

Weapons of mass division: *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narratives and testing the rejection-identification model in Russian speakers in Latvia

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Abstract

The effects of exposure to Russian propaganda have long been feared; however, academic research examining responses is scarce. This study aims to investigate the responses of Russian speakers in Latvia to a narrative propagated by the Kremlin-sponsored media outlet *Sputnik Latvia* that narrates Latvian government policy as Russophobic. The potential to entrench existing ethno-political divisions has been highlighted as a possible effect of Russian speakers consuming this narration. We adopt a comprehensive, mixed-method research approach, where we first provide an analysis of the content of *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narrative in its recent output. Then, using this analysis, we examine how Russian-speaking participants respond to this content in a preregistered survey experiment and a focus group. Theoretically, we orient around the *rejection-identification model*. This predicts individuals to generally experience lower well-being after perceiving group-based discrimination, but that embracing the stigmatized identity can help maintain well-being despite this perceived devaluation. Our results showed that even brief exposure to *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narrative led to higher levels of perceived discrimination and group identification in Russian speakers. However, we found no significant effects on well-being, which deviates from extant literature on discrimination. We discuss the reasons for this and suggest future directions.

KEYWORDS

identity, Latvia, malign information influence, rejection identification, Russia, state-sponsored media

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives projected by the Kremlin transnational media are frequently seen as intent on cultivating tensions and hampering cohesion. Exemplifying the perceived seriousness of this threat, the European Commission announced a controversial ban of Kremlin-sponsored media outlets RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik in March 2022, referring to the outlets' attempts to "sow the seeds of division in our Union" (European Commission, 2022). Yet, (experimental) research investigating if and how consuming Kremlin narratives leads to meaningful psychological responses is scarce, and there is little empirical evidence demonstrating effects of the consumption of Kremlin-sponsored narratives (cf. Carter & Carter, 2021; Fisher, 2020; Hoyle et al., 2023). The current study aims to address this gap by examining the possible effects of Kremlin-sponsored transnational media narratives on identity.

Effects on identity are especially relevant for audiences within post-Soviet states. As the Kremlin searches for ways to (re)build its influence in the space, an element may involve strengthening relations with Russian "compatriots"—the term used by the Kremlin to describe Russian speakers living outside Russian borders (e.g., Berzina, 2016; Ekmanis, 2020). President Vladimir Putin has himself indicated this goal, sketching the "protection" of Russian speakers as a "right and duty" and emphasizing that the "global Russian community" transcends formal ethnicity and incorporates "Russian-speaking citizens, people who feel themselves a part of the so-called broad Russian world" (Putin, 2014). For countries such as the Baltic state of Latvia, consolidation of the Russian-speaking identity has been problematized as a threat to societal cohesion. Latvian society is sharply divided along ethnolinguistic lines, and although many contend that comparisons between Ukraine and the Baltic states are overblown and unrealistic (e.g., Ekmanis, 2020), Kachuyevski (2017) argues that Russia's invasions of Ukraine have "securitized divisive issues in Latvian society regarding historical memory, language preference, transnational media, and ethnic identity" (p. 239).

Our goal is to examine the effects of Russian speakers in Latvia consuming a "Russophobia" narrative that is frequently propagated by the Russian-language version of the Kremlin-sponsored media outlet *Sputnik Latvia*. This outlet is particularly relevant as it represents an official and direct voice of the Kremlin speaking to Russian speakers in Latvia. Moreover, such state-sponsored media outlets are often considered initiators of narratives that spread on social media or through more local media outlets (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019). Indeed, research by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2020) has documented many instances of Kremlin-sponsored media projecting narratives portraying different state governments as discriminatory towards Russian speakers.

The Russophone identity in Latvia

Out of Latvia's population of approximately 1.9 million people, around 37% use Russian as their primary language.¹ This minority is often treated as a well-defined ethnolinguistic unit, contrasted against the ethnic-Latvian majority. Latvian media or politics frequently refer to and consequently engrain this ethnolinguistic distinction (Kapraņš & Mieriņa, 2019). Yet, researchers have contemplated the contours of Russian-speaking identity in ex-Soviet states since the 1990s (e.g., Laitin, 1998), with many voicing skepticism regarding the degree to which Russian speakers in these regions can be reasonably amalgamated into a singular and meaningful social group. In Latvia, several different ethnic minorities fall within this umbrella, including ethnic Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, and other former-Soviet identities, and the

¹Recent estimates put Russian as the mother tongue of 37% of Latvian residents (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2022).

group is marked by a wide diversity regarding citizenship status, language knowledge, and generation of immigration. However, the current consensus is that during the post-Soviet transition, a distinct yet composite and inherently fragmented identity emerged which is lingua-culturally centered around the Russian language (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019; Vihalemm et al., 2019). Importantly, this identity is seen as separate from a wholly “Russian” identity; studies have shown that Baltic Russian speakers view themselves as culturally connected to, but ultimately distinct from, Russians in Russia (Kolstø, 1996).

After the break-up of the USSR, the newly constituted Latvia had been initially regarded as a state with great potential to integrate Russian speakers. Laitin (1998) argued that the conditions for integration—the partial adoption of a new culture while maintaining the old one—or even full assimilation—the total adoption of a new culture at the expense of an old one (Sam & Berry, 2010)—were promising in Latvia. Yet, while some assessments have indicated progress, others highlight “several patterns of separation and exclusion in the media and in public and political life” that are “stable and deep-rooted” (Muižnieks, 2010, p. 282). Several social or economic factors, such as (perceptions of) economic discrimination (Hynek, 2020) or a persisting conflict in perceptions of history (Gruzina, 2011) have been floated as reasons for this lack of progress. While many Russian speakers have shown an enthusiasm for learning Latvian and embracing aspects of Latvian culture, research has shown that they have maintained a preference for either simultaneously displaying their Russian-speaking identity alongside a Latvian one, or even for a separation of the two spheres entirely, instead of full assimilation (Pisarenko, 2006). Indeed, this group's connection to Latvia appears complex. Focus group research showed that Russian speakers continue to perceive exclusion regarding Latvian culture (Cheskin, 2013, p. 304), while survey research on Russian speakers showed an inconsistent pattern of identification with Latvia which largely depends on generational differences or positions on geopolitical issues (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019).

Discussing how the Russophone identity in Latvia might consolidate, Ammon Cheskin (2015) argues that two things need to occur: Russian speakers must simultaneously view their “nationalizing states” of residence—Latvia—in a more negative light, and their imagined “external homeland”—Russia—more positively (p. 87). He discusses that while Latvia's stronger economic standing, relative to Russia, may discourage consolidation of the Russian-speaking identity, motivation might be more readily found in the cultural or political domains. The combination of the widespread perception that the Latvian state is culturally discriminatory (Berzina, 2016), and Russia's consistent positive influence through media and linguistic avenues (Gruzina, 2011), affords Russia potential leverage to rupture integration processes. Moreover, additional political leverage might be found as a result of Latvia's citizenship policies, which are widely seen as strict and exclusionary (Berzina, 2016). These policies preclude those born in or who relocated to Latvia after the 1940 Soviet occupation but have not yet taken or passed the naturalization exams from, for example, participating in local politics.

Kremlin narratives of Russophobia and possible identity responses

Highlighting the persecutory approach of the Latvian state to Russian speakers has been posited as a potential mechanism for the Kremlin to consolidate the Russophone identity (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021). Itzigsohn and Saucedo (2002) term this ‘reactive transnationalism’, whereby perceived discrimination by the ‘nationalizing state’ results in reduced well-being and a reactionary ‘thickening’ of the identification with their ‘external homeland’. Survey data has shown that 56.2% of Russian speakers interviewed agreed that non-Latvian speakers are discriminated against by the Latvian state and 41.3% agreed that the rights and interests of Russian speakers were violated in a way that justified Russian intervention (Berzina, 2016). Indeed, another survey showed that 48% of sampled Russian

speakers at least somewhat agreed that “the Latvian government endangers the existence of Russian language and culture in Latvia” (Kaprāns & Mierīņa, 2019). Frequently cited examples of this perceived marginalization are Latvia's aforementioned citizenship policy and language-reform measures prohibiting Latvian education institutions from teaching in a non-EU language.

Psychologically, different models have been proposed to account for how individuals may negotiate their group identities in the face of discrimination, such as the *identity-acculturation model* (Gonzales-Backen et al., 2018), the *rejection-identification model* (RIM) (Branscombe et al., 1999), or the *rejection-disidentification model* (RDIM) (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). The latter two are most pertinent for the current study, providing mirroring images of how Russian speakers in Latvia may respond to perceived Russophobia. While extant discrimination research suggests that increased discrimination perceptions should negatively impact one's well-being and the desire to identify with the discriminated identity (Schmitt et al., 2014), the RIM posits that perceived discrimination can encourage stronger identification with aspects of the discriminated identity, which in turn, boosts well-being. Harmful effects can be mitigated if the discriminated individual more strongly identifies with the minority ingroup identity, leading to group-based strategies of rejecting the majority outgroup standards and accentuating aspects of the discriminated identity that differentiate them from the majority. Alternatively, the RDIM suggests that minority group members perceiving discrimination may choose to distance themselves from the majority group, as differences between the groups after discrimination are more apparent (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). In contrast to RIM, RDIM predicts withdrawal behavior, as well as more negative affective responses for minority group members.

Support has been found for the rejection-(dis)identification models have been observed in a variety of social groups, including religious groups (Doane & Elliott, 2015), people with mental illness (Crabtree et al., 2010), and other ethnic minorities in different countries (Verkuyten, 2008). Yet, support is not resolute, and counterevidence has been found in, for example, first-generation American immigrants (Wiley et al., 2013) or ex-prisoners (Kyprianides et al., 2019) where inconsistent results were obtained. For the current study, one of the most interesting studies is one of the few experimentally based examinations of rejection-(dis)identification (Jetten et al., 2001). Here, the authors showed that experimentally inducing perceptions of discrimination in people with body piercings led to an identification with the ingroup that mitigated effects on collective self-esteem. The study provides a good basis for future experimental studies into rejection-(dis)identification.

We argue that when considering the context of Kremlin influence in the post-Soviet diaspora communities, RIM is more pertinent to test as increasing personal or collective self-esteem—fundamental aspects of well-being—by tethering it to the Russian-speaking identity is a desirable outcome for the Kremlin. Indeed, Ryazanov-Clarke (2017) discusses concerted efforts by the Kremlin to increase “transnational pride”—a sense of belonging to “The Russian world”—in Russian speakers living outside of Russia. Conversely, the erosion of attachment to the Latvian majority only partially aligns with the Kremlin's aforementioned assumed goals; while it precipitates incohesion, it does not necessarily imply an identity shift towards Russia. Therefore, the current study positions RIM as its focal model, while retaining RDIM exploratively. Nevertheless, experimentally testing rejection-(dis)identification models in the Baltic context provides a further novel contribution of the current study, adding to psychological scholarship about the tensions regarding identity in the region (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2018).

The current study

To examine if and how Kremlin transnational media narratives of Russophobia in Latvia affect identity conceptions of Latvian Russophones, we adopt a cumulative three-study, mixed-method approach. We begin with a narrative analysis in which we evaluate the ways *Sputnik Latvia* operationalizes this Russophobia narrative. This is an important step for three reasons. First, it provides a general understanding of how antagonistic narratives might be designed, which is important when considering their potential success/failure in influencing audiences. Second, it updates previous examinations of how Latvian society is portrayed in Russian media (e.g., Muižnieks, 2008). Finally, it provides a direct stepping stone to the two later studies looking at responses, by providing stimulus material sourced from real-life content that Russian speakers in Latvia could be exposed to. After the narrative analysis, we move on to examining responses to the narrative. We approach this in two distinct but complementary ways: a survey experiment and a focus group of Russian speakers in Latvia. This mirroring approach affords us a more comprehensive view; we can gauge quantitatively any significant responses the articles trigger, while also exploring the underlying motivations and thought processes behind these responses.

STUDY 1: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Narrative analysis seeks to grasp narratives by examining the way subjects are addressed, the emphasis placed on specific elements, the framing employed, the key characters involved, and how the story maintains its cohesion as a narrative sequence. Therefore, our focus was specifically directed towards assessing the communication of various themes and topics, alongside the content itself. We conducted our narrative analysis on articles published by *Sputnik Latvia* between December 1, 2021, and February 28, 2022, scraping data before the ban was enforced on March 2, 2022. Details on data selection can be found in the online [supporting information \(S1\)](#).

Our overall analysis identified eight distinct but intersecting strategic narratives. In this article, we focus solely on *Sputnik Latvia's* deployment of the Russophobia narrative, which was the most frequent in the sample, appearing in 80 of the 300 articles. We will, however, note when and how other identified narratives intersected with this narrative.² In the following section, we will describe and analyze the Russophobia strategic narrative, illustrating our analysis with some pertinent examples. Referenced articles can be found in the online [supporting information \(S2\)](#).

Sputnik Latvia's Russophobia narrative

Our analysis indicated that across the sampled period, the Russophobia narrative comprised two main overarching themes: criticism of the Russian language reforms and of restrictions to Russian (–language) media in Latvian borders. Further discussion of other examples presented by *Sputnik Latvia* during the period can be found in the online [supporting information \(S3\)](#).

²The other strategic narratives identified in the corpus were labeled “Life in Latvia is bad”; “Anti-West”; “Latvian institutional failure”; “Anti-Latvian government”; “Anti-Woke”; “Fascism in Latvia”; and “Soviet pride”.

Russian language in Latvia

The language reforms in Latvian schools, which obligate Russian minority schools to teach in Latvian, were narrated as a clear example of the persecution of Russian speakers. The national government's position is that moving towards the Latvian language in education is important for both enhancing the opportunities for young people in Latvia and for strengthening the state's cohesion (LSM, 2018). *Sputnik Latvia*, however, depicts the reforms as a flagrant violation of human rights.

Generally, the articles have a tone of outrage and anger. Several articles navigate the frustration of Russian speakers towards this policy, who take issue with the language being relegated to minority status and feel “deceived” by the Latvian government (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022a). Indeed, one interviewee details his feelings of betrayal regarding how the state promised that education in Russian would continue, but “one government after another took a course to eradicate everything Russian ... including the complete destruction of education in Russian” (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022b). Another interviewee suggests that this would not have happened if European structures protected the rights of the Russophone population of the Baltic States in the same way they fight, for example, for LGBT rights. Thus, a European hypocrisy is also intimated.

Statements by the Latvian president Egils Levits are also labeled as Russophobic. Levits is said to be inciting hatred by trying to stamp out the Russian language, something he has “long dreamt of” (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022c). This intersects with other strategic narratives presented by *Sputnik Latvia*, namely of a cold, incompetent, and corrupt Latvian government, and a pernicious Nazism brewing in Latvian society. In one particularly inflammatory article, the co-chairman of the Russian Union of Latvia party is quoted describing Levits as having “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*, 2022d). Similarly, commentators interviewed by *Sputnik Latvia* scoff at the absurdity that a president tries to “justify the persecution of the culture of 40% of the inhabitants ... with an argument about the ‘non-European’ nature of this culture”.

Some articles, however, take an alternative approach in their criticism, instead employing techniques to stimulate sympathy. One story quotes the director of a Russian-language private school claiming the Latvian state “began to tighten the screws” and “deprive” the school as soon as “the first signs of discrimination on the basis of language were outlined.” Here, she laments the detrimental effects this has on children, for whom schooling in Latvian is detrimental. In another interview, a teacher warns of “psycho-emotional instability, stress, tears” for children who are the ultimate sufferers of the government's policy (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022b). Across these articles, the staff are presented as so overworked and distressed that they cannot prevent the harm done to their students.

Russian media in Latvia

The state-level ban of Russian media in Latvia is also leveraged as the second major example of institutionalized Russophobia in Latvia. The intensity of this plot increases as tensions over Russia's position towards Ukraine develop and the Latvian government blocks more Russian media. Here, as with the issue of the language reforms, the banning of Russian media is narrated as having been ardently pursued. Often, the term “harassment” is used to describe how the Latvian government has consistently worked to curtail Russian media in Latvia. Many articles focus on the hypocrisy of Baltic governments, describing them as paying “demagogic” lip service to democratic values but, in reality, enforcing harsh and unjustified censorship in practice (e.g., *Sputnik Latvia*, 2022e, 2022f). References are made

to the commitment to freedom of speech and information that is ratified in the Latvian constitution, wryly questioning how this commitment is congruous with the ban on Russian media (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022g).

The ban is also instrumentalized to emphasize what *Sputnik Latvia* promotes as a divide in values between the government and the Latvian population, intersecting with an “anti-woke” strategic narrative also observed in the corpus. Across several articles, the ban is presented as “a method of intellectual impotence” (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022e) whereby all residents of Latvia are prevented from accessing views opposing the government's ideological position. Quoting statements from the Kremlin, one article suggests that the Latvian government is using the ban to “finally deprive society of an alternative point of view to the mainstream...something that has not been agreed with the White House and Downing Street” (*Sputnik Latvia*, 2022f). With the bans of Russian media, *Sputnik Latvia* latches onto an image of the Latvian government as, overcome by their Russophobia, backsliding on their liberal democratic commitments.

INTERIM DISCUSSION

The above analysis demonstrates that there is a clear lens through which *Sputnik Latvia* wants Russian speakers to view the Latvian state and its people. In *Sputnik Latvia's* view, Russophobia in Latvia has been institutionalized, and this process has also trickled down and calcified in the general public, who are portrayed as sensitive and irascible when they come across instances of Russian culture. This bias is portrayed as inherent and predictable; there is a tone of almost cynical banality baked into the narration—emphasizing this persecution as an enduring problem. The narrative includes several aspects, but the plot points that were the most apparent across the 3 months were the reforms by the state to the language of Latvian schools and the bans of Russian media in Latvia. With both topics, *Sputnik Latvia* carves an image of Latvia as a hypocritical state, striving to eradicate Russian culture from Latvia. However, we also see the Russophobia narrative seeping into other areas of *Sputnik Latvia's* content, intersecting with other strategic narratives such as promoting the Soviet legacy in Latvia or condemning the “import” of woke European values.

Importantly, *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative rarely includes irrefutably false information. The narrated events are generally all verifiable, and there are indeed reasonable and legitimate concerns about the Latvian government's policies towards Russian speakers (Schulze, 2021). What we do analyze, however, is how the narrative envelops factual developments in the Latvian government's policies towards Russian speakers in antagonistic and hostile language, often decontextualizing or removing details and presenting biased accounts of the events. Here, *Sputnik Latvia's* employment of the narrative corresponds to how recent scholarship has moved beyond rudimentary understandings of disinformation as the simple intentional dissemination of false information, to (re-)theorize disinformation as a “context-bound deliberate act” of “de-contextualizing, manipulating or fabricating information” (Hameleers, 2022, p. 1). It also differs from *Sputnik Latvia's* presentations of domestic affairs in other European states (Hoyle et al., 2021; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019) which more frequently and egregiously deviate from reality.

The consequent question is, then: How do Russian speakers respond to this narrative? More specifically, does exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative elicit changes to the perception of discrimination in Russian speakers? This is an important question, as Russian speakers may dismiss such narratives. As a direct follow-up to this, we ask two highly intertwined questions: (1) Does exposure to the narrative reduce psychological well-being in Russian speakers? (2) Is identification with the Russian-speaking identity associated with an increase in psychological well-being? We approach these questions from both a quantitative

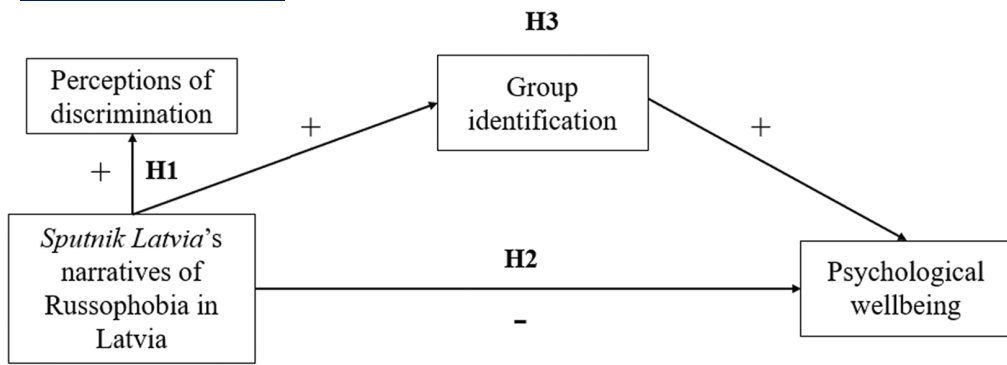


FIGURE 1 A model depicting the hypothesized responses to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative.

and qualitative perspective, using both a survey experiment and a focus group to get closer to understanding the responses exposure to this narrative triggers. We present the survey experiment first and then move onto the focus group.

STUDY 2: SURVEY EXPERIMENT

To allow for formal testing of the above questions, we devised three hypotheses, depicted in Figure 1:

Hypothesis 1. Exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative should lead to higher levels of perceived discrimination when compared to a control.

Hypothesis 2. Exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative will have a direct negative effect on psychological well-being.

Hypothesis 3. The effects of exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative will result in an indirect positive effect on group identification, and in turn, a positive impact on psychological well-being.

This survey experiment was preregistered on the Open Science Framework on August 26, 2022. Ethics approval from the [University withheld for peer review] was acquired on September 27, 2022,³ and data collection began on October 3, 2022.

Participants

Participants were recruited by the Latvian-based research company Norstat. They had to use Russian as their first language and be 18 or above. As indicated in our preregistration, we excluded outliers in completion time ($+3.00$ *SD*) and participants who failed the attention check. The final sample size was 268 participants (160 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 49$ years). Seventy-nine percent of the sample identified as ethnically Russian, with the remainder self-identifying as Belarussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, or Jewish. More details about the power analysis

³ECRB number: 2022-SP-15402.

and demographics of the participants can be found in the online [supporting information \(S4, S5\)](#).

Design

We used a between-participants survey experiment design with one factor (narrative exposure) and two levels (exposed to *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narrative or control).

Materials

All stimulus materials and scales used in this experiment can be found on the [online repository](#).

Stimulus materials

Experimental condition

Narrative exposure, our independent variable, was manipulated by asking participants in the narrative exposure condition to read two short articles. The articles selected were taken directly from the preceding narrative analysis and were seen as good examples of *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narrative. Crucially, the two articles reflected the mirroring aspects of the aforementioned main themes identified in the narrative analysis.

Control condition

The participants were exposed to two texts that contained the same or similar information as the corresponding experimental conditions, but they were comprised of mainly facts and were neutral in tone. This method has been used by other studies that sought to measure psychological responses to strategic narratives (e.g., Hoyle et al., 2023). By exposing participants to the same, or as similar as possible, information in a factual and unemotional manner, the effects of the narrative are then isolated. We constructed the control articles by extracting excerpts from press releases or official statements relevant to the topic at hand. This was done to decrease any emotional language and preserve the objective style of reporting in contrast to the experimental condition.

Presentation of materials

We ensured a comparable presentation of stimulus materials in both conditions: All articles, about 500 words in length, were presented as plain text, isolating the influence to the narrative content alone. Participants were informed that the texts came from international media, excluding *Sputnik Latvia*. This ensures generalizability since RT/Sputnik content is frequently encountered via local or social media, aligning with previous studies on responses to Kremlin narratives (e.g., Hoyle et al., 2023).

Variables and instruments

Confirmatory variables

Perceived discrimination. We assessed perceived discrimination using two items measuring perceptions of (personal and group) discrimination based on ethnicity, as used by Armenta and Hunt (2009). Both personal and group discrimination are useful here as *Sputnik Latvia* mainly discusses state-level policy that they see as Russophobic, meaning perceptions of

discrimination could be both personal and collective. Participants indicated their agreement with two statements: “I experience discrimination because of my ethnicity” and “Other people of my ethnicity experience discrimination” on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*). The correlation between these two items was high ($r = .63$).

Group identification. As in Jetten et al. (2001), group identification was measured using four items that comprise the identity subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) collective self-esteem scale. Participants indicated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), for example: “Being a Russian speaker is an important reflection of who I am.” The scale showed good internal reliability, with an average interitem correlation of .24.⁴

Well-being. As in many studies looking at rejection-(dis)identification, we conceptualized well-being by looking into self-esteem (Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Ball et al., 2023; Bourguignon et al., 2006; Jetten et al., 2001). As discussed in the introduction, tethering Russian speakers' self-esteem to the Russian-speaking identity is a strategically desirable endeavor for the Kremlin. Due to unacceptable fit statistics,⁵ we deviated slightly from our preregistration which stated that we would use a composite score for psychological well-being, created by combining personal and collective self-esteem scales. Instead, we proceeded with the collective self-esteem scale only, following the most directly relevant study (Jetten et al., 2001).

Collective self-esteem was measured using 12 items that comprise the membership, public and private components of Luhtanen and Crocker's scale. Participants indicated agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), for example with this counterindicative item: “I often regret that I belong to some of the social groups I do.” The scale showed good reliability, $\alpha = .83$.

Attention check. Participants were given an instructed-response item embedded in the collective self-esteem scale.

Exploratory variables

Sense of belonging. As an exploratory measure to analyze the tenets of the rejection-disidentification model, we included the relational subscale of the sense of belonging to the country scale used by Kolesovs (2021). Participants indicated agreement with four items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), for example: “I feel accepted in Latvia.” The scale showed strong internal reliability, with an average interitem correlation of .55.

Procedure

Participants, after giving informed consent, were randomly assigned to the “narrative exposure” or a corresponding control condition. They were then instructed to read the stimulus material for at least 2 minutes. Finally, they completed posttest and final check items, with counterbalancing both across and within scales.

⁴Cronbach's alpha was 0.56. However, alpha is often lower for scales with under 10 items (Pallant, 2020). Therefore, we also look at the average interitem correlation which has been deemed as more appropriate for scales with fewer items. This has an ideal range of 0.15–0.5 (Clark & Watson, 1995).

⁵These statistics can be found in the online [supporting information \(S7\)](#).

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in [Table 1](#). All analysis was done in R; data and code for our analyses can be found on the [online repository](#). The results of exploratory analyses can be found in the [supporting information \(S8\)](#).

Effect on perceived discrimination

A Welch two-sample *t*-test showed that the level of perceived discrimination was significantly higher in participants who had read the Sputnik Russophobia articles than those who read the control texts: $t(265.48) = 2.79$, $p = .003$, $d = .341$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Effect on group identification

A second Welch two-sample *t*-test showed that the level of identification as a Russian speaker was significantly higher in participants who had read the *Sputnik* Russophobia articles than those who read the control texts: $t(265.4) = 2.02$, $p = .022$, $d = .247$.

Testing the rejection-identification model

We estimated our preregistered mediation model (depicted in [Figure 2](#)) using the Hayes' PROCESS macro in R with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5000 bootstrap samples, controlling for age, gender, and level of education. Exposure to *Sputnik*'s Russophobia narratives did not result in significantly lower levels of collective self-esteem, $b = -.112$, $\beta = -.14$, $t(262) = -1.132$, $p = .285$, 95% CI = $[-.306, .083]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Exposure to *Sputnik*'s Russophobia narrative led to a significantly higher level of group identification, $b = .217$, $\beta = .431$, $t(263) = 1.99$, $p = .048$, 95% CI = $[.002, .431]$. However, higher levels of group identification did not significantly predict higher levels of collective self-esteem $b = .032$, $\beta = .055$, $t(262) = .568$, $p = .571$, 95% CI = $[-.078, .141]$. The indirect effect of exposure to *Sputnik*'s Russophobia narrative on collective self-esteem through group identification, as suggested by the RIM, was also not significant $b = .007$, 95% CI = $[-.021, .039]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

STUDY 3: FOCUS GROUP

Method and procedure

Our final analysis comprised a focus group with Russian speakers in Latvia. The focus group took place on the October 27, 2022, after data collection for the survey experiment was concluded, at a location in Riga, Latvia. All seven participants were recruited by Norstat, and care was taken to ensure that the group had diversity in age, gender, region, ethnicity, and education level. All participants used Russian as their main language of communication. Participants were able to choose their names when participating but to ensure anonymity, all names have been changed. More details about the participants can be found in the [online supporting information \(S6\)](#).

Participants were asked to read the two articles provided in the survey experiment and to share their initial impressions. They were then guided through questions that were based

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of dependent variables.

Condition	Sputnik		Control		1	2	3	4	5
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
1. Perceived discrimination	4.96	1.65	4.38	1.70	—				
2. Group identification	4.22	.92	4.00	.87	.42*	—			
3. Collective self-esteem	5.45	.79	5.56	.87	-.11	.03	—		
4. Personal self-esteem	5.61	.91	5.63	.98	-.18*	-.09	.50*	—	
5. Sense of belonging	5.02	1.40	5.11	1.26	-.46*	-.30*	.38*	.46*	—

**p* < .01.

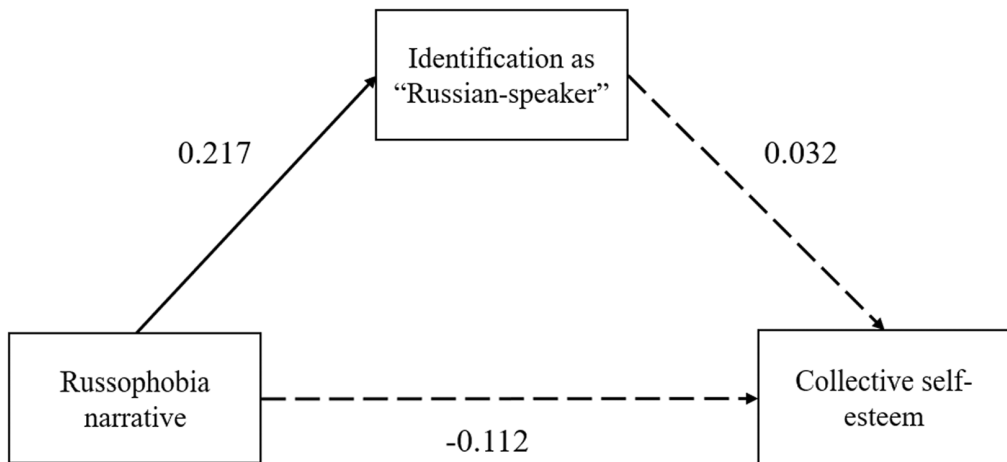


FIGURE 2 The resulting mediation model depicting the relationships between exposure to Sputnik's Russophobia narrative, group identification, and collective self-esteem. Paths are depicted using standardized estimates. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant pathways.

on the survey items. This included enquiring about how the articles made them feel as a Russian speaker, if it affected their self-esteem, and the extent to which they perceived discrimination by the Latvian state due to being a Russian speaker. A full list of questions can be seen in the online [supporting information \(S5\)](#). Afterwards, they were informed that the articles were published by *Sputnik Latvia* and asked about their media-consumption patterns.

Results

Perceived discrimination

In general, there was a consensus among participants that Russian speakers in Latvia were discriminated against. When asked this perceived discrimination on a 1–5 scale, most participants selected 4 or 5, and many were frank in their reasoning for this. For example, one participant says “I believe [we are discriminated against] to a great extent. 5 out of 5. Discrimination is concrete” (Aleksandrs). Another agrees, responding to the article content by explaining her sadness regarding policies focused on the Russian language:

“4 out of 5. When people from Ukraine came to us, many of them do not know English, we who know Russian help them in Russian on the street... And I, as a Russian speaker, help them in Russian. I don't want to cause harm when speaking Russian. And the fact that we are forbidden to learn this language and to speak it. It's sad” (Marija).

Participants referred to feelings of unfairness over Latvian policy. In response to the second article on Russian media, one participant says “Well, I guess I have a heightened sense of injustice. I believe that one part of the population has no right to ban something from another part of the population” (Tatjana).

However, a handful of participants disagreed, often invoking a more pragmatic self-reliant response to any discrimination that they may face in Latvia. Indeed, two participants

independently referred to feelings of self-sufficiency as a buffer to possible rejection: One participant was dismissive of the articles, suggesting that she felt no discrimination and instead proclaimed her self-sufficiency as a method of circumventing any discrimination, stating: "I don't feel discrimination, no ... I'm self-sufficient" (Natalja). A second participant echoed this, articulating: "I think I'll give 1 out of 5, because I'm integrated enough. I agree that I'm self-sufficient." (Tatjana).

The prevailing sentiment underpinning participants' responses to questions of discrimination was resignation, and participants were matter of fact about the discrimination they perceived. For example, one participant was pessimistic about change, suggesting that attempts to reduce discrimination would be in vain: "It's too late to discuss it. Time has already been lost; it should have been won in the 90s. Now it's useless: the subject is forgotten. And as it is, so it will be" (Aleksandrs). When asked if it is upsetting to read the articles, one participant says "No, these aren't, because we have heard it so many times for 30 years" (Vladimirs). Another approached questions about discrimination in a more detached manner: "when someone suggests that I go somewhere else, I basically laugh... It rather annoys me as a thinking person, intellectually, that someone, on the basis of some assumptions, tells me what language I should speak, what channels I should watch" (Tatjana).

Identity

There were also differences in how participants negotiated their Russian-speaking identities. A handful of participants voiced an apparently strong attachment to their Russian-speaking identity. As we see in the above quote, one participant presented a very black-and-white view of her identity: "I don't have an identity crisis. I am definitely Russian—living in Latvia. I have no other homeland" (Tatjana). Another participant discussed the comfort a Russian-speaking bubble gives them while residing in Latvia: "I like that there is a Russian-speaking presence. I feel comfortable" (Juijs). Another, older participant, indicated that she, in fact, identified as more Soviet, rather than Russian-speaking or Latvian: "My homeland is the Soviet Union. I am an old woman. I live here, but it is not mine" (Natalja).

Many participants also invoked their Russian-speaking identity when discussing discrimination. For example, one participant discussed how fear of discrimination makes them hesitant to speak in Russian: "But in public, sometimes I am afraid that when I speak Russian, I see those judgmental looks ... I tense up when I have to call somewhere. If I used to be able to calmly ask something in Russian, now I wonder how I will be answered. Whether I will be answered at all. Obviously, it is forbidden now ... some inferiority complex is instilled in people" (Marija).

However, several participants also indicated that, for them, they felt the strongest attachment to Latvia, although it is complex. Despite perceiving discrimination and holding grievances with the Latvian state, Latvia was their homeland. This complexity is perhaps best exemplified by two quotes:

"I love Latvia very much. I really do. I wish my country prosperity, I am always with different initiatives, I sort waste. I take part in clean-ups; I take part in charitable things ... I am unhappy, without any doubt, because of the political situation in Latvia. I am aware that there are two communities, an ethnic conflict. Eyes are closed to that. And it is latently, without any doubt, being encouraged. And that is very sad." (Rita)

“I can say that I was born in Latvia, and I feel that I belong to this country. The sea, the pine trees—this is all mine. I love this country very much. I do not love the politicians, those who run this country, who do not respect their people and do not strive for prosperity, friendship. Because to set two great nations against each other is hatred. And it is being cultivated. There can be nothing positive here” (Tatjana)

Both quotes exemplify the connection that these participants felt to Latvia, in spite of the acknowledged difficulties that being Russian speaking in Latvia presents.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our point of departure for our final two studies was the narrative analysis of *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative, where we observed that the outlet renders a reality for Russian speakers in Latvia where their language, media, and culture is under extreme threat. We proceeded to examine how Russian speakers responded to such. As hypothesized, participants exposed to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative were indeed significantly higher in perceived discrimination when compared to those exposed to the control texts. This result was corroborated in reflections from the focus group, where most participants indicated high levels of perceived discrimination. Additionally, survey-experiment participants exposed to the narrative were significantly higher in their identification as Russian speakers when compared to a control, and exploratory mediation analyses showed that this was predicted by perceived discrimination. However, when testing the tenets of the RIM, we found incomplete support in our experimental results: Exposure to the Russophobia narrative did not lead to lower levels of well-being, and stronger identification did not predict higher well-being. Insights from the focus group also appeared to support this notion, with participants appearing mostly unphased by the discrimination they felt.

The most important takeaway from our survey experiment is that exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative was enough to elicit significantly higher levels of both perceived discrimination and identification as a Russian speaker. This is striking as it shows that even in the short term—participants were asked to read just two brief articles from *Sputnik Latvia*—exposure to this narrative could elicit meaningful, albeit small, differences. The results converge with the nascent research agenda looking at the psychological effects of Russian antagonistic narratives in foreign audiences (Fisher, 2020; Hoyle et al., 2023). Crucially, we saw that the higher levels of group identification were mediated by perceived discrimination.

This is an important finding as it speaks to the influence that Kremlin media can have in diaspora communities. This is particularly pertinent in states where Russian is an official language such as former Soviet states in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, or used as a lingua franca, such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, or countries in the Caucasus. It is also pertinent for countries with significant Russian-speaking diasporas, such as Germany or Finland. Yet, this effect need not be limited to Russian speakers, and such results might point to the pertinence of increasing resilience in states with other large diaspora communities. For example, the Netherlands has large communities of Moroccan and Turkish (Dijkink & Van Der Welle, 2009). With reports pointing to similar levels of perceived discrimination in these communities (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2020), this mechanism of highlighting perceived discriminatory practices by national governments could potentially be used by Russia to foment discord or reduce cohesion in the Netherlands. Further research could

explore the extent to which Kremlin media targets other diaspora communities with similar narratives.

The story of our results was clouded somewhat when we saw that exposure to the Russophobia narratives did not lead to significantly lower levels of well-being. Moreover, the indirect pathways predicting higher levels of well-being through higher identification as a Russian speaker were not significant. That exposure to provocative narration about one's ethnic group being discriminated against did not lower levels of well-being is puzzling. It stands in direct contrast to both the RIM and prevailing wisdom from decades of discrimination research (Schmitt et al., 2014). It resonates, however, with how Cheskin (2013) describes his Russophone focus group members as "phlegmatic" about the discrimination they experience, where they "generally expressed a sense of miscomprehension rather than anger at certain phenomena" (p. 302). Our focus participants, too, were unemotional and stoic when asked to respond to how the reports of discrimination made them feel.

A possible reason for this lack of effect might be that this Russophobia narrative has been so enduring that, although acknowledged, it is unable to trigger any shifts in self-identity. Indeed, questions regarding the extent to which Latvian policymaking towards Russian speakers can be considered discriminatory are not new and have been debated for decades (Dobson, 2001; Dobson & Jones, 1998). Indeed, focus group participants referring to how deeply engrained and protensive they perceive the discrimination in Latvian society to be, as well as their pragmatic deferrals to their sense of self-sufficiency, may lend support to this notion.

An alternative, perhaps more positive, interpretation might be that Russian speakers in Latvia are integrated to a degree that would render efforts to have them disidentify as fruitless. Interestingly, our exploratory analyses revealed that the overarching mechanism for rejection-disidentification—that perceptions of discrimination should predict lower levels of identification with the national Latvian majority—was also not supported by our survey experiment results. There was no meaningful difference in the participants' sense of belonging to Latvia after exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative, contradicting general trends in rejection-disidentification research (Mazzoni et al., 2020) and results from research about Estonian, Finnish, and Norwegian Russian speakers (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2018). We also saw this in the focus group results, where participants indicated high levels of attachment to Latvia, although this attachment came with strong caveats about the political landscape of the country and acknowledgments of the difficulties faced by Russian speakers. Such findings may support this more optimistic reading of the results.

With this study, we also make a methodological contribution. The study demonstrates the usefulness of a comprehensive approach to the study of the workings—including both the design and the political and psychological effects—of state-sponsored information campaigns. We thus offer an approach of wider applicability that enables the identification of the (narrative) design of such campaigns and their political/psychological effects. The narrative analysis identifies and maps the malign narration, the experiment identifies reactions/effects, and the focus groups provide depth to the findings of the experiment. In future research, the qualitative component could become even more valuable by running a larger number of focus groups or in-depth interviews with individuals. This would provide an opportunity to better understand the reasoning of minority groups that are targeted by state-sponsored malign information campaigns, letting them express their potential grievances and alignment/misalignment with the information campaigns in their own words.

Nevertheless, despite the methodological contribution, the short-term nature of the survey experiment can be scrutinized. While it is sensible to initially investigate short-term effects before investing in longitudinal designs, this decision has consequences for the study's ecological validity and the potential for type II errors. Longitudinal designs are, of course, more

reflective of the type of cumulative exposure to Kremlin-sponsored media narratives that people likely experience. Moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility that certain effects, say on self-esteem, may only appear after repeated and sustained exposure.

A second methodological reflection centers on our dependent variable. We discussed the theoretical relevance of studying well-being and of operationalizing this as self-esteem in the context of the Kremlin influencing Russian speakers in the Baltics. Yet alternative variables, such as collective action intentions or support for Russian intervention, are also pertinent when contemplating the aims of Kremlin-sponsored media. Extant literature puts forward mixed ideas about the potential for collective action among Baltic Russian speakers. For example, the previously discussed survey data showing that 41.3% of sampled Russian speakers agreed that Russian intervention is justified (Berzina, 2016) would suggest this is not an irrational concern. Yet, other scholars note that Baltic Russian speakers have rarely engaged in collective action and—despite some exceptions in Latvia in 2003–2004 and Estonia in 2007—“fears of mobilisation of Russian minority groups proved largely unfounded” (Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019, p. 3). The extent to which consumption of the Russophobia narrative heightens collective action intentions centering around the Russophone identity is therefore valuable to examine.

CONCLUSION

This study widens the scope of nascent research seeking to understand the responses of international audiences to Russian antagonistic narratives about foreign states, providing research in a new response domain: identity. We have analyzed how the Kremlin-sponsored media outlet *Sputnik Latvia* projected a narrative of Russophobia to Russian speakers living in Latvia, identifying key thematic aspects to this narrative. Then, using both a focus group and a survey experiment, we examined how exposure to this Russophobia narrative affected conceptions of Russian speakers' identity and well-being. The most important results are that both perceived discrimination and the levels of identification with the Russian-speaking identity were significantly heightened in Russian speakers after strategic exposure to *Sputnik Latvia's* Russophobia narrative content, even in short-term survey-experiment context. Levels of self-esteem and sense of belonging, meanwhile, were not significantly affected by short-term exposure to this narrative, which we posited as an effect of the endurance of the perception of discrimination. These results contribute complex initial insights regarding how such narratives may affect the Russian-speaking ethnopolitical identity in Latvia or more broadly in other diaspora communities. They also contribute broader insights on rejection-identification and identity after (perceived) discrimination. Replication studies and future research that can unpick the intricacies within these effects are both necessary.

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