



ANNUAL  
**CONFERENCE**  
2021 **RUSSIA**

Chief Editor: Dr Sandis Šrāders

Editor: Dr Viljar Veebel

# Conference Papers



Tartu, Estonia

## The Russia Conference Papers 2021

*You will not grasp her with your mind or  
cover with a common label, for Russia is one of a kind –  
believe in her, if you are able...*  
Fyodor Tyutchev

*The United States Congress' sanctions are  
squeezing Russia out from Europe.*  
Vladimir Putin, Valdai Discussion Club, 2017

*In Europe we were Tatars,  
while in Asia we can be Europeans.*  
Fyodor Dostoevsky

*To stand up for truth is nothing.  
For truth, you must sit in jail.*  
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Candle in the Wind

# THE RUSSIA CONFERENCE PAPERS 2021

Chief Editor, Dr. Sandis ŠRĀDERS,  
Baltic Defence College

Editor, Dr. Viljar VEEBEL,  
Baltic Defence College



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
Press

The Baltic Defence College

Chief Editor: Dr. Sandis Šrāders

Editor: Dr. Viljar Veebel

Reviewers:

- Dr. Illimar Ploom, Assistant Professor, Estonian Military Academy
- Dr. Vladimir Sazonov, Researcher, Estonian Academy of Security Studies and University of Tartu
- Dr. Christopher P. Murray, Lecturer, Baltic Defence College
- George Spencer Terry, University of Tartu
- Michael G. Dvorak (LTC), Baltic Defence College
- Danny Looney (LTC), Baltic Defence College

Cover page: Raido Saar

ISBN 978-9949-03-568-7 (print)

ISBN 978-9949-03-569-4 (PDF)

Printed by:

University of Tartu Press

[www.tyk.ee](http://www.tyk.ee)

## Foreword

Brigadier General Ilmar TAMM,  
Commandant of the Baltic Defence College

The security of a state is the key to its wealth, stability, and welfare. As per the words of former Estonian President Lennart Meri during the College's inaugural ceremony on 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1999,

*“Security is precious, and there is never too much of it. Security is an indivisible wealth, and it must be cultivated in the spirit of close regional concord. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have the task to ensure, to the best of their ability, the security of the Baltic region, which is a necessary precondition to stability in Europe.”*

All three Baltic states historical path reverted to freedom and independence just a little more than 30 years ago. With the support of Allies, fostering regional security has been the top priority of the Baltic Defence College for more than 20 years. Our College delivers professional military education to senior staff officers and civil servants. The College's core task is to invest in human capital to ensure peace dividends for future generations and the shared security of the Baltic sea region.

For more than two decades since the inauguration, the civilian and military leadership of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and our partners have continuously recognized the importance and quality of our work. One of the most prominent flagship educational events of the College is our annual Conference on Russia. This international and renowned project commenced in 2014 and has been primarily aimed at our military and civilian students but also the broader community – civilian and military security experts, academics, media, and think tanks, and policy makers. The purpose of our Conferences is to focus on and study Russia, from within and without, especially concerning the Baltic, European, and transatlantic perspectives.

This year, we are proud to release the Conference's papers to unveil how both the international community and Russians see the Russian Federation as apart or a part of the world order. We are questioning if Russia is a tentative partner or a strategic challenge for the West, or is it a historical phenomenon that cannot separate itself from the demons of the past? Moreover, the publication allows us to better understand if and how to

# Table of Contents

Sandis ŠRĀDERS, Zdzisław ŚLIWA Introduction .....	9
--	---

## I. From the Heart of Europe

Sandis ŠRĀDERS, George Spencer TERRY The Baltic States at the Berlin Blockade – a West Berlin or an East Germany? .....	15
---	----

Sarah PAGUNG Changing Course – From Ostpolitik to Containment .....	25
--	----

Eugeniusz CIEŚLAK, Zdzisław ŚLIWA Perceptions of Russia in Poland: Reconciling History, Maintaining Dialogue, and Shaping the Future .....	34
--	----

Hans BINNENDIJK NATO Adaptation and Baltic Security .....	51
--	----

Dovilė JAKNIŪNAITĖ The Baltic States, Poland, and the Protests in Belarus: the Case for the Unconditional Love? .....	60
---	----

Sandis ŠRĀDERS, Shota GVINERIA, Viljar VEEBEL Belarus: Stuck in a Moment with No Escape .....	72
--	----

## II. From Russia: Mirror Images

Dmitry LANKO “I Looked Back to See If You Looked Back to See If I Was Looking at You”: Russian Discourse on Western Critique of Russia’s Actions	87
--	----

Nikita LOMAGIN Where People Stand: Public Attitudes in Russia towards the West ...	104
---	-----

Keir GILES Assessing Russian Success and Failure .....	116
---	-----

---

Viljar VEEBEL, Sandis ŠRĀDERS <b>The Future of the Russia's Military Industry: 'Special Deliveries', Functional Needs, Generous Loan Deals, and 'Old Love' from Soviet Times</b> .....	130
Bobo LO <b>Russia and the Global Order</b> .....	147
Fraser CAMERON <b>Perceptions of Russia's Pivot to Asia</b> .....	156
Konstantin VON EGGERT <b>How the Empire Struck Back: Russia's Long Quest for a Post-Soviet Soul</b> .....	163
Andrew WOOD <b>Putin's Chains</b> .....	172
Sandis ŠRĀDERS, Viljar VEEBEL <b>Conclusions</b> .....	180
<b>Author Biographies</b> .....	183



**II**  
**From Russia: Mirror Images**

# **“I Looked Back to See If You Looked Back to See If I Was Looking at You”: Russian Discourse on Western Critique of Russia’s Actions**

Dr. Dmitry LANKO

## **Abstract**

Most Russians are interested in finding out how their country’s particular actions are perceived in the West. To satisfy this interest, the website Inosmi.Ru was established almost twenty years ago, and since then, this website has selected, translated, and published foreign – mostly Western – media reports on Russia. This paper analyses the publications on the website, including translated articles and editorial comments, with the aim of understanding Russian discourse on the Western critique of Russia’s actions. The paper applies the theoretical lens of Orientalism as an analytical tool as an important characteristic of the Russian discourse on Western critique of Russia’s actions; in this paradigm, it is the assumption that the West treats any Russia’s action with an attitude of hubristic superiority. In conclusion, this paper illustrates the two major strategies that Russian agents apply in order to cope with this assumed Western conceit: mimicry and self-Orientalisation.

Key words: Russia, Orientalism, perception, discourse, West

## **Putin: I Watch Western Media, but I do not Believe It**

The song “I looked back,” a line from which provided the first half of the title of this paper, appeared on the B-side of the single “Master Jack” by the South African rock ensemble *Four Jacks and a Jill* released in 1967. In 1996, Russian pop singer Maksim Leonidov released his probably most popular song of his entire career, *Devochka-videnye* (Phantasm Girl), the refrain of which repeated those same words. The words “I looked back to see if you looked back to see if I was looking at you” perfectly convey the impression that Russia’s reaction to Western reaction to its actions creates. When Western reactions to Russia’s actions are positive, Russian discourse appreciates it. In most cases, however, it is negative. In such cases, different

Russian agents apply different strategies of coping with Western critiques, from admitting its correctness to devaluing it or hyperbolizing it. Below, the following work will demonstrate that what makes all those interlocutors similar is that all of them would rather hear Western criticism than not get any Western reaction to Russian actions at all.

Western academia opened the debate on Russian disinformation campaigns in Western media, including social media, after the announcement of the results of the 2016 United States presidential election, in which Russia allegedly interfered. There were few publications earlier than 2016 on the matter of Russian disinformation campaigns in countries neighbouring Russia. For example, Ciziunas names propaganda and disinformation campaigns among the tools that Russia applies with the aim to influence domestic politics in the Baltic States; other tools being diplomatic pressure, military threats and peacekeeping deployments, economic leverage and energy controls, exploiting ethnic and social discontent, discrediting governments through political influence, and penetrating intelligence services.<sup>1</sup> Although several influential US Democrats, including former President Jimmy Carter,<sup>2</sup> have declared that Russian interference played the decisive role in determining the outcomes of 2016 presidential elections, Western academia failed to reach consensus on the impact that Russian interference actually had on the election results.

The role that any (dis)information campaigns, including a foreign one, had on the outcomes of particular elections is difficult to measure, if not impossible. It is possible, however, to measure the influence of such campaigns on public and elite perceptions of particular events. In Germany, for example, “Russian disinformation exploiting historical memory, discontent with policies, and skepticism towards the U.S.” has not produced approval of Putin’s Russia and its actions, both domestic and international, but it has resulted in ‘understanding’ of it.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars agree that despite some of the information perceived to be part of Russian disinformation campaigns in Western media, including social media, is either false or true but misleading,

<sup>1</sup> Pranas Ciziunas, “Russia and the Baltic States: Is Russian Imperialism Dead?,” *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 3 (2008): 287–307.

<sup>2</sup> John Wagner, “Jimmy Carter Says Trump Wouldn’t Be President without Help from Russia,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/jimmy-carter-says-trump-wouldnt-be-president-without-help-from-russia/2019/06/28/deef1ef0-99b6-11e9-8d0a-5edd7e2025b1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/jimmy-carter-says-trump-wouldnt-be-president-without-help-from-russia/2019/06/28/deef1ef0-99b6-11e9-8d0a-5edd7e2025b1_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Steve Wood, “Understanding’ for Russia in Germany: International Triangle Meets Domestic Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* forthcoming (2020).

most of it is nonetheless true. Richey explains the potency of Russian disinformation campaigns not with its establishing “falsehoods as true,” but with its ability to pollute “political discourse such that news information consumers are led to doubt the very concepts of truth and objective political facts.”<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, it was in 2016 that the Oxford Dictionary named post-truth as its Word of the Year.

While being the alleged source of multiple disinformation campaigns that influenced international politics in the latter half of 2010s, Russia simultaneously suffered being the target of multiple disinformation campaigns allegedly orchestrated from other countries. The alleged potency of Russian disinformation campaigns itself became a propaganda tool targeting Russia. In particular, Carden named the publications in Western media accusing Russian government of hacking the US Democratic National Committee, of orchestrating the Brexit, and of tacitly supporting Trump as “evidence-free.”<sup>5</sup> A reaction to these and other accusations of Russia in the country itself was the growing concern among the elite and the public in Russia of what they believed to be Western disinformation campaigns against Russia. Debates on disinformation campaigns, propaganda and information warfare gained prevalence not only in the West, but also in Russia as well.<sup>6</sup> Russian debate on Western anti-Russian propaganda started at least a decade earlier than similar Western debate on Russian anti-Western propaganda began in the West.

The war in Chechnya became the first subject that Putin's administration declared a propaganda tool of Western anti-Russian media campaign. Despite in the early years of the 21st century, Russia was an ally in the United States-led global war on terror; Western media in those years criticized what the administration called a “counter-terrorist operation” in Chechnya. According to the administration, part of the information on which the critique was founded was false. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself expressed his “concern... for coverage of the events that take

---

<sup>4</sup> Mason Richey, “Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation,” *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 101–13.

<sup>5</sup> James Carden, “The Media's Incessant Barrage of Evidence-Free Accusations against Russia,” *The Nation*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-medias-incessant-barrage-of-evidence-free-accusations-against-russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Baumann, “Propaganda Fights' and 'Disinformation Campaigns': The Discourse on Information Warfare in Russia-West Relations,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 288–307.

place [in Chechnya] to be objective.”<sup>7</sup> Foreign media coverage of Russian-Georgian War of 2008 became another occasion for Putin to start casting doubt on the objectivity of Western media. In particular, in his interview to the CNN, Putin criticized an interview with an American of South Ossetian origin aired by CNN’s rival broadcaster Fox News. “Is that an honest and objective way to give information? Is that the way to inform the people of your own country?” Putin asked, referring to the Fox interview. “No, he answered to self that is disinformation.”<sup>8</sup>

Russian authorities actively criticized the way in which Western media covered Russia’s conflict with Ukraine. Even before the beginning of the violent phase of the conflict, Putin criticized the way in which Western media covered the Russian-Ukrainian so-called gas wars during the latter half of 2000s. During his news conference specially organized for foreign reporters on the occasion of termination of supplies of natural gas from Russia to Ukraine in January 2009, Putin claimed that he “watch[ed] both Western European and North American media,” and that he could not “see objective assessment of the events.”<sup>9</sup> Recently, Putin criticized Western media coverage of the Russian role in the civil war in Libya, which has been going on since Gaddafi was removed from power in 2011. Some Western media reported that Russia supported the Libyan National Army and that Russian mercenaries fought on its side. When a journalist from Turkey asked Putin if such reports were true, Putin responded, “Do you believe what is written in the Western media? Read what they write about Turkey, and you will change your mind.”<sup>10</sup>

The above-quoted statement by Putin concerning Western media coverage of the 2009 Russian-Ukrainian conflict over natural gas supplies is indicative of the internal controversy that is characteristic of a vast part of Russian elite. They, like Putin, watch Western media. Inversely, they do not believe what they see. This paper seeks to understand this controversy by applying the concept of Orientalism, which has been developed in the literature on the relations between the West and the non-West since Said

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Putin, Interview with German television channels ARD and ZDF, May 5, 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22948>.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin, Transcript: CNN interview with Vladimir Putin, August 29, 2008, <https://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Putin, Zapadnye SMI ne dayut ob’yektivnoy otsenki gazovogo konflikta [Western media do not provide with objective assessment of the gas conflict; – in Russian], January 8, 2009, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2177190>.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin’s Annual News Conference,” *Kremlin.Ru*, December 19, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62366>.

introduced the term in late 1970s.<sup>11</sup> The paper will discuss the ambiguity of the Russian self-perception between the East and the West, between that of the Orientalist and the Oriental. The paper analyses the abstracts that Russian online media Inosmi.Ru, which specializes in re-publishing translated articles concerning Russia from foreign media, attaches to texts of translated articles that cover Russian foreign policy action. It will demonstrate that the ambiguity mentioned above forces vast part of Russian elite to look for Western assessment of Russia while simultaneously being prepared to find that it is grounded in stereotypes.

### **Russian Orientalism and Self-Orientalism: We, the people of Mordor**

The double-headed eagle on the Russian coat of arms is intended to symbolize the position of the country between the West and East. With that, Russian discourse on neighbouring countries is ambiguous. This Russian discourse includes elements that can be qualified as Orientalist in Said's terms. Scholarly studies of the peoples of the Orient as well as artistic presentations of Russians meeting those people have contributed to the formation of the Russian discourse on the Orient. Evidence of the continuity of the Oriental Studies from the Russian Empire, to the Soviet Union, and to the Russian Federation can be found in Kemper and Conermann's edited volume.<sup>12</sup> Russian literature from Lermontov<sup>13</sup> until present provides multiple examples of tales about Russians meeting people of the Orient told solely from the Russian perspective. Jersild concludes that the Orientalist discourse, which at the dawn of the 20th century justified Western imperialism as a "white man's burden" in the West itself,<sup>14</sup> was simultaneously characteristic to the elite of the Russian Empire, though Schimmelpenninck van der Oye rejects this conclusion.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Kemper and Stephen Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Scotto, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov's 'Bela,'" *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 107, no. 2 (1992): 246–60.

<sup>14</sup> Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

Conversely, the assumption that Western discourse on Russia can be qualified as Orientalist is also an element of the Russian discourse. Many Western scholars also note an Orientalist Western discourse on Russia. When Russia is considered a part of Europe, thanks to its geography, it is considered a part of Eastern Europe. In this case, Western discourse on Russia bears similar characteristics with Western discourse on Eastern Europe in general, the characteristics that Larry Wolff<sup>16</sup> identified as being essentially Orientalist. When, however, Russia is considered a place outside of Europe, there is no major change in this presentation. Brown found characteristic elements of Orientalism in Western discourse on Russia, namely “exaggeration of difference, assumption of Western superiority, and resort to clichéd analytical models.”<sup>17</sup> In turn, an element of Russian discourse on the West is the assumption that representatives of the West in general and Western media in particular intentionally seek only for such information from and about Russia, which affirms the difference, superiority, and the clichés.

Khudoley and Lanko<sup>18</sup> discuss the influence of the ambiguity of Russian discourse that justifies condescending approaches to people of the Orient living in Russia and abroad while simultaneously failing to justify a similar condescension of some people of the West to Russia itself on Russian foreign policy. They discuss Ramzan Kadyrov of Chechnya as an oriental Russian leader influencing the country’s foreign policymaking despite the fact that they, too, fail to answer Varisco’s question “at what point does European-looking Russia fade into the Eastern steppe.”<sup>19</sup> Russian poet Alexander Pushkin delimited the border between the European and the Oriental parts of Russia in the most radical way by declaring the Russian government to be “the only European” aspect of Russia in a letter to his former schoolmate Pyotr Chaadayev. The latter was a prominent thinker participating in Russia’s most important philosophical debate that of the Westerners vs. Slavophiles, with which Hahn associates the emergence of Orientalist elements in Russian discourse.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> James D.J. Brown, “A Stereotype, Wrapped in a Cliché, inside a Caricature: Russian Foreign Policy and Orientalism,” *Politics* 30, no. 3 (October 2010): 149–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2010.01378.x>.

<sup>18</sup> Konstantin K. Khudoley and Dmitry A. Lanko, “Russia’s Turn to the East: A Postcolonial Perspective,” *Stosunki Miedzynarodowe – International Relations* 54, no. 2 (2018): 31–50.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid (Publications on the Near East)* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Gordon H. Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 232.

Morozov approaches Russia as a “subaltern empire” where the government is the “only European” that never listens to its own people thus justifying the qualification of the people as a “subaltern,” a term applied by postcolonial scholars to identify the people (most often of the Orient) excluded from the hierarchies of power in (most often Western) empires.<sup>21</sup> Many people in Russia perceive their government as a part of the West, which never listens to them; thus, they perceive critical reviews of Russia's actions in Western media as deceitful as rave reviews of those same actions in Russian pro-government media. Koplataдзе perceives such an approach as an attempt to exonerate Russian people, if not the Russian state, of the wrongdoings of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet Union, and of the recent wrongdoings of the Russian Federation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, unconscious recourse to practices described by postcolonial scholars, such as mimicry and self-orientalism, has found a place among defensive strategies adopted by many Russians facing the necessity to cope with Western critique of the actions of Russian government.

Exaggeration of the difference between the West and the rest helps justifying Western superiority in Western discourse on the rest. For representatives of the rest, it becomes a source of insecurity, material losses, and psychological discomfort. Facing these challenges, representatives of the rest adopt either of the two strategies. Sometimes they attempt to bridge the difference by means of adopting Western practices, from clothing to political institutions. However, adoption of Western practices by a group rarely results in elimination of the elements of Western discourse on that group, which in turn justify claims of Western superiority. Bhabha noted that Western Orientalist discourse justifies treatment of such attempts as mimicry; participants of the Western Orientalist discourse thus approach the attempts of non-Western groups to adopt Western practices as resulting in practices, which are “like Western, but not quite.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, some other non-Western groups adopt the opposite to mimic the strategy of self-Orientalism, the term first introduced by Iwabuchi.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Vyatcheslav Morozov, *Russian Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Tamar Koplataдзе, “Theorizing Russian Postcolonial Studies,” *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 4 (2019): 469–89.

<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 122.

<sup>24</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, “Complicit Exotism: Japan and Its Other,” *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (1994): 49–82.



Self-Orientalism is the strategy of exaggerating the differences between non-Western group and the West. Self-Orientalism is widely spread in tourist industry outside of the West;<sup>25</sup> rendering it profitable, workers of the tourist industry wear traditional clothes when dealing with Western tourists seeking ‘indigenous’ experiences, though they change for jeans after hours. Self-Orientalism does not aim for greater profit only but also for security and psychological comfort. It is search for psychological comfort that pushes some Russians to adopt self-Orientalizing practices in response to Western critique of Russia. An example of such practices is the Russian-language Twitter account under the name of “The Voice of the Mordor,”<sup>26</sup> which presents negative reports on Russian actions in Western media as dictated by the desire of the Western media to present contemporary Russia as a kind of Mordor, the fictional evil kingdom from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* in a sarcastic manner. The current article will demonstrate that Russian online media Inosmi.Ru also adopts self-Orientalizing practices when commenting on the texts of translated articles covering Russian foreign policy action from Western media that it publishes.

### Inosmi.Ru: A Russian Soft Power Tool

Many Russians treat the West and Europe as a point of reference. For some, the West and Europe are positive examples. Despite some authors having claimed that Russia as a whole “has moved from the role of the recipient of the EU’s normative power to the demands to be accepted as an agent of normative power,”<sup>27</sup> the words “like in Europe” have positive connotation for many Russians. Many others, however, “following early Slavophiles and also Dostoyevsky, argue[d] that the Russians [were] morally superior to people of the West, because they [had] grown spiritually as they [had] been faced with hardships, such as communism, which [had] not been present in the

<sup>25</sup> Grace C. Yan and Carla A. Santos, “China, Forever’. Tourism Discourse and Self-Orientalism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 2 (2009): 295–315; Lei Wei, Junxi Qian, and Jiuxia Sun, “Self-Orientalism, Joke-Work, and Host-Tourist Relations,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 68, no. 1 (2019): 89–99.

<sup>26</sup> @spacelordrock, “Golos Mordora,” 2014, <https://twitter.com/spacelordrock>.

<sup>27</sup> Elena B. Pavlova and Tatiana A. Romanova, “Normative Power: Some Theory Aspects and Contemporary Practice of Russia and the EU,” *Polis (Russian Federation)* 1 (2017): 162–76.

West.”<sup>28</sup> They believe that the West and Europe, which had made significant achievements in terms of political, social, and economic development in the past, are degrading today. In their view, this degradation is a result of refocusing of attention from the interests of individuals, attention to which made Europe exemplary in the past, to the interests of groups, specifically those of minority groups.

Representatives of these two groups of Russians have polar opinions in most cases, but what makes them similar is their thirst for opinions on Russia's actions published in European and Western media. Representatives of the former group look for those opinions as for something that reaffirms their own beliefs about what is good and what is bad in contemporary Russia. Representatives of the latter groups look for those opinions for a different reason; the phrase attributed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, whose popularity has recently significantly risen in Russia, and who allegedly said, “If our enemies scold us, then we are doing everything right,” helps understanding that reason. At the same time, representatives of both groups demand those opinions. To satisfy that demand, Russian journalist Yaroslav Ognev in 2001 launched the website Inosmi.Ru, “inosmi” being Russian abbreviation meaning foreign mass media. Initially, the website enjoyed support of the Effective Policy Foundation, a non-profit founded and headed by Russian journalist and former Soviet dissident Gleb Pavlovsky, but in 2002, it came to belong to the VGTRK, a state-owned Russian broadcasting company.<sup>29</sup>

In 2004, VGTRK gave the website over to RIA Novosti, the state-owned Russian news agency. In 2013, Russia adopted its new Foreign Policy Concept,<sup>30</sup> which became the first Russian Foreign Policy Concept (previous versions of the documents were adopted in 1993, 2000 and 2008 respectively) that mentions soft power. In line with the desire to make soft power a tool of growing Russian ambitions on the international arena, Russia started heavily investing in state-owned broadcasting companies targeting foreign audiences. RIA Novosti was transformed into the state-owned media

<sup>28</sup> Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation*, vol. 9 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 180.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Skudin, “InoSmi Otdali v RIA ‘Novosti’ [RIA Novosti Aquired InoSmi],” *Webplaneta*, February 24, 2004, [http://www.webplanet.ru/news/internet/2004/2/24/inosmi\\_inovesti.html](http://www.webplanet.ru/news/internet/2004/2/24/inosmi_inovesti.html).

<sup>30</sup> “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 18, 2013), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186).

holding Rossiya Segodnya, which currently owns such Russian media as RT and Sputnik. Inosmi.Ru also became a part of the holding despite the fact that over half of its audience comes from Russia as of October 2020.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the official declaration of the website as a tool of Russian soft power attracted attention of Western scholars to it. Multiple studies made use of the website's selection of articles originally published in foreign media to be translated into Russian and posted on the website in order to understand Russian soft power strategy.

For example, Spiessens and van Poucke found that “through selective appropriation, shifts in translations and visual strategies,” the website “produces a discourse that is more in line with the Kremlin's official viewpoints than the original data set.”<sup>32</sup> In a separate article, however, van Poucke discusses the particular strategies that translators working for the website adopt in order to make “the Western discourse on Russian subjects more visible to the reader, especially in these cases where the source text contains metaphors that suggest a critical interpretation of the Russian state, society or the leaders of the country.”<sup>33</sup> In turn, Spiessens found that the website “re-interprets Western reports on the Crimean crisis by triggering ‘deep memory’ of the Great Patriotic War,” the term that Russians use to identify the part of WWII in 1941–1945 when the Soviet Union was at war with Nazi Germany.<sup>34</sup> After the financial crisis of 2008, which heavily hurt the Russian media market, multiple changes took place in its leadership and structure even before the website was officially declared a Russian soft power tool.

In 2009, Yaroslav Ognev stepped down as the editor-in-chief of the website, and Marina Pustilnik, who had previously headed the user support group of the Russian branch of LiveJournal, became the editor-in-chief.<sup>35</sup> In 2012, Alexey Kovalev came to replace Pustilnik as editor-in-chief of

<sup>31</sup> “Alexa, An Amazon.Com Company,” *Inosmi.Ru: Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic*, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/inosmi.ru>.

<sup>32</sup> Anneleen Spiessens and Piet van Poucke, “Translating News Discourse on the Crimean Crisis: Patterns of Reframing on the Russian Website InoSmi,” *Translator* 22, no. 3 (2016): 319–39.

<sup>33</sup> Piet van Poucke, “Foreignization in News Translation: Metaphors in Russian Translation on the News Translation Website InoSmi,” *Meta* 61, no. 2 (2016): 346–68.

<sup>34</sup> Anneleen Spiessens and Piet van Poucke, “Deep Memory during the Crimean Crisis: References to the Great Patriotic War in Russian News Translations,” *Target* 31, no. 3 (2019): 398–419.

<sup>35</sup> “Glavnym Redaktorom Sayta Inosmi.Ru Naznachena Marina Pustilnik [Marina Pustilnik Appointed Editor-in-Chief of the Inosmi.Ru Website; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, March 9, 2009, <https://inosmi.ru/online/20090311/247854.html>.

the website,<sup>36</sup> though he kept a vast share of her legacy in place. Among Pustilnik's initiatives, the most important was a reform of the website's forum, where visitors of the website had the opportunity to discuss posted translations of articles originally published in foreign media. Initially, she planned to switch from the forum mode to comments under each article, but the plan faced mass online protests from frequent visitors of the website. As a result, the forum remained in place, though its interface changed significantly, and the possibility to make comments under each article appeared in addition to the forum but not as a replacement of the forum. Multiple studies aiming to understand Russian public opinion on others and of Russian discourse on them have made use of those comments since then.

An example is the study by Radina, to whom the comments are evidence of digital political mobilization of the commenters.<sup>37</sup> Another example is the study by Gazda, who "examined the expressions of intolerance toward the opinions of others and linguistic aggression on the part of the Russian-speaking commenters toward the authors of critical Czech journalism as natural and instinctive dismissive reactions to "different" or hostile language and cultural and ideological expressions."<sup>38</sup> Studies that made use of the comments posted by visitors of the website have played an important role in understanding of Russian public opinion in the 2010s. This paper, however, aims at understanding elite opinions; thus, it will not make use of visitors' comments posted on the website, but of editors' notes to each article. The paper will make use of the 153 editor's comments to translations of the articles mentioning NATO and NATO member states posted on the website in 2019 and in January through October 2020. Results of qualitative content analysis of those editorial notes do not represent the entire plurality of Russian elite opinions, but they contribute to understanding of the Russian discourse on the West and Europe.

---

<sup>36</sup> "InoSMI Nashel Novogo Glavreda v Londone [Inosmi.Ru Found Its New Editor-in-Chief in London; - in Russian]," *Lenta.Ru*, February 9, 2012, <https://lenta.ru/news/2012/02/09/inosmi/>.

<sup>37</sup> Nadezhda K. Radina, "Digital Political Mobilization of Online Commenters on Publications about Politics and International Relations," *Polis (Russian Federation)* 2 (2018): 115–29.

<sup>38</sup> Jiri Gazda, "Online Comments as a Tool of Inter-Cultural (Russian-Czech) 'Anti-Dialogue,'" *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics* 12, no. 1 (2018): 100–120.

## Editors of Inosmi.Ru: If You Cannot Devalue Western Critique, Hyperbolize It

The results of content analysis of the articles mentioning NATO translated from foreign media and posted on the website Inosmi.Ru and of the editorial notes that precede each article demonstrates that the website published articles that can be classified as pro-Russian, neutral, and anti-Russian. To increase the number of pro-Russian articles, editors of the website post and translate articles from non-Western and non-European media. On multiple occasions, the website posted translated articles originally published by Akharin Khabar<sup>39</sup> and from Ifeng.Com,<sup>40</sup> media from Iran and China respectively, of which is neither Western nor European. On other occasions, the website posts translated articles from the website of the Stratejik Düşünce Estitüsü, the Institute of Strategic Thinking, a think tank from Turkey,<sup>41</sup> whose geographic location vis-à-vis regions of the world is a subject of discussion in the Russian discourse on the country. There are perceptions of Turkey as located between East and West, like Russia itself, as a part of the Middle East, as a part of Europe but not of the West, as a part of the West but not of Europe, and as a part of both the West and Europe.

On some occasions, however, the website posts translated pro-Russian or neutral articles originally published in mass media from NATO member states and not only from Turkey. On those occasions, the editors of the website attach neutral notes to the translated articles, which summarize their contents or simply repeat part of their introductory or concluding parts without evaluating the quality of analysis presented in them. For example, to the report originally published in French *Le Figaro* on Russian military exercises “Centre-2019,” which took place in September 2019, editors of the website attached the following note: “‘Pathfinder-85 to the group commanders, you can start moving. Kavkaz-16, you first’. Such commands endlessly sound from a loudspeaker in the command centre on the banks of the Tom’

<sup>39</sup> “Akharin Khabar: Rossiyskie Razrabotki Neytralizuyut Ugrozy NATO [Akharin Khabar: Russian Developments Neutralize NATO Threats; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, December 9, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/military/20191209/246393382.html>.

<sup>40</sup> “Feniks: Rossiya Gotova Otvetit’ Na Razmeshchenie Voysk NATO Vblizi Svoikh Granits [Phoenix: Russia Is Ready to Respond to the Deployment of NATO Troops Near Its Borders; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, October 23, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20191023/246080887.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “SDE: Po-Zivantiyski Khitrye SShA Nachali Igru a Gruzii [Byzantine Cunning USA Started the Game in Georgia; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, July 31, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20190731/245551711.html>.

A dozen heavy T-72V3 tanks lined up on the bank pull away towards the river that represents the Russian border. This is how the correspondent of the French newspaper begins his report.”<sup>42</sup> The article is considered positive, because it underlines Russian strength and Russian openness: Russia allowed French journalists to observe military exercises.

At the same time, translated articles posted on the website that approach Russian actions negatively outnumbered pro-Russian and neutral articles. In such cases, editorial notes to the translated articles attempt to devalue the critique presented either in them or, to the contrary, to hyperbolize that critique. Multiple tactics help those editorial notes to devalue Western critique of Russia's actions presented in the translated articles. An editorial note can point at the fact that the translated article it is presenting reports only part of the truth, while silencing other relevant information. For example, when commenting on the British Telegraph's report on Russian military exercises held in times when NATO had to cancel the Defender-2020 exercises due to COVID-19, editors of the website wrote, “Russia flexes its muscles near NATO borders – it conducted exercises with the participation of 82,000 troops, the newspaper frightens the public. But he is silent that these exercises to localize emergency situations associated with the threat of viral infections were held at seven training grounds in the Western and Central Military Districts – far from the borders” [with any NATO member country].<sup>43</sup>

An editorial note can simply claim that the translated article it presents does not provide enough evidence to support the author's claim. For example, when commenting on a CNN report that a Russian fighter jet violated the airspace of one of NATO's member countries when intercepting a US bomber, editors of the website wrote, “The US military continues to panic over allegedly unsafe interceptions by Russian fighters. Another reason for the accusations was an incident during which, according to the NATO Air Force, a Russian Su-27 violated Danish airspace. Evidence, as usual, is not presented.”<sup>44</sup> An editorial note can claim that the translated article that is

<sup>42</sup> “Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Na Sibirskikh Ucheniyakh Rossiyskoy Armii [Le Figaro (France): At the Siberian Exercises of the Russian Army; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 24, 2019, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20190924/245877334.html>.

<sup>43</sup> “The Telegraph (Velikobritaniya): NATO Preduprezhdaet Rossiyu, Chto Koronavirus Ee Ne Slomil [NATO Warns Russia That COVID-19 Has Not Broken It; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, April 2, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200402/247186363.html>.

<sup>44</sup> “CNN (SShA): Rossiyskiy Samolet Narushil Vozdushnoe Prostranstvo NATO Pri Popytke Perekhvata Amerikanskogo Bombardirovshchika B-52 [CNN (USA): Russian Aircraft Violated NATO Airspace While Attempting to Intercept American B-52 Bomber; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 2, 2019.

presented repeats the argument that Western journalists have used multiple times in the past thus devaluing the content of the articles by means that there is nothing new in it. For example, when commenting on the report on NATO Exercise Eager Leopard that took place in Lithuania in September 2020 originally published in *Le Figaro*, editors of the website wrote, “The Baltic States once again see Russia as a threat, and they turned to NATO for help. Stating this, the correspondent of the French newspaper does not bother to comprehend the real state of affairs and, as a result, does not notice how contradictory the evidence of this ‘threat’ is.”<sup>45</sup>

Sometimes, editors of the *Inosmi.Ru* target the authors of the translated articles or the newsmakers whose opinions the article presents. Sometimes they point at the fact that the author of the translated article has already published several articles that were critical of particular Russian actions but did not present sufficient evidence to support the critique in order to devalue the article in question. For example, when commenting on the article by Jouko Juonala, originally published in the Finnish *Ilta-Sanomat*, editors of *Inosmi.Ru* wrote the following: “If Finland becomes the target of an attack, it will not automatically receive military aid from the West, according to a Finnish journalist known for his ‘objective’ attitude towards Russia. It is from Russia that the attack is supposed to be, and the only insurance can, of course, be Finland’s entry into NATO.”<sup>46</sup> In general, editors of *Inosmi.Ru* often claim that particular opinions critical of certain Russian actions or even of authors of media reports, in which those opinions were presented, are subjective.

Finally, an editorial note can claim that the author of the article presents certain opinions, but readers of the media in which the article was originally published do not agree with those opinions. In such a case, the website publishes not only the article itself, but also some of the comments posted on the website of the media, where the original article was published. For example, when commenting on the interview of former Polish army officer Roman Polko, originally published in the Polish media ‘*Do Rzeczy*’, editors

<sup>45</sup> “*Le Figaro* (Frantsiya): Pribaltika – Soldaty NATO Na Pervoy Linii Oborony Ot Rossiyskoy Ugrozy [Le Figaro (France): The Baltic States – NATO Soldiers on First Line of Defense against Russian Threat; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, September 30, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200930/248220688.html>.

<sup>46</sup> “*Ilta-Sanomat* (Finlyandiya): Poluchit Li Finlyandiya Pomoshch v Sluchae Napadeniya Rossii? [Ilta-Sanomat (Finland): Will Finland Get Support in Case of Russian Attack? – In Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, February 27, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200227/246938714.html>.

of the website wrote, "General Roman Polko, in an interview with a popular weekly, praises the US decision to place the command of the US 5th Army Corps in Poznan. He says that even Finland can now sleep peacefully – aggressive Russia will be wary of attacking it. The readers are not enthusiastic, as they have different opinions."<sup>47</sup> Editors of Inosmi.Ru often stress their comments, preceding translated interviews posted on the website of military officers or NATO civilian officials, and thus the opinions presented in those interviews are biased thanks to their official status.

The use of the term "aggressive Russia" in the above-quoted editorial note allows a placing of it into a separate category of editorial notes – those that hyperbolize Western critique of Russian actions. Such editorial notes aim to convince the readers that such emotionally charged assessments of the Russian actions, which in practice can only rarely be found in Western media when it comments very exceptional Russian actions, are commonly in use in the West when discussing Russia. By doing so, those editors want to convince their readers that a narrative similar to the equation of Russia to Mordor is dominant in Western media discourse while not in public opinion in Western countries where many people allegedly view Russia positively. They want to convince the readers that certain interest groups in the West, for example, have created the narrative such as those discussed in Tsygankov's book, which has been translated into Russian.<sup>48</sup> They want to convince the readers that most reports published in Western media of any Russian action are influenced by that narrative, and due to that, Western media perceives all Russian actions negatively regardless of intentions and outcomes of those actions.

Following the title of Tsygankov's book, the editors of Inosmi.Ru often use the word "Russophobic" when commenting on critical opinions expressed in translated articles that the website posts. For example, when commenting on the report on Russian military exercises that took place in Northern Caucasus in September 2020 originally published by Le Figaro, the editors of the website wrote, "The exercises of the Russian army look like a show of strength in the face of NATO."<sup>49</sup> How else? We defend our borders

<sup>47</sup> "Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Bolshie Rossiyskie Ucheniya Na Kavkaze [Le Figaro (France): Large Russian Exercises in the Caucasus; – in Russian]" *Inosmi.Ru*, September 28, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200928/248203783.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, *Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> "Le Figaro (Frantsiya): Bolshie Rossiyskie Ucheniya Na Kavkaze [Le Figaro (France): Large Russian Exercises in the Caucasus; – in Russian]"



and security, which was appreciated by the military inspectors of Germany, Denmark, France, and Romania. But the main thing for the author is to convey to the readers a Russophobic attitude.” The editors of the website attribute the authors, whose translated articles the website posts, a usage of emotionally charged terms such as the Kremlin’s “occupation” of Europe<sup>50</sup> in an attempt to demonstrate that the use of such terms is the norm in Western media, even if such terms do not appear in the original article.

## Conclusions

Russian perceptions of Western critique of its actions, including foreign policy actions, is ambivalent. Many Russians use the West and Europe as a reference group, they look for Western assessments of Russian actions, and when they cannot find such assessments easily, they start to demand it. The website Inosmi.Ru, which provided with empirical evidence proving grounds for the conclusions of this paper, was founded exactly in order to satisfy that demand. On other hand, many Russians, who read Western assessments of Russian actions, approach such assessments sceptically. Though Russian discourse contains elements that help justify arrogance toward peoples and countries of Asia and Africa, which can be qualified as Orientalist, the discourse contains elements that allow for an ignorance of Western critique by means of perceiving it as based on arrogance towards peoples and countries of non-West, which is allegedly a characteristic of Westerns elites.

That arrogance, many Russians believe, makes representatives of Western elites ground their assessments of Russia’s actions, as well as of actions of other non-Western countries, on stereotypes rather than facts. This is clearly seen in the website Inosmi.Ru, which belongs to the state-owned Russian media holding Rossiya Segodnya that also owns such Russian mass media as the RT and the Sputnik. Unlike RT and Sputnik, which are mostly targeted on foreign audiences, over half of readers of Inosmi.Ru come from Russia, though slightly under half of other readers are Russophobic residents of foreign countries. The website publishes many translated articles originally published in Western media that contain critical assessments of Russia’s

---

<sup>50</sup> “National Review (SShA): Vladimir Putin Beret Evropu v Kol'tso [National Review (USA): Vladimir Putin Surrounds Europe; – in Russian],” *Inosmi.Ru*, March 20, 2020, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200320/247090687.html>.

actions. However, each translated article is preceded with an editorial note advising readers about alleged shortcomings of particular translated articles; this paper benefited from the results of qualitative content analysis of those editorial notes. In particular, it found that sometimes those editorial notes attempt to devalue the critique contained in the translated articles, but sometimes, to the contrary, they attempt to hyperbolize the critique.

The hyperbolization of critical assessments of particular actions can be regarded as another tactic aimed at devaluing them, similar to a deconstruction of such arguments behind such assessments or to attacking those expressing them. On other hand, exercises in this hyperbolization, many of which can be found among the editorial notes presenting translated articles posted at Inosmi.Ru, demonstrate that many Russians refer to self-Orientalism as a strategy to cope with Western critique of their country. While some Russians tend to downplay the differences between their country and the West, arguing that most of Russia's actions are not fundamentally different from Western similar actions, other Russians tend to exaggerate these differences. That inversion contributes to formation of the narrative in Russian discourse on the West that contains elements helpful in justifying its arrogance toward the West. That arrogance rests on the assumption of Russian superiority, which was forged in the fire of the hardships that Russians have suffered throughout their history, from which the assumed tendency, popular among Western elite is to perceive Russia as a kind of Mordor plays an important role.



The Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) is the multinational professional military education institution of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania established in 1999.

The College provides education to the civilian and military leaders from the Framework Nations, allies and partners at the operational and strategic level.

BALTDEFCOL promotes international cooperation and networking and contributes to research in security and defence policy.



This publication is sponsored by  
NATO's Public Diplomacy Division.

