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Russia's Influence Waning in Former Soviet Republics, While Growing in the Global South

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Since launching its February 2022 "special military operation" in Ukraine, Russia has carried out a concerted effort to sway public opinion in its favor through information operations (IO) both in the post-Soviet space and globally, yet it has found unique success in countries in the Global South.
- While Russia has found a convincing narrative in the Global South, where its discourse taps into issues related to social identity, culture, and anti-colonial sentiment, in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where its discourse focuses primarily on unity, solidarity, and security, younger populations in particular have rejected its IO efforts, due to lingering resentment over Soviet colonialism.
- This brief suggests that the U.S. and its Allies have new opportunities to engage these post-Soviet populations, while recognizing the new challenges that they face due to Russia's successful IO campaigns in the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's influence and ability to shape perceptions of Moscow appear to be waning across the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus (Armenia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia,). That despite concerted attempts to sway public opinion through a campaign of information operations (IO) in this Russian-speaking part of the world. This paper examines how Russia seeks to shape public discourse and the information landscape in the region via its penetration of local, national, and global news, along with social media, and popular messaging apps like Telegram. Just

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as Russia's military looks to find security vacuums to fill abroad–whether in Syria, the Sahel, or the Donbas–so, too, do Russian propagandists look for information vacuums to fill with narratives favorable of the Kremlin.

In the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian IO has not connected with audiences in its own Russian-speaking backyard or in areas that were once reliably pro-Kremlin. At first blush, this might seem puzzling, given Moscow's long history of successfully influencing these populations, the reach of Russian soft power, and the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties that these countries share.

There are several reasons for this lack of success. Polls show younger generations born after the collapse of the Soviet Union are less susceptible to Russian propaganda. In addition, there are large segments of the world's population, particularly in countries that border Russia, like Armenia and Kazakhstan, that are firmly against the war in Ukraine, thus reducing the efficacy of Russian IO there as well.[1] Yet, much further from home, Russia has been more successful. Its IO campaigns have taken hold across much of the Global South[2], and have focused on de-colonization, a theme that has held Western powers to account for the legacy of the colonial era.[3]

POST-SOVIET REPUBLICS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

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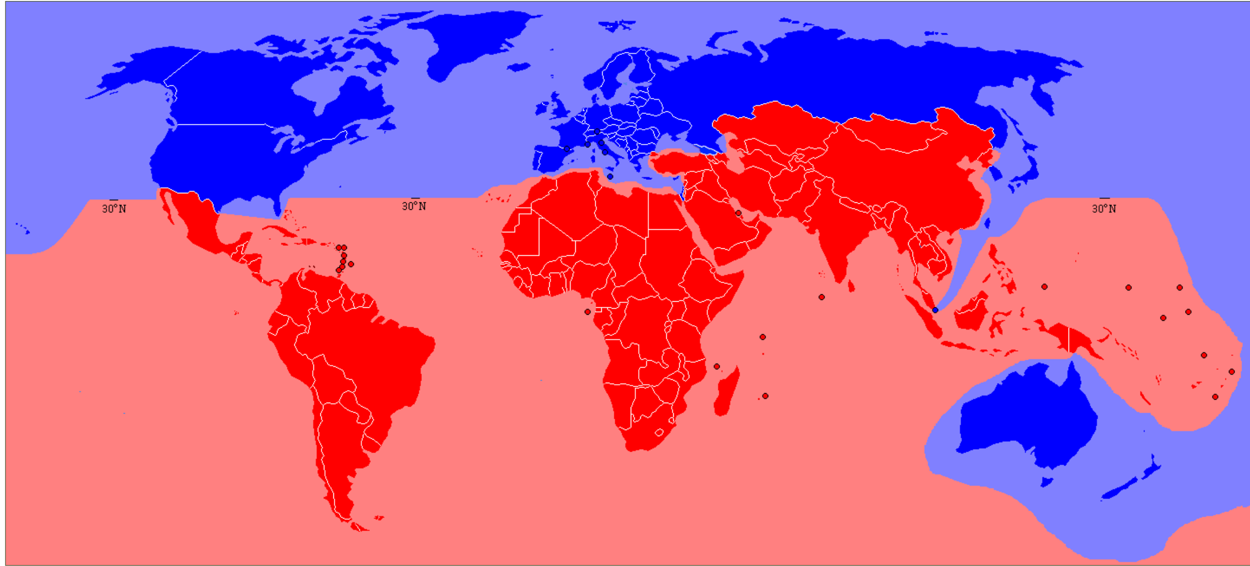
THE GLOBAL SOUTH



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HISTORY AND NATURE OF RUSSIAN MISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

IO, in the Russian sense of the phrase, refers to any state-backed act of military deception, *(maskirovka)*, leak, forged political manipulation, spin, or propaganda spread via public media, or outright lies or falsehoods spread online to shape narratives or to misinform.[4] The purpose of IO is manifold, but at its core it is meant to weaken Russia's opponents, which can include states, nonstate actors, organizations, or individuals. IO is just one component of Russia's larger practice of so-called "active measures" *(aktivnye meropriyatiya)*, which consists of a whole-of-government approach to both shape and control Russian "hearts and minds," as well as shape the perception of Russia overseas.[5]

The role of propaganda and information warfare has deep roots in Russian history because Russian authorities have long viewed them as vital instruments in ensuring the state's continued existence. Although there is no unified theory of Russian information warfare, the concept has informed Russian military doctrine going back centuries. The tsarist-era secret police, Okhrana, relied on subversion to shape the international environment, much like their Soviet successors.[6] Lenin, as one historian noted, "attached to propaganda the highest priority, attributing to it his regime's ability to survive against overwhelming odds. Its prerequisite was complete control over all sources of information."[7] In more recent years, IO has been compared to a "manipulative form of Russian 'soft power'."[8] Soft power can be defined as a country's ability to influence another with its cultural appeal and without resorting to the use of coercive force.[9] Waged effectively, Russian information warfare can be used as a "force multiplier," particularly to weaken the resolve of its adversary and to dissolve support for Western-style democracy.[10] More commonly, however, it is used as a cheaper substitute for more conventional or kinetic means to provide Russia greater political or diplomatic leverage.

A central aim of IO is to disrupt an adversary's

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ability to respond to an attack, conventional or otherwise. By muddying the information landscape and blurring the line between fact and fiction, as this line of thinking goes, IO can interfere with an actor's decision-action cycle – what military strategists call the OODA loop.[11] For Russia, information warfare *(informatsionnaya voyna)* is not simply a media blitz or pushing favorable news coverage or false narratives into the media; rather, it consists of a more holistic activity, encompassing the arts, education, culture, and other realms of society.

According to a report in *Joint Force Quarterly*, this kind of warfare is "designed to distract, overload, paralyze, exhaust, deceive, divide, pacify, deter, provoke, overload, and pressure an adversary."[12] For a country like Russia that sees enemies virtually everywhere, its IO is not only targeted at adversaries but also at would-be allies or fence-sitting countries. Russia does not seek to conquer these places. What it wants instead is to prevent or deter them from siding with its adversaries – namely, the West – as well as to provide Russia support (or at least nonalignment) in international forums like the United Nations.

Russia also sees its IO as part of a larger civilizational struggle.[13] Current Russian IO comes out of special propaganda *(spetspropaganda)* theory, which was widely taught during the Cold War and the Russian Ministry of Defense Military University reintroduced it in 2000. As a 2014 report put it, "Russian authors understand 'information warfare' as influencing the consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the different civilizational systems adopted by different countries in the information space by use of special means to control information resources as 'information weapons.'"[14]

RUSSIAN IO EFFORTS PRE- AND POST-2022

Pre-2022 Russian IO Trendlines

Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia employed a mixture of old-school IO methods with newer, digital ones. In the post-Cold War era, Russian-language blogs began to spring up, many of them serving as mouthpieces of the Kremlin to appeal to younger audiences. In 2005, shortly after the U.S.-led war in Iraq began and near the end of Vladimir Putin's first term as president, a new English-language television channel, *Russia Today,* was launched, largely to sway a more sophisticated international audience. Later rebranded as *RT*, the channel sought to attract foreign audiences with a sophisticated look, similar to Western television channels, yet the message was unmistakably from another era: Russia was morally virtuous while the West was corrupt and interventionist.

The largely unknown new president of Russia at the time was mostly concerned about the so-called "color revolutions" sweeping the former Soviet space and installing pro-West regimes. Within months, a revolution would unseat a Kremlin-backed candidate for president in Kyiv, as tens of thousands of Ukrainians, young and old, flocked to the EuroMaidan in what became known as the Orange Revolution. Even though the "revolution" fizzled, the episode sparked concern at the Kremlin that other ex-Soviet Republics might seek closer relations with Europe and the United States. A new concerted influence campaign by the Kremlin and its surrogates seemed required to keep Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics in Russia's orbit. *RT* was one component of a broader strategic public relations drive to control the narrative in Russia's "near abroad." Flush with cash from the rising price of oil, the Kremlin began to flood these countries' airwaves with

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pro-Kremlin programming. This line of effort may have peaked in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and the war in the Donbas began. Yale historian Timothy Snyder described Russia's IO campaign during this operation as "the most sophisticated propaganda campaign in the history of warfare."[15]

Whereas many Western countries have marginalized and underfunded the departments devoted to countering propaganda and conducting "narrative warfare," the Kremlin has doubled down on such operations over the past few decades. Russian leaders understand information warfare as a war for the hearts and minds of the population and a civilizational struggle between the Russian worldview and the Western one. The battlefield is the mind, both of the public and the political elite. It therefore has a political, ideological and cultural dimension. Still, Russia believes its IO is reactive, defensive in nature, and in response to U.S. information operations directed at its citizenry, with the goal of fomenting revolution and replacing the current government. In Russia's view, the various color revolutions of the 2000s are evidence that such brainwashing by the West has worked.

Claiming it is defending itself, Russia continues to try to disrupt Western societies, particularly ones holding elections, through the use of disinformation. For instance, in Bulgaria, Telegram channels linked to the Kremlin-seeded anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian false narratives as a way to foment opposition to Ukrainian grain imports. These narratives have found a firmer foothold than previous messaging that focused more on security: the Atlantic Council's DFRLab identifies 23 pro-Kremlin channels that are in Bulgarian and with over 65,000 subscribers.[16] In Moldova, anonymous pro-Kremlin Telegram channels have disseminated disinformation about the country's pro-EU government going back to 2023.[17] The campaign has targeted Moldova's increased "militarization" and closer military ties with France.[18] The purpose of these campaigns is to sow internal confusion and chaos as a way of weakening domestic support for EU institutions.

Post-2022 Russian IO Trendlines

The Russians' interest in IO has ramped up since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its operations have grown in scale. The U.S. Department of State recently noted "a vast ecosystem" of various proxy websites, individuals, and organizations that claim to be independent news sources but are, in fact, fake.[19] A May 2024 statement issued by NATO accused Russia of waging "disinformation campaigns and other hybrid operations."[20] In most Western societies, Russian IO plays not on national security concerns or fears of Russia's use of military force, but on other issues, such as Ukrainian corruption or Ukrainian leaders' incompetence. Russia has hired a number of political strategists and trolls to write thousands of stories, opinion pieces, social media posts, letters to the editor, and comments, whose aim is to sow doubt in the utility of supporting Ukraine.[21] In the United States, these farms put out stories playing on Americans' concerns about illegal immigration to downplay the importance of providing funding for people in a faraway country like Ukraine when those funds could theoretically be used to solve problems closer to home. Other messaging includes fabricated stories about Ukraine's entrenched corruption.[22]

The Russian government believes its enemies are waging a relentless and nonstop use of propaganda that mixes subversion with misinformation, so from its vantage point, it is simply engaging in defensive countermeasures. In other words, IO is not some kind of liminal form of warfare carried out between wars rather, it is an integral part of the "Russian way of war."[23] This helps explain how and why Russia carries out *informatsionnaya voyna* and how this domain of warfare was

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successfully integrated into its current military doctrine, developed in 2014.[24]

During kinetic conflict, the goal of this kind of "contactless warfare" has traditionally been to negate the enemy's battlefield advantage by employing IO methods that are cheap, targeted, and effective.[25] The purpose of Russia's current IO campaign is to divide its enemies and to shore up allies by dissuading them from aligning with the West or at least by staying neutral. The types of messages the Kremlin disseminates are not altogether false or fake news. Sometimes they are, but more often, these IO efforts take extremist viewpoints and present them as mainstream, thereby normalizing them in the popular discourse.[26]

ASSESSING RUSSIAN IO EFFORTS IN THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS

The information landscape of former Soviet republics is not a monolith, yet Russian media no longer holds the same sway as it did in the immediate post-Soviet era. That is partly because the share of Russian speakers in these countries is steadily decreasing, but also because of increasing top-down efforts by national governments to broadcast news in their native languages, the war in Ukraine (and rejection among some populations of the pro-Kremlin narrative), and evolving tastes and habits among these populations. The media landscape is also becoming more fragmented, as traditional news outlets vie for mostly younger viewers, who increasingly get their news from social media, messaging apps, and online newsletters. Despite the regional variation, television remains the dominant form of news dissemination across the post-Soviet space.[27] The most popular TV channels are state-run, rather than Russian channels. Russian television only constitutes 16 percent of the region's news consumption, far below national TV channels (56 percent) and social media (50 percent). Younger populations (ages 18-24) consume television news at far lower rates (39 percent) than older viewers (ages 55+, 79 percent). Meanwhile, there is no rural-urban difference in who consumes more Russian television – it is evenly split (roughly 22 percent each).

This media landscape presents an opportunity for external countries to exert an outsized influence on the younger generations. Local media in these countries is often at the mercy of corrupt politicians and businessmen, and is typically more fragmented compared to Russian media.[28] While the older and more educated viewers in these societies generally trust their state-run media more than younger and uneducated viewers,[29] both older and younger generations, along with linguistic minorities, are more susceptible to propaganda than others.

Meanwhile, Western media has little resonance among locals, even younger generations, because it is seen as too immoral and alien."[30] Independent media has taken a hit in recent years. For example, in 2023 the authorities shut down the popular investigative news site Kloop because of its coverage of government corruption.[31] Similar crackdowns have occurred as regional governments clamp down on dissenting voices.

Of course, the post-Soviet region is not a monolith – there is wide variation in how its populations consume their news and in which language, although older generations across this region tend to speak Russian more fluently. Nine of the top 10 most viewed television channels in Tajikistan are in Russian and owned by Russian affiliates.[32] In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, social media is a more popular source for news than the national TV networks, whereas in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the opposite is true, mostly because the internet is less popular in these countries than

in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.[33]

Television, particularly talk shows, is still the primary way older Central Asians consume their news.[34] Unsurprisingly, the war in Ukraine factors heavily in news coverage in these regions.[35] Central Asians who get their news from Russian-owned channels are more likely to blame the war on the United States and the West. Younger Central Asians get their news from local channels or social media, including Telegram and YouTube "vloggers." While Russian TV factors heavily in the Kremlin-run IO in the region, most disinformation is disseminated via online media, so the party line can potentially reach all ages of consumer.

Russian IO has become only more widespread across the former Soviet Union since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While the blitz of disinformation has a familiar ring to it and might remind some observers of the propaganda directed at Ukraine prior to the 2022 invasion, there are important differences. Rather than invoke culture, family values, or local traditions to boost pro-Russia attitudes in post-Soviet republics, Russia plays up fears of instability, and painting itself as the protector and stabilizing force in the region..[36] For example, in Moldova, Russian propaganda suggested that Ukrainian and Moldovan forces were planning to intervene militarily in the breakaway region of Transnistria. In Georgia, the pro-Kremlin Georgian Dream government has put out conspiracy theories and false narratives that Western governments are seeking to foment violence and uprisings–so-called "color revolutions"– in Georgia after its October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections, as a way to undermine support for NATO or Ukraine.[37] Russian IO has successfully shifted popular attitudes in Georgia to the idea that the United States and Ukraine are trying to provoke a war between Russia and Georgia.[38]

The purpose of this propaganda is manifold, but at its core, it is to sow distrust and demoralize the population, leaving locals to feel insecure, unsafe and in need of a protector. Such demoralization, the Kremlin's thinking goes, makes them more pliant and dependent on Russia for their security, economic provisions, and other public goods. The emphasis on security underscores these countries' integration with Russian-backed security architecture (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Collective Security Treaty Organization, etc.),[39] to compel these states from siding with Russia's enemies, namely, Europe and the United States.

The Kremlin sees its information operations as a second front of sorts to its ongoing kinetic operations in Ukraine, but not all its propaganda looks and sounds the same. Russia tailors its messaging based on the receiver. Across the former states of the Soviet Union, the message is loud and clear, and relies on a three-pronged strategy:

- *Russia and only Russia can protect you.*
- *Your country is an artificial construct and a fluke of history; in fact, you are part of Russia.*
- *The West wants to divide you. Don't let them.*

At the core of these three themes is a concerted move by the Kremlin to reassert greater influence in these countries, weaken their national unity and sense of nationhood, and demoralize the populations, playing on their fears of insecure borders, powerful neighbors, and doubt in their own weak security services.

Russia has long sought to destabilize societies it deems as enemy or hostile by mobilizing large armies of journalists, diplomats, businessmen, artists, priests, and others to peddle its propaganda. In January 2024, Russian historian Mikhail Smolin appeared on a popular talk show on Russia's NTV channel claiming Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan did not exist as nations.[40] The charge drew widespread condemnation in the region. This is common

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for Russian media penetration in former Soviet republics. In January 2024, ultranationalist Zakhar Prilepin floated the idea of reannexing Uzbekistan on *RT*.[41] Even a post on VKontakte, a popular Russian social media network, purportedly by former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, called Georgia and Kazakhstan "artificial" nations.[42] Various other posts call for the overthrow of governments deemed hostile to Moscow; for instance, in the spring of 2024, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels called for the overthrow of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The authorities in Yerevan subsequently responded by banning Russia's two main television channels.[43]

The messages are in written and spoken Russian, some of them appealing specifically to older generations. Kremlin-linked PR firms like the Moscow-based Social Design Agency, run by Ilya Gambashidze, bombard legitimate news sites with fake ads, fake stories, fake comments, and even fake corrections.[44] These articles are slickly written and produced and are meant to imitate authentic and salient fears that divide societies in these countries but to amplify one side over the other. Western intelligence has called this propaganda effort, "Doppelganger."[45] For example, if Kazakh polls show fear of jihadism as being of medium importance, a targeted PR campaign will amp up the perceived level of fear, thereby creating the illusion that fears of jihadism trump all others. This kind of disinformation also weakens democracy by dividing societies and undermining faith among average Central Asians in their system of government. As the Kazakhstani political scientist Dosym Satpayev told the Kazakh Telegraph Agency:

> ***"I would like to warn the leadership of Kazakhstan. The information war is already going on in Kazakhstan. The information war has divided the Kazakh society... Therefore, get ready for information wars, you cannot relax, no one can be 100% immune to this. Unfortunately, I think to some extent we have allowed this ourselves. For 30 years, the media field was simply destroyed in Kazakhstan, while Russian propaganda channels filled the vacuum."[46]***

Meanwhile, opposition lawmakers aim to sow doubt in the minds of readers or viewers by almost verbatim repeating talking points scripted by Kremlin operatives—only in their native language—on television news or by citing the talking points as actual facts in authentic news stories.

Russian bloggers are useful surrogates, particularly on social media to get around restrictions that Western tech firms like Meta, X, and Google have placed on Russian state media accounts.[47] Pro-Kremlin bloggers are also heavily active on Russian messaging apps like VK and Telegram. The Kremlin also relies on local surrogates, including commentators, bloggers, and influencers, to get its message out, as these actors are seen as more authentic and resonate more with a local audience. Sometimes the message sent by the Kremlin is a fake news story that justifies its war aims, like the fabrication that the West is running an illegal biolab in Ukraine.[48] Other times a news story may hype up a threat, e.g., the presence of foreign agents, that the Kremlin knows will resonate with many Central Asians.

Russian propaganda does not operate without limits, however. Due to local social attitudes , which are often either neutral or unfavorable toward Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and other geopolitics, Russian state television broadcasts Kremlin-friendly propaganda but within a number of unwritten taboos, one of which is to avoid too much news about the war in Ukraine.[49] Russian influence operations also span well beyond using the media to rally support, instead relying on a whole-of-government

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approach.[50] In September 2023, for example, Moscow announced plans to build nine Russian-language schools in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to the 10 schools it has already announced it is building in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.[51] At a cost of $USD 5.5 million, Russia will not only build the schools in Kyrgyzstan, but also appoint their principals. The schools will use new Russian textbooks with a "section on their justification for the invasion of Ukraine," according to an RFE/RL Bishkek-based analyst. The schools are part of a larger effort to maintain and possibly expand Russian influence and pro-Kremlin narratives in Kyrgyzstan.[52]

What has perhaps united the region more than anything else since 1991, based on polling data, has been its general position on the war in Ukraine.[53] In May 2022, just a few months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not a single Central Asian leader commemorated Victory Day in Moscow – a symbolic blow to the Kremlin and a demonstration of the region's growing autonomy.[54] As Russia looks to reassert its influence over the region, the reaction among lawmakers and leaders from these ex-Soviet republics has created strange alliances between reactionary forces and revolutionary elements–a uniting of political far right and far left. And earlier this year, Uzbekistan's authoritarian President Shavkat Mirziyoyev called for more competitive and credible independent media as a way to counter the onslaught of Russian propaganda and pro-Kremlin media.[55] Demography plays an important factor in varying perceptions of Russian media. The populations of most post-Soviet republics are young – half of the population of Central Asia is under 30. Given the region's large numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations, non-Kremlin aligned populations fear the Kremlin could carve up these countries as it has done in eastern Ukraine. Older generations of Kazakhs, for instance, show greater support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine than younger Kazakhs, who tend to sympathize with Ukraine.[56]

Russia's IO efforts have also led to an overall picture of mixed messaging, as the Kremlin freely tailors its messages to different audiences as needed, even if those messages directly contradict each other. Russia invokes anti-imperialist rhetoric to win sympathies across parts of the Global South, while simultaneously engaging in neo-imperial rhetoric to stoke fear in the hearts of Central Asians. In the former message, the colonial power is seen as oppressor, whereas in the latter, the colonial metropole is the noble defender. Ironically, the effect of this kind of exercise of active measures is to empower – or tilt – leaders in Central Asia toward the nationalist right. For example, in Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has defined his foreign policy as one of pragmatism, one defined by "national interests and strategic tasks," as he mentioned in a recent interview.[57]

Despite having stronger ties with Ukraine and other post-Soviet states now, these Central Asian countries have largely stayed neutral on the war in Ukraine, choosing a carefully crafted "multi-vector" foreign policy so as to not alienate any great power while forging closer ties with all. Many view the war through the prism of how it might disrupt their own economies or even relations with their Russian-speaking populations. The Western narrative that it is supporting Ukraine to preserve the international rules-based order has failed to gain traction in the region. Neither has the Russian version of events that the war is aimed at the denazification of Ukraine and to prevent Russia from being encircled by NATO or NATO-friendly countries.[58] The elites in former Soviet republics mostly see the war as an economic godsend so far, as the region benefits from its location as a logistics, transport, and sanctions-evasion hub. Russian trade and energy have been re-routed from Europe to the east and migrants working on energy projects in Russia send back badly

needed remittances.[59]

Finally, efforts to combat Russian IO as well as block, shut down, or marginalize Russia-controlled media companies in this region are on the rise. In January 2024, the Kazakh TV broadcasting company TVCOM said it would no longer broadcast Russian TV channels in Kazakhstan to prevent pro-Kremlin channels "with an informational agenda" from misinforming its viewers.[60] Nevertheless, Russian propaganda in non-Russian language broadcasts has been on the rise. According to Demoscope, a Kazakhstan-based pollster, the language Kazakhstanis get their news from can shape their preferences and views.[61] For example, among Kazakh-speaking Kazakhstanis, 20 percent said they support Ukraine. Among Russian speakers, that figure is just 6 percent. Switching broadcast media over to their national language is a subtle yet effective way to shift attitudes about Russia. Similarly, local populations would likely help shift attitudes about Russia by using native languages in primary, secondary, and higher education, rather than Russian. The Astana-based Factcheck.kz found that "additional measures limiting the influence of the Russian language include the adoption of Romanized writing (as observed in Turkmenistan), the prohibition of Russian-language media broadcasts, and, notably, shifts in foreign policy orientation, for example, Turkmenistan aligning with Turkey and Latvia aligning with the EU."[62] To date, these countries have been weary of sidelining Russian for fear this was one of Russia's casus belli for its war in Ukraine.[63]

ASSESSING RUSSIAN IO IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Across the Global South, the news Russia propagates seeks to accentuate critical viewpoints of Western colonialism. It plays on its targeted audiences' sense of identity as long-oppressed former colonies. For much of the Global South, Russia invokes the war as one against Western amorality, decadence, and the West's dismantling of traditional values, as well as the West itself, which it argues is trying to colonize Ukraine in its image. Although there is widespread variation, based on recent survey data, the IO campaign in the Global South has been successful, arguably because these countries do not view Russia as a former colonial power.[64] In fact, championing itself as the defender and leader of the global anti-colonial movement is spelled out in Russia's 2023 foreign policy concept.[65] In February 2024, Moscow aimed to rally countries against "Western neo-colonialism" by hosting 400 delegates from 60 countries at the first 'For the Freedom of Nations' forum.[66]

The Russian offensive has primarily targeted states across the Global South seen as more vulnerable to coups or abrupt changeovers of power. Russia mostly disseminates its pro-Kremlin propaganda via state news outlets like *Russia One, RT* (formerly *Russia Today)*, and *Sputnik*, internet trolls, newspaper advertisements, and via social media and messaging outlets like TikTok, Vkontakte and Telegram. The purpose of the propaganda is to sow popular resentment toward the West. While Russia continues to disrupt Western societies, particularly ones holding elections, through the use of disinformation, its primary target in recent years has been countries the Kremlin sees as "in play." Russia tends to step up its influence operations in countries when there is a major inflection point, including an election, a UN vote, or a recent coup.[67]

Russian influence operations have found receptive audiences across the Global South, although there is widespread variation. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies has found a fourfold increase in Russian disinformation campaigns across the African continent since February 2022, with a

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strong correlation between the presence of Russian IO and local instability.[68] The speed and scale of Russian propaganda have also intensified.[69] Several Kremlin-linked media companies have either signed partnerships or bought out Africa-based news outlets. Likewise, the Wagner Group has purchased several newspapers across the continent. Another avenue Russia uses to influence attitudes in the Global South, particularly those of younger generations, is social media. Moscow relies on an informal army of bloggers and so-called "Kremlin bots"–programs that automatically generate or amplify pro-Russia content, ads, articles and other online content.[70] A February 2024 report by the Royal Danish Defence College found clear linkages between African countries that featured high activity of pro-Kremlin bots and their votes in favor of pro-Russia resolutions at the United Nations.[71] Russia has successfully tapped into latent anti-colonial grievances, as well as a perceived double standard when it comes to the war in Ukraine, namely that Europe has largely welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees but has turned back tens of thousands of African migrants who cross the Mediterranean.

In Mali, for example, a wave of Russian propaganda disseminated on social media platforms like Facebook precipitated the country's August 2020 coup, resulting in the removal of Russian proxies from these sites.[72] A flurry of anti-French content also appeared on Burkina Faso social media sites ahead of its September 2022 coup. Jade McGlynn, a UK-based scholar of Russia, calls this "memory diplomacy," which taps into locals' anti-colonization sentiment as well as their conservative and traditional family values, thereby weaponizing cultural attitudes.[73] For example, the Kremlin has funded the construction of monuments and sponsored conferences that memorialize the Soviet support for the decolonization movements during the height of the Cold War.[74] One objective of these "anti-colonial" IO campaigns has been to replace governments sympathetic to the West with governments more aligned with Russia. This theme has also been a frequent one in President Putin's speeches. When he announced the annexation of four provinces in eastern Ukraine in September 2022, the Russian president marked the occasion as an end to U.S.-led hegemony thanks to a Moscow-led "anti-colonial movement."[75] The following year he noted at a speech in Vladivostok that Russia had "never been a colonizer anywhere."[76]

Russian IO across much of the Global South is also aimed at avoiding sanctions as well as securing these countries' backing at the United Nations. A 2023 report found that pro-Russian messages, many of them spread by bots in coordinated campaigns on the day of an important UN resolution meant to condemn Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, were focused on countries of key interest, e.g., India, to manipulate public opinion and influence their UN vote.[77]

While the war in Ukraine has factored into Russia's anti-Western narratives, it tends to focus on conspiracy theories around the war, e.g., the regime in Kyiv is run by Nazis, Ukraine is housing bio-laboratories, Kyiv is behind the spike in global grain prices, and more on the war as a symptom of Western and specifically American decline. Russia plays up its anti-colonial positioning but also these countries' desire for a multipolar world not dominated by one superpower. Russia has gotten better at understanding its target audience and crafting messages and narratives, whereas in the past its approach focused primarily on volume. The Kremlin has also improved its messengers, relying on an array of surrogates, both official (Russian ambassadors) and unofficial (Russian influencers).

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Russian IO Overall Success

Information operations form the backbone of Russia's projection of soft power across the world. Russia has sought to resonate with publics across the former Soviet Union using themes of unity and security, as well as by whipping up fears of a West meddling in their internal politics and corrupting these societies, Across the Global South, Moscow plays up notions of anti-colonialism resentment and other latent cultural, religious, and identity issues that resonate among these countries' populations.[78]

The Kremlin expected its IO campaigns in Russian-speaking parts of the former Soviet Union to be successful, given its view of them as generally sympathetic to its imperial ambitions or at least unlikely to seriously oppose them.[79] Across the former Soviet republics the propaganda consists of neo-patrimonial messaging that questions the very authenticity of these nations and calls for Russian to remain the lingua franca of these countries. Insofar as the goal of this IO has been to turn the public against the West and Ukraine and realign these states with Russia, the Kremlin has largely failed. Long dismissed as "Russia's backyard," this region has grown less subservient to Moscow in recent years, and more independent, although not more democratic or liberal.

As a result of the decolonization discourse that has taken form over the past decade, criticism of Russia is more openly tolerated and prevalent across the post-Soviet region. The resultant snowball effect has shown growing swaths of the population expressing their displeasure at Russian attempts to subjugate their countries as well as generally more openness to expressing disagreement with the war in Ukraine. The operational environment (OE) of the region is one that hangs in the balance – with Russia slowly losing its grip. The failure of Russia's IO campaigns has several important wider implications for the regional OE: It could further weaken and erode public support for Russia-led alliances. Armenia has already signaled it will pull out of the Russia-led CSTO. As support for the CSTO declines, expect support for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) perhaps to rise, given its orientation eastward and the presence of other regional powers like China and India. One can imagine information campaigns, whether from Moscow or Beijing, to build greater popular regional support for the SCO in the future – a key feature of which will require a common foreign enemy to be successful.

The second implication is the real threat of a kinetic war, more frequent border crises like the recent one between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, false-flag operations, or regional arms races: if these states are "artificial" constructs, then the Kremlin sees its IO campaigns as a prelude to war, similar to its use of IO ahead of the 2014 intervention in Donbas and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, if anti-Kremlin sentiment among local populations continues to rise, these states may take hostile activities that can unleash dynamics that may precipitate war, including a rise of terrorist attacks by ethnic groups originating in Central Asia. The 2024 terrorist attacks by ISIS-K allegedly involving Tajiks legally living in Russia on work visas could trigger anti-Muslim blowback and a ratcheting up of rhetoric by Kremlin surrogates in the provinces that border these Central Asian states as well as a sharp uptick of disinformation in the media targeting these regions.[80] The purpose of this messaging is to divide countries like Tajikistan, turn Russians against their Muslim neighbors to the south and Muslim migrants, and to reinforce these countries' security concerns.

In former Soviet republics, the Kremlin's propaganda consists of neo-patrimonial messaging that questions the very authenticity of these nations and calls for Russian to remain their lingua franca.

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These countries still hold large – if dwindling – populations of Russian nationals, who are not a monolith but are seen by the Kremlin as sympathetic to its imperial ambitions. Insofar as the goal of this kind of IO has been to turn the public against the West and Ukraine and to realign itself with Russia, it has failed. Russia's influence operations have prompted a backlash among younger generations on social media. A relentless campaign of Russian propaganda has sought to win back sympathies as well as demoralize these populations. If these societies remain fractured, this presents an opportunity for other major powers to exert greater influence in a regional operational environment that is both strategic and dynamic.

Regarding the Global South, Russia takes a different tack, with its propaganda reinforcing these countries' colonial pasts and lingering perceptions of western hypocrisy.[81] Russia has made significant inroads shifting public opinion across the continents of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. By relying on useful surrogates, including local influencers and Russian diplomats, playing up an anti-imperialist narrative, and tapping into some of these societies' conservative and latent conservative orientations, it has effectively turned many of these countries against the West and also inoculated itself against charges of colonization in its own war in Ukraine. Its main IO weapon has been Russian-backed news agencies like Sputnik and RT, as well as messaging apps like Telegram. The effect has been manifold, as many "nonaligned" countries across the Global South have either remained neutral by not voting against Moscow at the UN General Assembly, or have otherwise tacitly supported its war efforts. This stance is partly driven by something other than effective Russian propaganda or soft power per se, namely, by rational economic motives. They fear Russia could curtail trade or shut down grain shipments. Many of these countries also rely on Russia for arms and energy. Many of these countries have chosen a clever hedging strategy, remaining nonaligned and working with Russia and China, while not alienating the United States.

OE Implications for the United States: Global South

The IO efforts of the Kremlin have largely focused on turning local populations across large swaths of the Global South against U.S. interests. As mentioned above,hese campaigns have tapped into latent anti-colonialism feelings among local populations. They have also tapped into suspicion of Western cultural and social norms, around especially prominent in societies more steeped in religious or conservative traditions. That poses a direct challenge to U.S. interests, as evidenced by the Washington's struggle to win over votes in the UN General Assembly to condemn Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The success of RT and other Russian media outlets that proliferate anti-U.S. messaging has profound implications. The expansion of blocs like BRICS to more countries from the Global South (similar to the SCO in Central Asia) could pose a challenge to U.S. efforts to maintain a rules-based international order. Russian influence could also result in greater backsliding of democracy across the Global South, as countries take their cues from an autocracy. Finally, the success of Russian soft power could result in a backlash against U.S. military presence in these areas, fueling local resentment against U.S. forces that could manifest itself in many ways. When U.S. forces pulled out of Niger in September 2024, as GEN Michael Langley, commander of US Africa Command, put it when he testified to Congress in March 2024, "[A] number of countries are at the tipping point of actually being captured by the Russian Federation."[82]

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OE Implications for the United States: Post-Soviet Space

Unlike the Global South, where Russian influence could arguably be said to be ascendant, the decline of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space presents the United States with an opportunity – namely, to avoid creating a security vacuum in Central Asia that can be filled by China, Iran, or another strategic competitor. While the risk of a full-scale kinetic war remains low, the growing disenchantment of locals toward Moscow, along with these countries reasserting their linguistic and other rights, clamping down on Russia-controlled media, and the weakening of regional security organizations like the CSTO, could trigger a forceful intervention in these states, were they to assert too much autonomy for Russia's taste. Despite its fear-mongering narratives, the most powerful lever Russia holds over the post-Soviet space is economic leverage, not security ties. Russia accounts for over one-fifth of the region's imports. Remittances from migrant workers in Russia makes up over one-third of several Central Asian GDPs.[83] And Putin likes to boast that energy prices in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are 10 times lower than in Europe, thanks to Russia's generous subsidies.[84] As these countries grow less dependent on Moscow for energy, trade, and remittance checks, they may become more dependent on countries like China or Turkey, yet doing so will give them greater autonomy in the information space. These countries are open to alternative arrangements with respect to trade deals, energy pipelines, and arms transfers.

The information space is also up for grabs. Greater resources to support independent and alternative media in local languages and dialects to counteract Russia-backed media would weaken Moscow's influence. Media that are slick, professional, nonbiased, and aimed at both older and younger audiences could be game changers. By supporting a media landscape that is professional, competitive and capable of countering the influence of foreign news outlets, other efforts across the United States' DIME instruments would be easier to achieve. This is a region that has seen a backsliding in democracy and crackdown against dissenting voices

It is important to emphasize that Russian and Chinese interests in the region do not always align, which could provide the United States an opportunity to exploit and divide their "no limits" friendship. The SCO has emerged as the region's main security bloc, which could lead to smaller post-Soviet countries to look to Russia or China for their security needs, absent reassurances from the West and NATO.[85] These states' interests span beyond counterterrorism or great power competition for hegemony as the region seeks to become a more vital, independent, and economically prosperous part of the world. NATO could be enrich its ties and deepen its relationships with these countries as a way to counteract Russian and Chinese influence, and the C5+1 framework (five Central Asian former republics and the United States) could provide greater security cooperation in the region.

It is unrealistic for the Central Asian states to outright ban Russian media channels in the region. As Kazakhstan's Minister of Information and Social Development, Askar Umarov, recently noted, "The state does not interfere in this process," so long as they do not violate the law.[86] But the decline of Russian influence, in addition to the region's minimal commentary on the war in Ukraine, does provide an opportunity for the United States to exploit divisions between these countries and Moscow as it promotes greater security, economic and cultural ties to the region. Aside from Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and other powers also have a presence in the region, and security organizations like the SCO are expanding and enhancing their influence. Unlike the Global South, where Russia has effectively used its IO campaigns to present

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itself as a defender of anti-colonial sentiment, in the post-Soviet region, with Georgia as a recent notable exception, Russian IO has not been effective, with respects to the war in Ukraine or other geopolitical or security matters. The United States can likely not afford to ignore this region, given its central location as a buffer between China, Russia, and the Middle East, as an important trade and energy corridor, and as a potential exporter of terrorism. The media landscape is in constant flux and may be favorable to a greater, carefully curated U.S. information presence.

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