discussed Latvia as having to resort to reintroducing conscription. The Latvian military is described as ineffective, and the government as erratically scrambling to attract recruits. It also portrays Latvia as subordinate to the US who, under the Trump administration, chose to stop protecting the Baltic region. The article combines several destruction narratives, including government incompetence, a passive population, and the image of Latvia as weak and reliant on others for defense. It also resembles previous instances of the destruction strategy being used to malign the image of other states' defence (Hoyle et al. 2021b; Wagnsson and Barzanje 2019).

The second article was titled "'Shame': Orphanage Worker's Salary Causes Outrage." It centers on a journalist's tweet criticizing a caregiver's salary at the State Social Care Center in Riga and captures several online responses mocking the state for offering such a low salary to its employees and condemning the welfare minister for his lackluster response. This portrayal resembles how the destruction strategy has been used to malign the government's competency and how far the state will support its citizens (Hoyle et al. 2021b; Wagnsson and Barzanje 2019).

In choosing the stimulus materials, care was taken to capture different facets of the destruction strategy. Both articles intertwine different identified narratives, and portray Latvia as weak, disorganized and "failing." They do this in different ways, however: the first focuses more on the physical or existential threat to the safety and autonomy of Latvian residents, whereby they face

an uncertain physical threat. This is a key element of the destruction strategy. Conversely, the second article focused more on the economic security and precarity within Latvia – another key element whereby the state is failing to provide for residents. In this sense, the two articles selected provide a good representation of the destruction strategy. These two distinct aspects also reflect the prevailing “failed state” narrative discussed by, among others, Kaprāns and Mierīņa, (2019b).

Control condition

As in Hoyle et al. (2023), the control condition saw factual information on the same topics as the corresponding experimental condition, presented in a neutral and unemotional manner. The manipulation, therefore, concentrates on distinguishing the effect of the strategic narrative rather than simply the information provided – it distills the effects of the story used to relay this information. The first control article was titled “Changes to Latvia’s Defense Policy” and the second, “Facts about Salaries of VSC Workers in Latvia.”

Procedure

The studies replicated the procedure used by Hoyle et al. (2023). In this, the studies were administered using Norstat’s online survey program. Participants indicated that they either used Latvian or Russian as their first language. The survey was then administered in this language. First, they provided informed consent and demographic data. Subsequently, they were randomly assigned to the experimental condition or a corresponding control condition, where they read the two articles. There was an imposed two-minute minimum for this stage. Finally, they completed the counterbalanced post-test items and were thanked and debriefed.

Supplemental focus groups

We strove to enrich our interpretation of the quantitative insights by conducting additional, supplementary focus groups. There are limited conclusions that can be drawn from only two focus groups. However, our intention was, rather than offering this as a full additional research phase, to provide some qualitative material that may elucidate our conclusions. One focus group was conducted in Latvian, and the other was conducted in Russian. Participants were recruited by Norstat, and the sessions took place at a location in Riga, Latvia. The Latvian-language group had eight participants while the Russian-language group had seven. Care was taken to ensure diversity in age, gender, and region. Participants could choose their names, but all names have been changed to ensure anonymity. More details about the participants can be found in the online supplementary material (S4).

Participants in both groups were asked to read the experimental stimulus materials and, after reading, to share their initial impressions. Then, they were guided through discussion questions based on the survey items. Afterwards, they were informed that the articles were published by Sputnik Latvia and asked about their media consumption patterns.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations.

Study	Condition	Perceived realistic threat		Political trust		Anger		Fear	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Study 1 –Latvian participants	Experimental	4.77	1.27	3.19	1.40	4.45	1.84	3.23	1.65
	Control	4.52	1.27	3.44	1.40	3.10	1.90	2.84	1.69
Study 2 –Russian-speaking participants	Experimental	4.90	1.23	2.02	1.12	4.69	1.98	3.34	1.90
	Control	4.60	1.13	2.23	1.27	3.92	2.07	3.18	1.89

Results

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

Confirmatory analysis

Study 1—responses of the ethnic Latvian audience

Manipulation check. A two-sample t-test revealed perceptions that the texts presented Latvian institutions as failing were significantly higher in the destruction condition ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.34$) than in the corresponding control condition ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.63$): $t(372.69) = 11.18$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$.

Model estimation and hypothesis testing. Using *lavaan*, we estimated a path analysis model, controlling for age, gender, media trust, life satisfaction, education level, political interest and governmental support. To account for multivariate non-normality, we used the MLMV estimator. This produced a well-fitting model: $\chi^2 = 22.01$, $df = 7$, $p = .003$, CFI = 0.961, RMSEA = .075, 90% CI [.041, .111], SRMR = .038. We tested our hypotheses using this estimated model (Figure 2). H1a, predicting comparatively lower political trust levels in those exposed to destruction narratives, was not supported ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .40$, 95% CI = [-0.318, 0.127]). H1b, testing a direct effect on anger, was supported ($b = 1.21$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .00$, 95% CI = [0.847, 1.580]). H1c, testing a direct effect on fear, was not supported ($b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .08$, 95% CI = [-0.032, 0.608]). H2a, testing the indirect effect on political trust through perceived realistic threat, was not supported ($b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.114, 0.007]). H2b, testing the indirect effect on anger, was not supported ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [-0.006, 0.235]). H2c, testing the indirect effect on fear, was not supported ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [-0.004, 0.224]).

Study 2—responses of the Russian-speaking audience

Manipulation check. A two-sample t-test revealed perceptions that the texts presented Latvian institutions as failing were significantly higher in the destruction condition ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.70$) than in the corresponding control condition ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.76$): $t(337.81) = 2.09$, $p = .037$, $d = 0.226$.

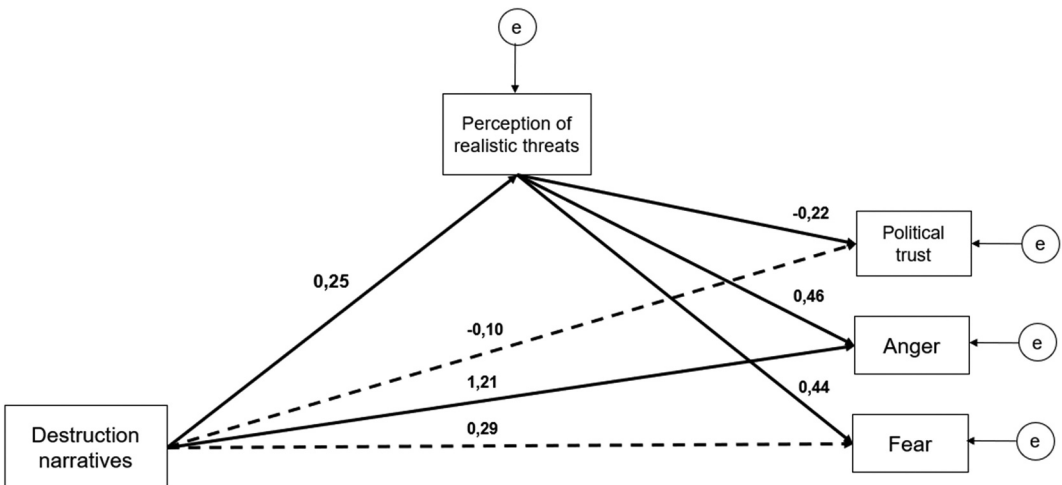


Figure 2. Path model testing responses of ethnic Latvian participants to destruction narratives. Paths are depicted using weighted unstandardized estimates. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant pathways.

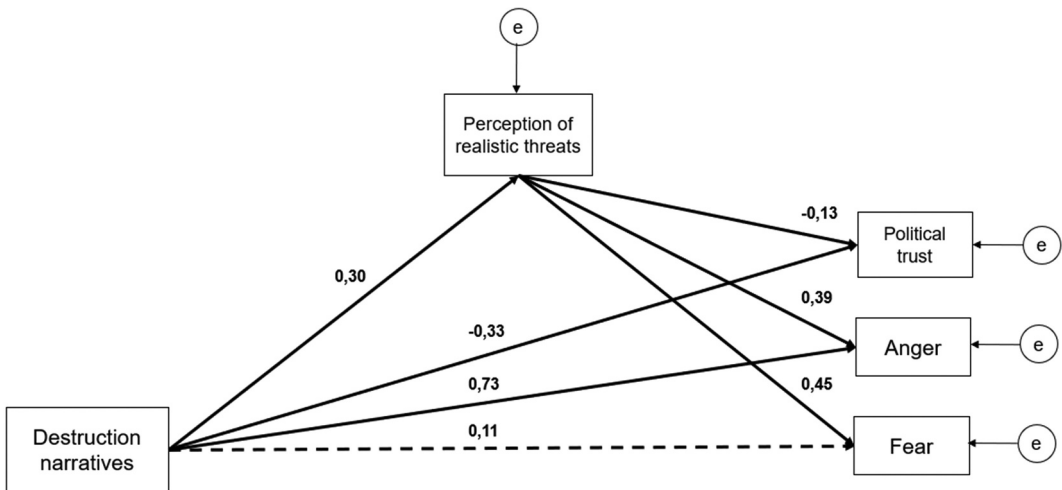


Figure 3. Path model testing responses of Russian-speaking participants to destruction narratives. Paths are depicted using weighted unstandardized estimates. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant pathways.

Model estimation and hypothesis testing. The same procedure as Study 1 produced a well-fitting model (Figure 3): $\chi^2 = 17.82$, $df = 7$, $p = .013$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = .064, 90% CI [.028, .102], SRMR = .025. We tested our hypotheses using this estimated model. H1a, which tested a direct effect on political trust, was supported ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .002$, 95% CI = [-0.540, -0.119]). H1b, testing a direct effect on anger, was supported ($b = 0.73$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.334, 1.116]). H1c, testing a direct effect on fear, was not supported ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .569$, 95% CI = [-0.262, 0.476]). H2a, testing the indirect effect on political trust through perceived realistic threat, was not supported ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.078, 0.002]). H2b, testing the indirect effect on anger, was supported ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.008, 0.220]). H2c, testing the indirect effect on fear, was supported ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.012, 0.253]).

Model comparison. To test H3, we sought to establish invariance of the models, testing if the path coefficients significantly differed between the two groups. To do this, we fitted the destruction model with all parameters of interest unconstrained across the groups. This resulted in a reasonably well-fitting model on most metrics, $\chi^2 = 70.645$, $df = 35$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.948, RMSEA = .052, 90% CI [.034, .069], SRMR = .035, and configural invariance was assumed. Full path invariance was then assessed, constraining our parameters of interest to equality. Metric invariance was achieved ($\Delta\chi^2 = 9.347$, $p = .228$, $\Delta df = 7$, $\Delta CFI = -0.005$, $\Delta RMSEA = -0.002$). Our constrained model did not fit the data significantly worse than the unconstrained model. This indicates that, statistically, the overall model fitted the two groups similarly. However, as already reported above, several path coefficients were larger in magnitude in the ethnic-Latvian group (e.g. anger). Thus, H3 received mixed support.

Exploratory analyses

Alignment with and accuracy of texts

Two two-sample t-tests showed that both perceptions that the destruction articles presented a realistic image of the situation in Latvia were significantly higher in Russian-speaking participants ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.63$) than in ethnic Latvian participants ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.77$), $t(361.24) = -4.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$, and that agreement with the destruction articles' message was also significantly higher in Russian-speaking

participants ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.55$) than ethnic-Latvian participants ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(362.01) = -4.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$.

Furthermore, first-stage moderated mediation analyses showed that in each group the indirect effects of destruction narratives on the response variables via perceived realistic threat depended on how accurate participants found, or how far they agreed with, the texts ($bs \geq \pm 0.020$). More specifically, the conditional indirect effects – in the hypothesized directions – on all response variables were significant for participants who indicated higher levels (1SD above the mean) of perceived accuracy of or alignment with the texts, but not for those who indicated lower levels (1SD below the mean) of these variables. Full results are found in S5 in the online supplementary material.

Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to study how residents of Latvia psychologically responded to content published by Sputnik Latvia, a news media outlet sponsored by the Kremlin. We began by analyzing the outlet's recent output, identifying several intertwined but distinct narratives that sought to depict Latvian society through grey-tinted glasses: as a disorganized and exploited state with an incompetent and corrupt government. Based on this, we questioned what affective and trust responses these narratives might trigger in Latvian audiences, and if this differed between the ethnic Latvian majority and Russian-speaking minority. Through survey experiments, we found that ethnic Latvian participants were significantly higher in anger after exposure to destruction narration, compared to a control group. Meanwhile, Russian-speakers were significantly lower in political trust and higher in anger after exposure to destruction narratives when compared to a control group, with the narratives' effect on anger being partially mediated by perceived realistic threat. Fear, conversely, was fully explained by the indirect effect through perceived realistic threat in Russian speakers.

What do these results tell us? Well, as with Hoyle et al. (2023), we find compelling evidence that narratives propagated by Russian state-sponsored media outlets can trigger significant and meaningful affective and trust responses in foreign audiences. Our results join growing research that points to the potential for these narratives to influence foreign audiences, opening a gateway to potentially increase division and tensions (e.g. Carter and Carter 2021; Fisher 2020). While previous studies have focused on American or West/Northern European audiences, the current study is, to our knowledge, the first experimental examination of how audiences in a post-Soviet state psychologically respond to Kremlin-sponsored narratives. Latvia's aforementioned inclusion in what Russia considers its "near abroad" underscores how very valuable such findings are; Russia has different goals for its near abroad than other states, and this study gives the first clues into how the use of narrative strategies is adapted to these goals.

Implementing suggested recommendations for future research, we found that reading Sputnik Latvia articles demonstrative of the destruction strategy heightened levels of perceived realistic threat which, in turn, partially or fully predicted the affective responses of Russian-speakers. This provides supporting evidence for the transdisciplinary mechanism proposed by Hoyle et al. (2023). In our focus groups, we saw that there was comparatively little focus on physical threat – on a macro- or micro-level in Latvia – in both groups, although one Russian-speaking participant did reflect on the threat posed by "crime, human shamelessness, poverty" that is "already in full bloom" in Latvia "because nobody is doing anything." Conversely, there was fervent discussion about the threat posed by economic instability, particularly in the Russian-speaking group. One participant, for example, remarked that they saw Latvia's economic standing as "very unstable because there is no production... That's what we must do, so that people have jobs, otherwise they are just living off taxes. Especially the government." Another summarized: "I believe that Latvia is in great danger, but not of war, but economic danger. I do not just mean security in terms of weapons and troops. Security are the same roads, the health system, salaries – that is security."

Often, the Russian-speaking group related the economic instability to the shortcomings of the Latvian government. In contrast, while the general sentiment was similar in the ethnic Latvian group,

participants appeared more pragmatic, acknowledging the crisis but refraining from attributing real blame. For example, one participant said: “We have a government that is trying, let us hope that everything will be alright. . . .” This is demonstrative of what we can interpret as several differences between the groups. Although invariance testing showed that, as predicted, the overall model fitted structurally similarly in both audiences, there were still small but noteworthy differences in the magnitude of the observed pathways. These minor discrepancies, coupled with insights from our qualitative data, suggest that more might be going on under the surface of these seemingly similar results.

One key point is that when contrasted to a control, Russian-speakers showed significantly lower levels of political trust after exposure to the destruction narratives, whereas ethnic Latvians did not. This might indicate a greater readiness to accept destruction narrative themes in Russian-speakers, an idea we raised in the introduction. Perhaps, indeed, Russian-speakers are more familiar with these themes, through low-level exposure through friends, family, or media. Several suggested disapproval of Latvia’s current geopolitical orientation, with much criticism stemming from participants’ belief that Latvia was too aligned with the US or the EU. For example, when asked who they thought the Latvian government was working for, several participants agreed: “In the interests of United States, of course . . . But certainly not in the interests of 40% of the Latvian population, the Russian-speaking.” When discussing Latvia’s economic fragility, another participant criticises the EU: “. . . although my opinion is that Latvia has many opportunities and, in principle . . . if Latvia were to leave the EU, we would achieve much more than in the EU. That is my utopian view.” Although sometimes these views were challenged by other participants, such statements reflect disapproval of Latvia’s current geopolitical system in some Russian-speakers.

Yet, it is perhaps most interesting to consider responses such as anger – a significant response in both groups. This effect was direct in the ethnic-Latvian participants, while for Russian-speakers, it was partially explained by increased realistic threat perceptions. This potentially reflects divergent motivations underlying these affective responses, with insights from both the focus groups and exploratory analyses supporting this. While both focus groups quickly deduced the pro-Kremlin origin of the articles, their discussions point to the ethnic Latvian participants’ anger being a reaction to this origin, whereas anger in the Russian-speaking group was linked to support of the narrative content. Indeed, several Russian-speaking participants indicated that the pro-Kremlin origin did not alter their opinion of the articles, and stated that they regularly accessed Russian state-sponsored media. In contrast, the Latvian group were critical of the articles’ Russian origin, calling them “nonsense” and “the purest mumbo-jumbo . . . just senseless talking.” Moreover, exploratory analyses showed two key supporting findings: that perceived accuracy and alignment with the texts were both higher in the Russian-speaking group, and in both groups, the indirect effects of the destruction narratives on the response variables depended on higher levels of agreement with, and perceived accuracy of, the texts.

This points to how affective responses may have different drivers despite appearing the same. Here, the indirect effects in Russian speakers are driven by them endorsing the articles’ messaging, irrespective of the articles’ origin, whereas the direct anger response in the ethnic Latvian group might stem from an inability to move past the articles’ Russian origin and anger towards the suspected outlet. It is anger, but *different types* of anger – a nuance the current model does not capture. Future studies could modify the model to separate the affective variables into responses to the content and to the messenger, which would allow for verification of the discussion above.

Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance of “buying into” the content matters in generating responses. A valuable addition to future research therefore might also be the inclusion of a measure gauging openness to Russian – or at least alternative – media as an additional moderator. Presumably, as with perceived accuracy and message alignment, more positive attitudes towards such media may also amplify the indirect pathways, whereas more negative attitudes may reduce it. One may presume that Russian-speakers are more positive

about Russian media – an idea that resonates with Szostek’s (2017) discussion of *linkage*—the maintenance of personal or cultural connections with a foreign state through various means – as a predictor of support for Russian strategic narration. Yet, positive attitudes towards Russian (or alternative) media do not necessarily have to correlate with proximity to Russia. Recent research on Swedish audiences accessing RT or Sputnik identified 7% of a representative sample as semi-regularly accessors (Wagnsson 2022) and a variety of reasons motivating this accessing (Wagnsson, Blad, and Hoyle 2023). This included a genuine alignment with RT/Sputnik messaging, but others engaged with the outlets due to criticism of establishment media. Extrapolating these findings, one might assume a large variance in pre-existing attitudes towards such media outlets in other societies. Indeed, the picture that emerges when considering the results in their entirety is that the responses triggered by Russian state-sponsored media articles are tricky to disentangle.

We should briefly reflect on the geopolitical context brewing in the background of this research: the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war that escalated in the spring of 2022. Studies have shown that negative polarization towards Russia is higher after this escalation in many European and Western societies, including Latvia (Delfi 2022), which will likely increase as the war continues. Although the effect this would have on the psychological responses displayed is difficult to gauge, its impact on responses such as anger in the ethnic Latvian group is to be presumed, particularly given the content of the articles participants were exposed to. Indeed, several participants referenced the war during the focus groups, albeit in passing. It is therefore an important context to keep in mind when interpreting the results.

In closing, it is worth reaffirming the key findings of this research. Our content analysis of Sputnik Latvia’s output delivered two main findings: the Kremlin-affiliated outlet focused disproportionately on projecting “destruction” narratives to portray Latvia as a failing, dependent state, and less so on “suppression” narratives that would denigrate Latvia’s cultural and moral values. We discussed possible reasons for this discrepancy. Focusing on destruction narratives, and extending Hoyle et al.’s (2023) survey experimental paradigm, we found evidence that exposure to destruction narratives elicited significant psychological responses in Latvian residents: affecting anger in both ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking residents, and levels of fear and political trust in Russian-speakers. Inspecting these responses more closely, and strengthening our interpretation with insights from focus groups, we reasoned that openness to Russian or alternative media narration may influence responses. This was supported by Russian-speakers generally rating the narrative content as more accurate and aligning more strongly with it. The results nuance our understanding of how foreign audiences respond to Kremlin narration, demonstrating that reactions are not generalizable and the recipient’s background can imbue even short-term responses. This research contributes to several disciplines including, but not limited to, psychology, communication science, political science, and post-Soviet studies. It further motivates several directions for future research, that if followed, can develop a more nuanced understanding of the micro-level effects of international propaganda.

Notes

1. Corresponding references for the numerous citations to Sputnik Latvia in this article can be found in the article’s online supplementary material.
2. ECRB number: 2022-SP-15402.
3. Based on previous simulations by Hoyle et al. (2023), a sample of at least 332 would be necessary to achieve at least 80% power of detecting an effect in the parameters of interest.

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