

ECREA Pre-Conference 2024

The Informational Influence of Autocracies Abroad

Full program

Time & Venue

Date: 23.09.2024

Time: 9 am – 6 pm

Location: City Hotel, Dalmatinova 15, SI-1000 Ljubljana

Room: Meeting room CI



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

The event is organised by the European Research Council (ERC) consolidator project RUSINFORM on "The Consequences of the Internet for Russia's Informational Influence Abroad" (2019-2025), under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 819025) conducted at the University of Passau, Germany.
Website: <https://www.rusinform.uni-passau.de/en/ecrea24preconf/>

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has put the spotlight on the wide range of digital warfare tools that autocracies can use to influence public opinion abroad (see, e.g., Lokot, 2023).

However, even before this war, authoritarian states such as Russia (e.g., Glazunova et al., 2022) and China (e.g., Pan et al., 2019) have sought to increase their soft power and exert foreign information influence by delivering their strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014) to foreign audiences.

This pre-conference aims to explore the past and present of authoritarian regimes' foreign propaganda, including the complex dynamics of its (co-)creators and disseminators, its content, strategies and audiences. By juxtaposing historical and contemporary techniques, the conference aims to generate a deep and nuanced understanding of what has often been referred to as authoritarian regimes' "public diplomacy" (with the latter concept being not unproblematic as such, particularly if it is used to describe practices that include deceptive, covert influence efforts, see e.g. Nip & Sun, 2022).

By organising this conference, we aim to provide a platform for lively scholarly discussion among researchers of the foreign propaganda of authoritarian regimes across the globe, including Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey. By bringing together this community of experts, we seek to facilitate the exchange of novel ideas and collaborative theorising on this timely topic.

Program

Monday 23rd September

9:00 – 09:15: Welcome note

Florian Toepfl (University of Passau, Germany)

09:15 – 10:45 Panel I: Theories, Conceptualizations and (Counter-)Tactics

Vera Tolz, Stephen Hutchings (University of Manchester, UK)
Russia and COVID-19: Modelling the Disinformation Lifecycle

Abstract: In this paper we present a case study to illustrate a new model for studying disinformation. Focused on (though not restricted to) the Russian context, the model is designed to take account of (a) terminological issues relating to historico-cultural context (e.g. the classification of poor journalistic practice including skewed sensationalised headlines as disinformation); (b) the shift of attention away from individual actors affiliated to discrete states to the translingual and transcultural networks in which disinformation is produced, disseminated and consumed; (b) the acquisition and/or loss of disinformation status across temporal, geopolitical and linguacultural boundaries; and (c) the dialogical relationship between (dis)information providers and counter-disinformation services.

Vera Tolz is Sir William Mather Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. She has published widely on various aspects of Russian nationalism, identity politics and the media. Her books include *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference* (with Stephen Hutchings) (2015); *‘Russia’s Own Orient’: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (2011); (co-editor) *Gender and Nation in Contemporary Europe* (2005); *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (2001); (co-editor) *European Democratization since 1800* (2000); and *Russian Academicians and the Revolution* (1997). Her research has been funded through grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust. She held research fellowships at Harvard University and the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

Stephen Hutchings is Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester and Fellow of the UK's Academy of Social Sciences. He has published eight monographs and six edited volumes on various aspects of Russian cultural, media and

propaganda studies with presses including Cambridge University Press, Cornell University Press and Routledge, as well as many articles in journals ranging from Television and New Media, Journalism, and European Journal of Cultural Studies, to Slavic Review. He has frequently advised government departments, media monitoring organizations and journalists on aspects of Russian state communications strategy. He was President of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies from 2010-2013. He has held 8 large research grants with the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council since 2000 and is currently leading a major new nationally funded project on disinformation as a translingual dynamic.

Christiern Santos Okholm (European University Institute, Italy)

Conditions of Subversive Reach Comparing societal factors for Russian propaganda outlets

Online presentation

Abstract: What factors influence the reach of Russian propaganda outlets among its primary audience? A growing literature on Societal Resilience argues that specific societal factors may make some societies more vulnerable to disinformation than others. Here I study the degree to which various societal factors condition Russia's ability to target primary audiences, i.e. Western European fringe communities, in the 3 months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Comparing national levels of Media Resilience, Affective Polarization, and Populism, I find that high national levels of affective polarization and populism significantly correlate with propaganda outlets' having a larger reach among national fringe audiences. I further find that Russian propaganda outlets have a larger reach in societies from regional great powers and among those with a larger parliamentary presence of populist parties. When controlled for these two factors, media or affective polarization loses their correlation. This points to the role that populism plays in Russian Information Warfare's ability to reach its primary audience.

Christiern Santos Okholm is a PhD-student at the European University Institute, where he is finishing his thesis on Russian Information Warfare among European fringe audiences. Through mixed methods, he studies the conditions of Russian information warfare narratives, reach and the effect of various countermeasures.

Tommaso Valastro, Sergio Splendore (University of Milan, Italy)

The political leaning of fact-checking: countering Italian disinformation on the war in Ukraine

Abstract: The intense disinformation efforts that accompanied Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine highlight the importance of countering misinformation to mitigate the influence of foreign actors, particularly in vulnerable public spheres such as the Italian one. Despite widespread use, the effectiveness of factchecking in this regard remains ambiguous, with limited exploration of the underlying reasons. In the present paper we address the topic by focusing on the Italian public sphere, emphasizing how

partisanship and political leaning shape individuals' comprehension of factual information, their inclination to fact-checking exposure, and their capacity to assimilate findings that challenge their preconceived beliefs. For this purpose, we analyse original survey data collected in Italy in spring 2022, assessing the impact of political leaning and partisanship. Our findings highlight the importance of considering political leaning when addressing misinformation and foreign disinformation efforts, explaining the nuanced role of partisanship in shaping the reach and corrective power of factchecking

Tommaso Valastro holds a bachelor's degree in political science and international Relations from the University of Milan, where he graduated with honours with a thesis on the role of Telegram in contemporary Russian propaganda efforts in Italy. He was awarded a place at the University of Helsinki, where he is currently studying for a Master's degree in Russian, Eurasian and Eastern European Studies. His research interests include the dynamics of communication power and propaganda, as well as their relationship to the broader impact of the post-Soviet space on the international order.

Sergio Splendore is Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the Università degli Studi di Milano. He teaches Media Sociology (undergraduate), Journalism, media and politics (postgraduate) and platforms & politics (School of Journalism Walter Tobagi). He received his PhD from the Graduate School in Social and Political Sciences (NASP). He is member of The Worlds of Journalism Study. Sergio's research interests include digital journalism, journalists' professionalization and media trust; he has published on these topics in the International Journal of Public Opinion Research, Journalism, Journalism Studies, New Media and Society, and Media, Culture and Society, among others.

Roman Horbyk (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

Propaganda: What's in a Name? Towards Clearing the Conceptual Quagmire around Information Influence, Persuasion and Strategic Communication

Abstract: The recent surge in concerted information influence attempts has become one of the leading research problems in many disciplines, from media studies to political science. Within each discipline it is approached from a number of different perspectives, often leading to mutually incompatible perspectives, a number of misunderstandings and a conceptual mess that significantly hampers the study of what has been variously described as propaganda, public diplomacy, information warfare, strategic communication, etc. In this presentation, I would like to use the recent experience in studying information influence to advance the need for a clearer separation and specialization between the concepts. Departing from both emic and etic uses of the key concepts among researchers and practitioners, and a thorough review of the definitions proposed historically, I will offer a framework for a theoretical understanding of these conceptual differences that translate to huge differences in practice even though their conceptual differences may seem minute in definitions. I

argue that without such framework the possibilities for a meaningful conversation about information influence are limited.

Roman Horbyk is a scholar of media and culture, holding two doctorates: one on Weimar Republic and Soviet Ukrainian press (Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University, 2015), and another on media power during Euromaidan (Södertörn University, 2017), shortlisted for the best Swedish dissertation in media studies. He has held research and teaching positions at Södertörn, Umeå, Örebro, Uppsala and Basel universities, publishing widely on topics such as disinformation, propaganda, and military communication. He is affiliated with the University of Zurich and Swedish Defense University. Dr. Horbyk is also an accomplished journalist, playwright and screenwriter, with credits including the film *Pryputni* (2017).

Florian Toepfl, Arista Beseler, Julia Kling, Daria Kravets-Meinke, Serge Poliakoff, Anna Ryzhova (University of Passau, Germany)
The Kremlin's Foreign Propaganda Network: Consequences of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

Abstract: In the early days of April 2022, the world stood in shock as the first horrific images from the massacres committed by the Russian army in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha reached the global public. By the end of that year, United Nations investigators had documented, for the time period from 5 to 30 March when Bucha was temporarily occupied by Russian forces, “the killing of 73 civilians (54 men, 16 women, 2 boys and 1 girl)” and were “in the process of corroborating an additional 105 alleged killings” (OHCHR, 2024, n.p.). Figure 1 presents a comparison of the result pages, which users retrieved in the first week of April when they searched for images of "Bucha" (in Russian) on Google and on its Kremlin-controlled counterpart Yandex. As Figure 1 illustrates, the Google algorithms already presented images of human death and large-scale devastation. In contrast, through the algorithmic prism of Yandex, Bucha still appeared as a peaceful suburb of Kyiv.

Florian Toepfl is a Professor at the University of Passau, Germany, where he holds the Chair of Political Communication with a Focus on Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region. He is Principal Investigator of an European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025). His research is grounded in qualitative, quantitative, and computational methods of social science.

Arista Beseler is a PhD Candidate and Researcher at the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025) at the University of Passau. In her dissertation, she focuses on German-language alternative media and their role as disseminators of pro-Kremlin content.

Julia Kling is a PhD Candidate and Researcher at the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s

Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025) at the University of Passau. Her research interests include Russia’s informational influence on social networks (especially Facebook and VK), dis-/misinformation and propaganda.

Daria Kravets is a PhD Candidate in Political Communication at the University of Passau and a researcher at the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025) at the University of Passau. Her research interests are in search engines as mediators of foreign influence and computational methods for communication research.

Serge Poliakoff is a PhD Candidate and Researcher at the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025) at the University of Passau. His research interests are in the areas of Russia's informational influence, troll factories (particularly Prigozhin’s Internet Research Agency and Patriot Media Group), dis-/misinformation and propaganda.

Anna Ryzhova is a PhD Candidate in Political Communication at the University of Passau and a researcher at the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Project on “The Consequences of the Internet for Russia’s Informational Influence Abroad” (RUSINFORM, 2019-2025). Her main research interests are news consumption, media trust, and news literacy of the audiences. Currently, her research focuses on Russian disinformation and propaganda and its reception, specifically among Russian-speaking audiences in Germany.

Chair: Florian Toepfl (University of Passau, Germany)

10:45 – 11:15 Coffee break

11:15 – 12:30 Panel II: Social Networks as Intermediaries of Authoritarian Propaganda

Aytalina Kulichkina (University of Vienna, Austria), Paul Balluff (GESIS, Germany), Nicola Righetti (University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy), Annie Waldherr (University of Vienna, Austria)

Cross-border coordination: Analyzing multilingual Twitter communication during China’s COVID-19 Protests

Abstract: This study analyzes coordinated Twitter activity and discourse in simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English during the 2022 COVID-19 protests in China. We found that 293,899 Twitter accounts engaged in 1,791,916 instances of coordinated sharing. Using topic modeling, we identified leadership-critical, policy-critical, and descriptive discourse among protest-supporting tweets, as well as government propaganda, distracting information, and demoralizing content among repression-supporting tweets. Protest-supporting content was most prominent in simplified and traditional Chinese, while repressive content dominated English tweets. Demoralizing

and distracting information was most frequently tweeted in English, whereas government propaganda was most common in simplified Chinese and least frequent in traditional Chinese. Finally, we identified ten major communities coordinating each content type in each language. We conclude that while protest amplification was efficiently coordinated in simplified Chinese, digital repression primarily targeted the global English-speaking audience, highlighting the lack of coordination in amplifying protests and countering repression internationally.

Aytalina Kulichkina is a researcher at the University of Vienna, Department of Communication. She studies political communication, social media, and computational methods in social science.

Paul Balluff is a researcher at GESIS, Department of Computational Social Science. His research includes applications of transformer models for communication science.

Nicola Righetti is Assistant Professor at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. He studies digital media, political communication, and statistical and computational methods.

Annie Waldherr is Professor of Computational Communication Science at the University of Vienna. She studies the changing structures and dynamics in digitized public spheres, combining computational and conventional empirical methods.

Jakob Bæk Kristensen, Frederik Møller Hansen, Eva Mayerhöffer (Roskilde University, Denmark)

How Authoritarian Regimes can Influence Anti-system Counterpublics on Social Media Platforms in Foreign States

Abstract: Authoritarian regimes that wish to strengthen their geopolitical position can attempt to do so by exercising ‘sharp power’ i.e. garnering support from foreign populations by attempting to destabilize the current political system within those states, which has been noted as a likely strategy operationalized by Russian propaganda entities. The present study examines alternative news sharers on multiple social media platforms exploring the role they play in distributing pro-Russian sources by aligning it with their own anti-system narratives. We hypothesize that actors who have shared pro-Russian sources for various topics prior to the full-scale 2022 invasion are more likely to explicitly support Russia or cast doubt over most of Europe’s denunciation of the invasion in the months following. Preliminary findings suggest that continuously providing source material for anti-system communities on social media can be an effective way for Authoritarian regimes to influence the political system in foreign states.

Frederik Møller Henriksen (MA, University of Copenhagen) is a PhD Fellow at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University. His research focuses on understanding anti-systemic alternative media and digital counterpublics using computational text methods and machine learning.

Jakob Bæk Kristensen (PhD, University of Canterbury) is an associate professor at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University. His research interests include studies of large-scale news sharing online, network analysis, and the formation of digital publics and counterpublics.

Eva Mayerhöffer (Dr.Phil., Freie Universität Berlin) is an Associate Professor in Political Journalism and Comparative Media Studies at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University. Her research focuses on the relation between elites and countermovements in political communication, most recently on the role of alternative news media in digital counterpublics.

Justin Chun-ting Ho, Fabio Votta (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)
China's Digital Propaganda on Meta

Abstract: The Chinese government has increasingly stressed the need to influence public discourse on overseas media. For instance, in 2019 the Cyberspace Administration of China published a 5.8 million yuan (roughly 743 thousand euro) contract to promote content about China on Facebook (Zheng, 2019). Current work on China's overseas propaganda focuses mostly on diplomats' accounts or centres around high-profile incidents, such as the US–China trade war and the 2019 Hong Kong protests (Huang & Wang, 2019, 2021). While these works yield valuable insights on Chinese propaganda during controversies, we know little about how China employs soft propaganda, namely propagandistic content presented in subtle and entertaining formats (Zou, 2023), through its influencer network. This is especially important after the suspension of Chinese accounts by Twitter and Facebook in August 2019 for their attempt to sway public discourse related to the Hong Kong protests, as China propaganda now needs to navigate the social media platforms' rules on misinformation and information operation. Against this background, we address the following research question: how China propaganda uses soft and hard propaganda to influence public discourse?

Justin Chun-ting Ho is a postdoctoral researcher in communication science. Working on computational methods for communication research, including multilingual text analysis and multi-modal (text and image) analysis.

Fabio Votta is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Communication at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the impact of microtargeted political advertisements on citizens and society. He is very passionate about reproducible open science, data visualization and communicating insights from data to a broader

audience. His other research interests include the study of political extremism and fringe political groups online.

Daria Dergacheva (University of Bremen, Germany)

Governing Russian Disinformation: very large social media platforms policies in the context of Russian invasion and war in Ukraine

Abstract: The Russian invasion and war in Ukraine increased disinformation on social media platforms (Semi-annual report on Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2023). With the enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA) in the EU, very large online platforms (VLOPs) must report instances of content moderation of misinformation. However, the DSA's ability to act against disinformation is limited. According to Husovec (2024), platforms are only required to moderate disinformation that falls under categories prohibited by national laws. Additionally, VLOPs had to restrict access to several Russian state disinformation sources following an EU Council decision. A recent report showed that Russian disinformation in the EU had increased (TrustLab, Reset, 2023). This research studied the measures platforms took to mitigate Russian disinformation and how they differentiated between illegal and legal speech.

Dr **Daria Dergacheva** is a postdoc researcher at Prof. Dr. Christian Katzenbach's lab "Platform Governance, Media, and Technology" at the Center for Media, Communication and Information Research (ZeMKI) at the University of Bremen. Her work at the lab is currently focused on governance of misinformation and disinformation by social media platforms, content moderation and censorship. She is also interested in tech regulation on platforms' transparency and researchers access to data.

Chair: Daria Kravets-Meinke (Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt), Germany)

12:30 – 13:30 Lunch break

13:30 – 14:45 Panel III: The Language of Authoritarian Propaganda

Yuliya Krylova-Grek (Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine)

Understanding Media Language. The extension of Pro-Russian narratives in Europe

Abstract: This study examines the language of Public Communication as a tool of political influence used to justify the policies of the Russian autocratic regime. It focuses on the phenomenon of "weaponization of language" in amplifying Russian autocratic narratives within the European information space. This investigation aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of information warfare tactics and inform strategies to counter disinformation in the European media landscape. The research investigates how language weaponization is employed to: 1) Disseminate hate speech; 2) Incite genocide and crimes against humanity; 3) Justify aggression and repression.

In the study a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of public communication have been applied: content analysis; psycholinguistic text analysis (author's method); discourse analysis. Through this comprehensive analysis, the research identifies specific methods and tools of language weaponization in public communication, examining both linguistic and non-linguistic means.

Yuliya Krylova-Grek, PhD, as. prof., National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy"(UA), the director of NGO “Institute of Psycholinguistic Research”, affiliated researcher of Uppsala University. She works in the fields of social and linguistic and psycholinguistics. The area of the scientific interest is related to language, media, and communication studies. She is the author of a methodology for psycholinguistic text analysis that is successfully applied in in the international projects for studying media content and political communication. Yuliya Krylova-Grek has worked as a visiting professor at the University of Hradec Králové (CZ), a guest scholar at MacEwan University (CA), Uppsala University (SE).

Radu-Mihai Meza, Alina Mogos (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania)

Propaganda on Demand. Framing and Agenda Setting of Foreign Affairs in Czech, Polish and Romanian Sputnik News (2017-2022) – An Analysis of Headlines

Abstract: The Sputnik News network of websites has been the subject of scholarly attention since its 2014 launch. Acknowledging the network’s potential influence, EU countries blocked the websites in January 2022. This research employs a mixed methods approach to study a large dataset (N=118198) of Sputnik News headlines from the foreign news sections of three language editions – Czech, Polish and Romanian, from January 2017 to January 2022. The findings indicate a conflict oriented, war journalism approach mostly focusing on USA-Russia and individual actors Trump and Putin. Furthermore, the coverage leans towards fear as the dominant affective framing and the most frequently represented organization, NATO, is framed as a failing alliance, as actively pursuing the consolidation of power, or even as an aggressor. Sputnik is not reliant on a coherent narrative, but rather on large volumes of emotionalized eclectic messages, which fits with the emergent "propaganda on demand" strategy model.

Radu M. Meza is an associate professor of Journalism and Digital Media at Babeş-Bolyai University with a background in journalism, computer science, media communication, and sociology. His research focuses on popular online media, media representations, and online hate speech, and employs computational methods for data collection and analysis. Most recent publications tackle discursive strategies and persona performances employed by the most followed young TikTok celebrities and shifts in the media framing of the Schengen issue in the Romanian national media with a focus on politicisation, emotionalisation, scapegoating and disenchantment with politics.

Andreea-Alina Mogoş is a professor of Journalism and Digital Media at Babeş-Bolyai University. In 2009, she earned a PhD in sociology at Babeş-Bolyai University and a PhD in information and communication sciences at Université Paris 8 Vincennes–Saint-Denis with the thesis *Media Representations of the Romanians in the French Daily Newspapers*. Her research interests focus on the mixed-methods approach of the textual and visual media frames and representations, and the transformation of media genres. Recent publications investigate disinformation in Eastern Europe through an analysis of vaccination frames and the discursive and stylistic dimensions of populist leaders' newsworthiness and mediatization.

Oleksandra Kozlova, Michael Johann (University of Augsburg, Germany)

Firehose of Falsehood on Telegram: How Russian Political Influencers Frame the War against Ukraine

Abstract: The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 marked a pivotal event, characterized by the deployment of various Russian propaganda frames to justify military aggression. In this presentation we will demonstrate the results of the research on the way Russian political influencers apply various framing strategies in justification of the full-scale invasion of an independent state through the “Firehose of Falsehood” propaganda model. Our study explores (1) the framing patterns employed by Russian political influencers from 2022 to 2023 on Telegram, and investigate (2) how these frames have transformed throughout the progression of the war in Ukraine. Our findings delineate a range of frames, from those supporting Vladimir Putin’s portrayal of the invasion as a ‘special military operation’ to narratives that include ‘outright calls for war against Ukraine’ and ‘admissions of civilian casualties’ as Russia’s responsibility.

Oleksandra Kozlova is Graduate of the Master program “Media and Communication Studies” at the University of Augsburg, Germany. Her graduate thesis concerns the changes in Russian propaganda narratives over the course of full-scale war against Ukraine. Before that completed the Master program in Journalism in the National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”.

Dr. **Michael Johann** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Augsburg (Germany). He holds a PhD in communication from the University of Passau (Germany). Michael is also the young representative of the Organisational and Strategic Communication section of the ECREA. His main research interests include digital communication, political communication, and strategic communication.

Olena Melnykova-Kurhanova (National Aviation University, Ukraine)

The peculiarities of Russian propaganda spreading under the siege of Mariupol

Abstract: Russian propaganda was spread in Mariupol until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The city's information space was also affected by Russian information aggression. However, the propaganda was spread on the eve of

Russia's full-scale invasion and during the siege of Mariupol. In our study, we used document analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews. These methods made it possible to describe from different dimensions how the propaganda of the invaders in Mariupol changed after the start of the Russian war against Ukraine. We interviewed 22 residents and 22 journalists in Mariupol. We have developed a typology and structure of media and public communication means in times of war which will allow to assess the degree of Russian propaganda. During the siege, TV and radio channels, the press started to spread information through social networks, and some outlets started to print leaflets and posters.

Dr Olena Melnykova-Kurhanova is Associate Professor of Journalism Chair at the National Aviation University, Kyiv (Ukraine). Her research interests include public and social communication, social media, fact-checking, media literacy, journalistic genres, speechwriting, information wars, (political) journalism, alternative media, strategic communication, human rights journalism, ethics of journalism and gender in mass media. Besides lecturing and developing several courses, she has published regularly in these areas in recent years as well as participated in various conferences, congresses and projects. She was awarded several certificates of appreciation for significant achievements in research work, a high level of student training as well as her pedagogical skills and effective work with gifted students. Olena Melnykova-Kurhanova also serves as a media coach and is a member of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine.

Chair: TBA

14:45 – 16:00 Panel IV: Strategies of and Responses to Authoritarian Propaganda

Ana Stojiljković, Sabina Mihelj (Loughborough University, UK)

Between global influence and local appropriation: Understanding the impact of China's COVID-19 diplomacy in Serbia

Abstract: Chinese public diplomacy, including its ‘vaccine diplomacy’, attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years, yet research has largely focused on the ‘supply’ side rather than on the ‘demand side. As a result, we know little about how Chinese attempts at swaying public opinion abroad are received in specific local contexts. This paper addresses this gap by examining the local appropriation of China’s COVID-19 ‘vaccine diplomacy’ in Serbia, a country where both political elites and public opinion have grown increasingly sympathetic to China in recent years. The paper draws on a two-step narrative analysis of media coverage from three outlets of different political orientations. The results show that rather than simply praising China, local political and media actors reframed Chinese strategic narratives in ways that presented Chinese vaccine supplies as evidence of Serbia’s own success at managing the pandemic. While these findings do not challenge the effectiveness of China’s COVID-19 diplomacy as such, they do suggest that its impact is a result of an interaction and alignment with local political and economic interests.

Ana Stojiljković is a Research Associate on the Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism project (2022-24, ESRC/Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities) at Loughborough University. She is responsible for data collection and analysis in Serbia and contributes to the comparative research in all four countries covered by the project. Her research interests revolve around strategic communication, election campaigns and audience research, especially in the context of democratization. She holds a PhD in Political Communication from the University of Leeds.

Sabina Mihelj is Professor of Media and Cultural Analysis at Loughborough University, and Principal lead Investigator of the Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism project (2022-24). Her research is focused on the interaction between media, politics, and culture, especially in the context of transitions to and from democracy. Her major publications include *Media Nations: Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World* (2011), *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television* (2018, with S. Huxtable) and *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies* (2024, with V. Štětka).

Yingqi Huang, Carl Zhou (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Xin Zhou (Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany)

Political Disillusionment in Xi's Era: Comparing Chinese Youth Political Participation in White Paper Protest 2022

Online presentation

Abstract: During the pandemic, China's stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures led to several societal tragedies, including the Ürümqi fire that claimed ten lives. This prompted public discontent with the Zero-Covid policy and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), culminating in the White Paper Protest in late 2022. Notably, most of the White Paper Protest demonstrators were young individuals. This study examines the political engagement of youth in the protest across regions such as China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Europe, evaluating whether it signifies political disillusionment in the Xi Jinping era. Using thematic analysis, we explore the varying levels of political participation, constraints, and motivations among protesters in different geopolitical contexts.

Carl Zhou: Student at University of Amsterdam, focusing on political communication, protest, propaganda, and polarization through computational approaches.

Yingqi Huang: University of Amsterdam student, studying political communication, social movements, and propaganda in authoritarian contexts.

Xin Zhou: Doctoral candidate at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, researching political communication, misinformation, and digital authoritarianism using computational methods.

Ruty Korotaev (University of Toronto, Canada)

A Mediatized Diaspora: Analyzing the Russian Diasporic Experience in Latvia

Abstract: This presentation will focus on outlining my doctoral proposal and planned course of action for my doctoral field work, which is set to be conducted this coming academic year. My topic focuses on understanding Russian-speaking populations in Latvia, specifically with the goal of answering the following research questions: (RQ1) What are the main information sources that Russian-speaking communities in Latvia rely upon for news? What narratives resonate most with members of this community, and what factors impact this acceptance? (RQ2) How do Russians in Latvia perceive their positionality within Baltic society, particularly about government, integration vs. separation, and self-identity? What is the relationship between engagement with Kremlin-funded information sources and engagement within Latvian society (including its localized information space)? In this presentation, I will outline my planned methodology and fieldwork objectives, ethical considerations, interview guide and literature review. The objective of this presentation is to, in sharing my research plan and proposal, to receive constructive feedback and further recommendations for this project from pre-conference participants.

Ruty Korotaev is a third-year Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, working under the supervision of Dr. Kenzie Burchell. Her work focuses on understanding Russian state-funded media and its effects on Russian-speaking diasporic communities, with a specific focus on Russian-speaking communities in the Baltics. Her research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding Russian disinformation and the Kremlin's efforts to engage with the Russian-speaking diaspora through information warfare. Ruty also works as a Senior Analyst at the Centre for International Digital Policy at Global Affairs Canada, where she supports efforts to research the impacts of Russian disinformation largely in East-Central Europe.

Maxim Alyukov (University of Manchester, UK)

One person's belief is another's propaganda: Disinformation discourse and motivated reasoning in authoritarian Russia

Abstract: References to disinformation have become a persuasive aspect of modern political communication. While democracies debunk disinformation from authoritarian regimes, populist politicians in democracies and autocrats have embraced disinformation discourse to discredit political rivals. This oversaturation raises the issue of the second-order effects of disinformation, but research on this issue is scarce. To fill this gap, this study uses a pre-registered online experiment (n = 5,000) embedded in the Panel Study of Russian Public Opinion and Attitudes, conducted in Russia in 2024. I argue that in saturated media environments, raising awareness of disinformation can paradoxically help autocrats by spurring citizens' motivated reasoning. The experiment reveals that while awareness of disinformation undermines trust in regime

propaganda, it also gives regime supporters cognitive resources to shield themselves from counter-attitudinal information reinforcing their beliefs. The results contribute to research on authoritarian propaganda in saturated media environments and have important policy implications for counter-propaganda campaigns.

Dr **Maxim Alyukov** is a Leverhulme Early Career Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Manchester and a research associate at King's Russia Institute, King's College London. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Helsinki. Maxim's research focuses on media, political communication, and political cognition in autocracies, with a particular focus on Russia. His research has been published in a variety of journals, including *Political Communication*, *Politics*, *Qualitative Psychology*, and *Europe-Asia Studies*. Maxim is also a member of an independent research group Public Sociology Laboratory and an affiliate of the International Panel on the Information Environment.

Chair: Sophia Winkler (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS), Germany)

16:00 – 16:30 Coffee break

16:30 – 17:45 Panel V: The Audiences of Propaganda

Jānis Juzefovičs (Riga Stradins University, Latvia), Diāna Kalniņa, (Riga Stradins University, Latvia)

Transformations of news repertoires of Baltic Russian speakers after the ban of Kremlin-aligned Russian news providers

Abstract: Drawing on survey data and results of focus group discussions with audience members, the paper discusses the footprint Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the ensuing ban of Russian state-aligned news providers has left on the news repertoires (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012; Peters and Schröder 2018) of Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic countries of Latvia and Estonia, both having a sizeable Russian-speaking minority, who have long been avid users of Russian sources of news. Building on the analytical framework proposed by Vulpius et al. (2023) of news repertoire change, the paper presents various responses – strategies of news repertoire change – Russian-speakers have taken vis-à-vis the ban of Russian state-aligned news media.

Dr **Jānis Juzefovičs** is a senior researcher at the Riga Stradins University. His research interests focus on the study of media audiences in the Baltics, and the Russian-speaking minority audiences in Latvia and Estonia in particular. He obtained a PhD in media and communication studies from the University of Westminster in 2014. His most recent articles have been published in *Global Media and Communication*, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, *Political Geography*, and *Europe-Asia Studies*. He is the author of *Broadcasting and National Imagination in Post-Communist Latvia: Defining the Nation, Defining Public Television* (2017, Intellect).

Dani Madrid-Morales (University of Sheffield, UK), Herman Wasserman (Stellenbosch University, South Africa)

Assessing the persuasiveness of China's external communication towards Africa

Abstract: Over the last decade, there has been a surge in China's external communications efforts, particularly towards countries in the Global South. Previous research on the topic has largely focused on describing the type of content of Chinese media vis-à-vis other news organisations and examining the production routines within Chinese global newsrooms. Less is known about audiences' reception of content produced by Chinese media. Using experimental data (N = 600) collected in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, this study examines the persuasiveness of content produced by Chinese State-owned media. We find that content attributed to CGTN Africa scores lower in a range of metrics of persuasiveness and credibility than content attributed to another international news organisation. We discuss the implications of these findings within the developing body of literature that seeks to empirically assess the effectiveness of China's influence around the world.

Dani Madrid-Morales is a Lecturer in Journalism and Global Communication at the School of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Sheffield. Prior to this, he was an Assistant Professor at the Valenti School of Communication, University of Houston, and a Hong Kong PhD Fellow, at City University of Hong Kong. He studies global political communication, with a focus on the impact of new digital technologies on the production of State-sponsored news, global public opinion, and misinformation in the Global South. His latest co-edited book is *Disinformation in the Global South* (Wiley).

Herman Wasserman is Professor and Chair of the Department of Journalism, Stellenbosch University. He previously held positions at University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, the University of Sheffield and the University of Newcastle in the UK. He has published widely on journalism in South Africa. His current work focuses on media and disinformation from a comparative perspective. He is a Fellow of the International Communication Association and an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa. Wasserman is also Editor-in-Chief of the *Annals of the International Communication Association* and *African Journalism Studies*.

Alexandra Brankova (Uppsala University, Sweden)

The Role of Nationalist Actors in Authoritarian Propaganda: The Russian Imperial Movement's Media Ecology, Conservative Transnationalism, and Wartime Mobilization

Abstract: The presentation assesses how Russian nationalist groups (in this case, the Russian Imperial Movement), as a mezzo level-actor, are becoming an active part of digital propaganda, spread of state-aligned narratives but are also key actors for the front-line recruitment and mobilization in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The objective of

the study is to assess the RIM's media ecology, their patterns of intertextuality with other actors, and the study of its transnational ties. The study also provides insights from the RIM's mobilization and the use of digital media for coordination and paramilitary training delivery. The RIM's demonstrates ties with other extreme far-right nationalist groups in Serbia and Sweden but their own media ecology remains rather isolated with a limited number of actors with whom they share either militarist goals or ideological discursive alignment such as monarchism, Orthodoxy, conservatism, and ethno-nationalist stands. Digital methods such as scraping, hyperconnectivity mapping are combined with Netnography and critical discourse analysis as data from Telegram, Vkontakte, and other web sources is extracted. The presentation sheds light on the role of mezzo-level actors and the role of social networks in authoritarian propaganda.

Alexandra Brankova is a PhD candidate in Media and Communications at Uppsala University, the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES) and the Department of Informatics and Media (IM). Alexandra Brankova's PhD project investigates Russian nationalist media ecology, practices, and discursive constructions of Russian national identity pre- and during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2018 - 2023). The research approaches developed in the project are related to the study of digital nationalism, new media ecology, media practices, and the discursive construction of national identity. Her main research interests are related to national identity construction, nationalism, critical discourse studies, digital social science, new media, and digital methods with a specific focus on the Russian Federation and South-East Europe. She has also been a visiting scholar at the Centre for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo and Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki.

Sophia Winkler (Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS), Germany)

Online Lives Between Russia and Germany: Transnational Scrolling and Spaces of Belonging

Abstract: The paper explores the discursive construction of spaces of belonging within social media between Russia and Germany, focusing on how transnational memory agents shape historical narratives and thus influence identity. By conducting a critical discourse analysis and topic modeling of social media content, this study investigates the dynamic and complex nature of identity negotiation in the digital realm. It examines how antagonistic worldviews and historical narratives are propagated and contested, revealing the influence of nation-states and authoritarian governments in shaping public memory and identity. The research highlights the transnational mobilization of memory and its impact on political views and cultural identities. Research questions addressed are the role of transnational memory agents in creating spaces of belonging, the goals and functions of their content, and the interrelations and tensions between these spaces.

Sophia Winkler is a doctoral researcher based at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin, Germany. She analyses the transnational social

media space between Russia and Germany and its effects on young Russians in constructing and contesting their identities. Her research is part of the ERC project “Moving Russia(ns): Intergenerational Transmission of Memories Abroad and at Home (MoveMeRU),” in collaboration with the Chair of Political Communication with a Focus on Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region at the University of Passau, Germany. She focuses on interpretive qualitative methods, with research interests in memory and identity studies and social media.

Chair: Anna Ryzhova (University of Passau, Germany)

17:45 – 18:00 Final remarks

18:30 – Meeting at the restaurant