Nationalities Papers (2025), 53: 5, 1077–1098
doi:10.1017/nps.2024.89

ARTICLE

Tailoring Narratives on War in Ukraine: Cross-national Study of Sputnik News

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Abstract
The article analyses how Russian state-controlled media adapt narratives across their language versions to speak to specific national audiences. These media support the Kremlin by echoing its strategic narratives in the international arena. Our article stems from the assumption that the media tailor the narratives and do not deliver homogenous news. Texts published since the initial days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were analyzed from Sputnik Czech Republic, Germany, and Sputnik World, known to spread the Russian regime's propaganda. The central question was how the Russian regime depicted and explained the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in the chosen languages. Qualitative coding based on a predefined codebook, modified with codes inductively acquired during the analysis, was used to deeply understand strategic narratives and identify key differences among the Russian regime's influence campaigns in various national contexts. Some narratives were found to differ based on the national contexts, strengthening the initial assumption. However, analyzed texts also consistently depict Russia as a victim and the West as a threat across the language versions.

Keywords: narratives; invasion of Ukraine; qualitative coding; comparative analysis; cross-national

Introduction

For international media, it is common to have more language versions to reach new audiences. The Russian state-controlled media are no exception in this regard. They are often used for hybrid influence and operate in many languages to be able to reach various target audiences around the globe, "…misinforming and/or confusing these audiences about the developments in Russia and the world, as well as subverting and undermining Western mainstream views on Russia" (Shekhovtsov 2018, 133; see also Wilson 2015; Pomerantsev 2014). Sputnik News, one of the media controlled by the Russian regime, was published in 31 languages; English, Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, or Farsi being the main ones (Al-Rawi et al. 2023, 332). Established in 2014, it allegedly aimed to bring news from different perspectives to audiences tired of mainstream reporting (Ennis 2014).

However, there is little doubt that news rather constructs strategic narratives that serve the Russian regime's propaganda (Mogoș, Grapă, and Șandru 2022). After all, the agency was even accused by The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of "distributing misinformation as part of 'Kremlin propaganda machine'" (Dearden 2017) and banned by the European Union for twisting responsibility for the aggression in Ukraine (Kayali 2022).

*This article was originally published with an incomplete affiliation for the two authors. This has now been updated and a corrigendum published at https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2025.21.

There has been previous research on what narratives and to what purpose Sputnik's particular language variations disseminate. For example, Zhang and Luther (2020) mapped how the English version of Sputnik justified Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war and spread anti-western narratives. Other papers on the Romanian branch of Sputnik (Mogoș, Grapă, and Șandru 2022) or the Turkish Sputnik (Furman, Gürel, and Sivaslioğlu 2023) show how the news used the Russian vaccine Sputnik V during the Covid pandemic to enhance Russia's image of a superpower. Furthermore, the American's Sputnik coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement focused mainly on the polarization of the American population (Bradshaw, DiResta, and Miller 2022). Undoubtedly, these papers and several others[1] showed the *modus operandi* of the Russian state-controlled news, and to what ends they mimicked the Kremlin's policies.

However, what has remained relatively omitted in research is how various language versions adjust the narratives to fit national contexts. As Lemke and Habegger (2022, 3) indicate: "state-sponsored media outlets mimic the conversational style and cultural norms of their target audiences to achieve access and accrue reputational capital." There is an expectation that narratives disseminated by Sputnik News differ depending on the target audiences (Wagnsson 2023; Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson 2021). Bush (2020) supports the assumption by finding that in the observed time period during the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia Today's (RT) English version posts were much more polarized compared with the Spanish language version.

This article deals with narratives disseminated by the Russian state-controlled media Sputnik surrounding the initial days after the invasion of Ukraine. The outbreak of the war was accompanied by a hybrid influence campaign utilizing various tools, including state-controlled media, such as Sputnik News. Considering it is the same news agency, we would expect the invasion of Ukraine to be narrated homogenously across the different Sputnik language branches. However, a glance at Sputnik News reveals that the topics covered vary among the International and local versions because of intranational agendas.

We argue that Sputnik's language versions react to the preferences of the local readers and, therefore, may report about the same topics differently. Due to specific historical or cultural contexts in particular countries, the narratives are tailored by the state-controlled media to fall on fertile ground. Obviously, it would be shortsighted to disseminate the narrative on the denazification of Ukraine in the German language version. To examine this assumption, we analyze how Sputnik Czech Republic, Germany, and Sputnik World depict the invasion of Ukraine that broke out in February 2022. In the following chapter on the activity of the Russian state-controlled media and the subchapter on Case Selection, we delineate what makes these three cases an appropriate fit for our research.

With at least three months of build-up for the invasion (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022) and preparations estimated by Johnson (2022) to have taken an entire year, it would be reasonable to expect the narratives surrounding it should also have been prepared in advance by the Russian state. This would also support our assumption that the narratives are fitted to particular audiences purposefully. Nevertheless, some sources (see e.g., Fridrichová 2023) conclude that the Kremlin's propaganda was, in fact, staggeringly unprepared. Furthermore, as Lankina and Watanabe (2017) demonstrate, the pro-Kremlin media can actually aptly adapt their narratives to correspond with the regime's changing foreign policy. Yet, this article does not attempt to assess the preparedness (or lack of it) of the Kremlin's information campaign accompanying the war in Ukraine. The primary question of this article is as follows:

How did the German, Czech, and international branches of Sputnik inform about the launch of the invasion in Ukraine?

To help answer the main question, the following supporting questions were chosen:

SQ1 – *How did the quality and quantity of the articles compare on Sputnik Czech Republic, Germany, and International?*

SQ2 – *How did the narratives projected by the Sputnik branches differ?*

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Russian state-controlled media – Hybrid Influence Tool

The current media scene in Russia is mostly controlled by the regime's loyalists (Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018). Estimates claim that up to 90 % of the media are either sponsored by the Russian government or their owners have close ties to Putin's regime (Hinck, Kluver, and Cooley 2018). Even though the reported content varies among the media, these differences fall within the scope of the state-directed narratives (Tyushka 2022). Their goal is to serve as channels for amplifying the government's rhetoric to the citizens but also to foreign audiences. According to Simonov and Rao (2018), most Russians prefer state-controlled media to independent outlets as a source of news. Even though no firewall limits the Internet in Russia, the regime has found techniques to constrain it, including trolls, bots, or manipulation of search engines (Alyukov 2021). However, the state-controlled media's perspective often clashes with the media outlets not loyal to Moscow when attempting to present the Russian regime's narratives and worldview abroad (Szostek 2017).

RT and Sputnik are the two flagships of the Russian media system that disseminate the state's strategic narratives and propaganda internationally (Wagnsson 2023). Even though they both made an effort to appear as independent and transparent news, their subjugation to the Kremlin is indisputable (Global Engagement Center 2022). Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Russian regime is shutting down the last remnants of independent media and strongly curbing social media outlets (Vinokour 2022).

Based on James Dunn's 2014 paper, the Russian state-linked media system can be perceived in two tiers – one tightly controlled, the other partially independent (Dunn 2014). The reasoning behind such division stems from the regime's endeavor to appear as if there is freedom of speech in the country. For example, Dunn (2014) considered the Internet to be a part of tier two, even though there have been attempts to control it since 2012 (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020). On the other hand, Sputnik News is labeled as a tier-one media in a report from Splidsboel Hansen (2017), which means it is tightly controlled by the government, although it uses various online platforms as the primary dissemination method. Even the former director of the Berlin-based Sputnik News admitted that the majority of the news content is orchestrated directly by Moscow (Spahn 2021). The Russian regime has realized the importance of the Internet and social media for its propaganda since the anti-governmental demonstrations in 2011 (Helmus et al. 2018). Recent research reveals how the Russian regime gradually infiltrates the not subjugated media like Telegram and hence aptly adapts to the changing media environment (Garner 2022).

Wilson (2015) argues that the goals of the Kremlin's propaganda are "to confuse audiences to make moral and factual judgment more difficult, thus leaving them politically incapable." Furthermore, Wagnsson (2023, 1859) argues that – in the Swedish context – "RT/Sputnik consumers also aligned more with messaging that contrasts with, and can potentially harm, national security." Spreading the narratives surrounding the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was crucial for the Russian regime to shape public opinion. However, due to the large number of languages, we also expect the effort to differ based on the perceived importance of the target audiences.

In Czechia, the first of the states our article works with, there has remained a pro-Russian segment of society with active political forces even after the fall of the communist regime (Mareš et al. 2020). Bartoszewicz and Prucková (2024) describe the Czech-Russian relations as toxic. The authors indicate that the high number of spies the Russian regime used to station in the Czech Republic reflects the importance the Kremlin ascribed to Czechia. Despite Czechia being one of Ukraine's most vocal supporters after the 2022 invasion, significant parts of political representation and society have been supporting Putin's regime (Burda 2023; Havlík and Kluknavská 2023). Among others, Czech Sputnik gave medial space to politicians from the right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) (Webrová 2022). According to the institute Evropské hodnoty, SPD's politicians are major enablers of the Russian regime's influence in Czechia (Atlas vlivu n.d.) Our second case, Germany, used to be described as Russia's key European ally and the strongest

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proponent of Russia within the EU and NATO (Lough 2021). The 2014 events did not hamper Germany's perceived need for cooperation with Russia (Lough 2021, 111; Yoder 2015). Trenin (2013) portrays the public discussion in Germany on Russia as marked by extremes: on the one hand, the economic ties were accentuated, while on the other hand, the German public critiqued Putin's regime. Meister (2022) suggested that Germany had to stop denying reality and change its naïve approach to the Russian government, especially in light of the February 2022 crisis. Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués (2023) include Germany among the countries most hit by the Russian regime's orchestrated disinformation campaigns, whereby these incidents were significantly backed by German media outlets like Sputnik and RT.

From Information As Soft-Power To Weaponization

In his Art of War, Sun Tzu claimed, "Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" (Tzu 2009, 8). Information warfare, a staple part of Russian regime's hybrid influence, can and must be perceived as a weapon of its own (Giannopoulos 2021). The Russian state – and any other actor, for that matter – could hardly achieve its strategic goals in full scope without a single shot. It is not a coincidence that Clausewitz (2003) claimed that winning without a fight is "a fallacy that must be exposed." Nevertheless, some authors argue that nonmilitary means are more important than the military (see Galeotti 2015).

The Russian state has been emphasizing hybrid influence and propaganda for many years, which is also mirrored in its media system that serves the regime (Fridman 2018, 187-188, 235). It is argued in a report for the European Commission and Hybrid CoE that "[w]eaponizing information arguably remains the hallmark of Hybrid Threats and nonlinear strategies" (Giannopoulos 2021, 32). The support won by Ukraine after the 2022 invasion comes not only from the highest ranks of politics but also from ordinary people. "The country has received over 600 grants totaling $886,052,533 since Feb. 28 – four days after the Russia-Ukraine war began – and April 14" (Taylor 2022). Russian regime's information warfare on Western countries can mean a substantial material difference on the battlefield in the long run for Ukraine, aiding the Kremlin in reaching its goals for the invasion and securing its current territorial gains.

Not only can information warfare bring a physical advantage by attracting foreign fighters or donors – or dissuading others from helping the adversary – but the question of morale is also of the essence. Col. Warden summed this up in a straightforward equation (Warden 1995; Whitehead 1999):

(Physical) X (Morale) = Outcome

The information domain plays a vital role in this regard. It can influence morale on the battlefield but also the morale in societies of allied nations. This is particularly important in the face of the rising inflation in Europe, which is one of the effects of anti-Russian sanctions. The protests against helping Ukraine gathered around 70 thousand people in the Czech Republic, fewer thousands in Germany, and based on a survey conducted in mid-2022, over half of the population in Slovakia would like to see Russia winning the war (Kerekes 2022).

Strategic Narratives

Indisputably, Russia's leadership has been attempting to exercise influence and build a positive image of itself abroad for years before the current war in Ukraine. Lough et al. (2014) believe that the impetus to influence the surrounding countries started in the early 2000s as the Russian state was looking for an identity to substitute the vacuum after the fall of communism. The image of Russia as a guardian of European identity and the leader of the Eurasian cultural sphere was then transformed into foreign policy. Szostek (2014) pointed to the polarizing effect of Russian state-controlled media

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on Ukrainian society in the context of the occupation of Crimea. This endeavor to promote interests of the Russian government in the Ukrainian media landscape may be only insufficiently captured by the concept of soft power (ibid.). The first act of the long-lasting Russian-Ukrainian conflict has persuaded researchers that the Russian state-sponsored media strategy resembles nonlinear warfare (Bennett and Livingston 2018), informational blitzkrieg (Saressalo and Huhtinen 2018), or hybrid warfare (Chivvis 2017). Russian Minister of Defence Shoigu claimed that the regime sees mass media as a weapon (Aro 2016). Pomerantsev (2014) argues that the Russian leadership is bending the truth to the point where we no longer know reality. Nevertheless, this reinvention of reality has tangible implications.

The concept of strategic narratives is the most fitting to describe the Russian regime's pursuit of portraying reality according to its worldview via the state-controlled media. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) claim, strategic narratives are the soft power of the 21st century. The term was coined by Freedman (2015), who describes strategic narratives as: "compelling storylines which could explain events convincingly and from which inferences could be drawn." If strategic narratives are successfully adopted and received, they can change the interests or identities that the target audiences believe in accordance with their worldview (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2015). The narratives are forged to attain political objectives, for example, to justify a policy response to a security crisis (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2010). Schmitt (2018) argues that, whereas it is widely believed that strategic narratives must be carefully crafted for local contexts to target the receiving audiences, there is a lack of support for this assumption. Our article explores how this tailoring is projected in local contexts.

The Russian regime's media strategy often builds on presenting itself as an alternative to the West. This might stem from the fact that the Western media used to depict post-communist Russia as a state that did not share Western values and pursued an aggressive foreign policy (Mejias and Vokuev 2017). Nonetheless, there are shades within the grey, and various European states adopted different stances when reporting about Russia and its regime; France and Germany were the more amiable ones. Yet, according to Repina et al. (2018), projecting Cold War stereotypes onto Russia is common in the West. This non-acceptance of Russia among the states belonging to Western culture might have led the Russian regime to follow a distinct path and present itself as the alternative to the West. Orttung and Nelson (2019) argue that the key objectives of Russian state-controlled media are building the state's positive reputation abroad and providing alternative reporting to the local population. These media plant distrust towards the mainstream media by framing them as elite-linked and untrustworthy.

Several papers employ strategic narratives when analyzing the Russian leadership's endeavor of narrating reality. The regime uses state-controlled media as channels to deliver these narratives to foreign audiences. Szostek (2017) suggests that the above-mentioned attempts at discrediting the West and enhancing its own superb identity are actually the regime's strategic narratives. Szostek's conclusion overarches and matches eight master narratives identified by Rebegea (2019), which are directed against Western structures and at grooming a positive image of the Russian regime. The regime uses the outposts of the state-controlled media as channels to deliver these narratives to foreign audiences. Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) illustrate this concept to interpret Sputnik's activities in Sweden because it exposes how Russian state-controlled media deploy the antagonistic anti-Western narrative. Similar antagonistic narrating by the Russian state-controlled news was also researched by Hoyle et al. (2023) in the Netherlands. Tyushka (2022) even speaks of the Russian regime's weaponization of the narratives since they have become an instrument in the normative struggle. Hence, our analysis focuses on how the Russian state-controlled media narrate the outbreak of the war in Ukraine to promote the regime's interests. Some studies (see Kling et al. 2022; Geissler et al. 2022, 10) provide quantitative support to the claim that the Russian state-controlled media dose their content in larger amounts in certain regions.

Our article aims to fill a research gap and help understand how the Russian state-controlled media alter their strategy to respond to local specificities. It is logical to assume that the media adapt the narratives to its targets – different audiences are listening to different words (Lange-

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Ionatamishvili and Svetoka 2015). If the approaches across the world differ, they can take advantage of local weak points and, as a result, subvert cohesion and trust (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson (2021) demonstrate that Russian state-sponsored media tailor the information to fit particular states within the Nordic region based on historical experiences and current political context. Additionally, Helmus et al. (2018) suggest that Kremlin's informational warfare takes different shapes in different contexts. The former communist states with Russian minorities get served narratives that deepen the abyss between the majority population and the Russian minority. Yet, the whole post-communist bloc is a very diverse environment, with some states harboring pro-Russian stances and others being vigilant because of their historical experiences.

Meanwhile, the narratives spread by the Russian state-controlled media resemble a multilayered phenomenon: after their launch, they become amplified by local actors (Starbird et al. 2018). The Internet and social media have contributed a fair share to their dissemination, plus they are relatively low-cost channels. Hence, the Russian regime is no longer the single disseminator of state propaganda; instead, it has found so-called 'useful idiots,' trolls, alternative media, and other minions willing to echo the narratives (Aro 2016). The narratives are well received among the target audience if they resonate with the already existing beliefs (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). Here, we encounter the feature of fidelity: how well the narrative resonates with the target audiences (Hinck, Kluver, and Cooley 2018). However, it is not within the scope of our study to research how the narrating of the Russian regime's aggression was received among the target audiences. Some research has already been conducted on the consumers of Russian state-sponsored media (see Wagnsson, Blad, and Hoyle 2023) and the effect that the consumption may have on them (Wagnsson 2023). Nonetheless, understanding if and how the narratives are tailored for national contexts is a crucial step toward a deeper understanding of their effects.

Methodology

Mixed Method Approach

The core of our methodological approach is the qualitative coding of articles published on Sputnik News. However, to answer our supporting questions, we needed to compare the number of occurrences of the codes within our dataset. Therefore, our approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed-method approach. As there are three different groups for the independent variable (language) – i.e., Czech, German, and English – we used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to identify codes with statistically significant differences among the languages and followed up with post-hoc tests to identify the specific differences between language pairs.

To analyze the dataset of articles, we partially utilized an existing codebook by Alzahrani et al. (2018), which fit the topic of our article quite neatly. The codebook included five inductively identified codes. One example is the *Fascist vs. anti-fascist struggle*, as even before the 2022 invasion, accusations of leadership/society of target countries – in our case Ukraine – have often been used to depict the enemies as "the bad guys". Alzahrani et al. (2018) further identified the following codes: *Discrimination against Russian minorities*, *Assault on Soviet history*, *Criticism of government*, and *Invasion of Crimea* (see Alzahrani et al. 2018 for detailed descriptions). We did not observe all of these narratives used in our dataset. Therefore, the *Assault on Soviet history* and the *Invasion of Crimea* codes were not included in our final codebook.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine drastically changed Europe's geopolitical situation, and we expected new narratives to appear alongside the conventional war. Therefore, inductive coding was required to draw conclusions from new data. Thomas (2006) explains the process essentially as a refinement of textual data into gradually more abstract categories identified as the most important themes in the text. This combination of deductive and inductive approaches is not anything novel –

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a similar methodology was applied by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), who described the initial coding as "guided, but not confined, by the preliminary codes." In our case, the preliminary codes were taken from the aforementioned codebook by Alzahrani et al. (2018).

Case Selection

Even though quantitative estimates show that Sputnik reached a higher number of readers –e.g., in some Spanish or Arab-speaking countries – some prominent language versions could not have been chosen for our analysis (Kling et al. 2022; Global Engagement Center 2022). This is because native or fluent knowledge of a language is essential for a thorough qualitative analysis. Therefore, the language skills of this article's authors set limits to case selection.

Nevertheless, the states' population needs to be considered when assessing the popularity of Sputnik's particular language versions. Naturally, the Czech language version of Sputnik focuses on a minor segment compared with the German or English versions. It targets mostly the Czech and Slovak populations due to the similarity between their languages and shared history. Interestingly, Slovak citizens are the most disinformation-prone audience among the Visegrad states (Globsec 2020).

With an average of 2,5 million visits monthly, Czech Sputnik was among the most visited versions of this media outlet before being banned (Šlerka 2022; Cemper 2019). It was estimated that 10 % of Czech online users visit it at least once per month (Pika, Cibulka 2023). The beginning of the Russian regime's invasion of Ukraine boosted the number of visitors to 3,5 million (Webrová 2022). Sputnik's key position in the Czech alternative scene is confirmed by the fact that many other alternative media adopted the stories from Sputnik (Syrovátka n.d.). Therefore, Štětka, Mazák, and Vochocová (2020) label the website as a creator of disinformation. Moreover, the authors add that the Czech version borrows much of its content from the English language version. This suggestion speaks for our goal of examining how the narratives are fitted to specific national contexts. The audience's size and narrative setting role make the Czech language version a case worth examination. Even after disinformation webpages like Sputnik News were banned in the Czech Republic, they rebranded and continued disseminating propaganda via other platforms (Ciroková 2023).

The Kremlin's state-controlled media can touch upon a plethora of resentments to arouse support for itself among the Germans: anti-Americanism, historical feelings of guilt, pacifism, or economic interests (Wood 2023, 147). These media were found to be positively biased toward the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (Spahn 2021; Applebaum et al. 2017). The party's preferences have been on the rise, which is alarming in the context of the recently uncovered attempt by the Kremlin to finance a propaganda network in collaboration with an AfD member. The German intelligence service classified SNA as a key platform for spreading the Russian regime's propaganda in Germany (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat 2020). Sputnik used to have more than 200 thousand followers on Facebook and 90 thousand on YouTube (Spahn 2018). A paper by Müller and Schulz (2021) claims that 14.9% of German alternative news users visited Sputnik at least rarely. Moreover, the recent study by Henriksen et al. (2024), which compared the dissemination of Sputnik and RT in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, found that Germany hast the most active audience in terms of disseminating the content. As in Czechia, the reach of these media is increased through other German right-wing or conspirative news amplifying their content (Stratievski 2016). The German Sputnik circumvented the ban and continued spreading disinformation via other platforms (Spahn 2023). Lastly, we considered it essential to keep our analysis consistent and focused on the high-profile media outlet across all three cases. Therefore, we gave priority to SNA over RT.

The third case – Sputnik International – does not strictly point towards a target audience in a specific country. However, with English being the most spoken language in the world, The Russian regime can spread its narratives to the biggest audience possible with relatively low resources. With

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the unspecific audience of English speakers, the narratives need to be easily understandable and relatable to any person.

The language versions were purposefully selected to represent a variety of local settings so it is more easily detectable how they need to adapt their reporting. Whereas the international Sputnik branch is geographically unrelated to any local context, the German and Czech versions must adjust to attract native audiences.

Dataset

The dataset consists of 221 articles from three language versions – German, Czech, and English – gathered directly from the Sputnik News websites and the internet archive[2] using the MAXQDA software. The articles vary significantly in length, ranging from a mere 14 words describing an attached video to a 3000-word transcription of Vladimir Putin's speech. The average article length in the dataset is approximately 330 words. The median is 277 words. The selection of the sample was made using tags assigned to the articles by Sputnik itself – namely "Ukraine-Conflict" in German, "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine" in Czech,[3] and "situation in Ukraine" in English. Sputnik News organizes all texts by labeling them with tags. We examined Sputnik's webpages and confirmed that except for the above-mentioned tags, no other category of texts discussed the invasion of Ukraine. Hence, all texts concerning the invasion and originating in the analyzed time period are represented in our dataset.

The oldest texts come from February 24, while the latest is from February 27, when the ban of Sputnik News was announced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Kayali 2022). While looking at the narratives before the invasion might be beneficial for deeper understanding, only the German version of Sputnik News labeled some of its articles "Ukraine-conflict" before February 24, which would result in incomparable samples for the quantitative analysis of code frequencies.

Sputnik News moved to other domains after its ban by the EU, but the reach of those domains is not nearly as high as it had been with its established websites. It is more complicated to reach those sites because they are blocked by the EU. While the dataset is arguably quite small, the initial days after the invasion are crucial to understanding the Russian regime's narratives surrounding the conflict. The development of the invasion was unexpected for the Kremlin, which planned to end the invasion in several days (Johnson 2022; Stojar 2023), and for the Western analysts who did not expect Ukraine to hold off the Russian invasion (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022). Further information warfare is inherently reactive on both sides of the conflict, as it is hard to predict the development of the war, which in turn could skew any analysis by the ever-changing nature of the narratives employed.

The Codebook

The codes in our codebook are created by deduction from literature as well as driven by inductive coding. Some codes are based on a conference paper by Alzahrani et al. (2018) that deals with framing the Ukraine conflict by pro-Russian media. However, constructing data-driven inductive codes is necessary due to changes in Russian state-controlled media rhetoric before and during the invasion. Pro-Russian propaganda was arguably ill-prepared for the conflict's unexpected development and protraction, leading to the necessity of ad hoc reactions to the reality on the ground in propaganda materials. The strategic narratives in the initial stage of the invasion are nevertheless expected to be coordinated and consistent, as the Russian regime had been preparing for the invasion for at least several months with the observed amassing of troops on the borders but estimated by Johnson (2022) to have taken a full year. Some of the strategic narratives – such as linking the Ukrainian government to Fascism – have been used by the Russian leadership consistently since the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Pupcenoks and Seltzer 2021). The final codebook

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(see Annex 1 for full descriptions) contains eight codes, which were shortened and reformatted for the comparative analysis in SPSS:

(1) Russia as a victim (rus_victim)
(2) Russian invasion as successful (rus_success)
(3) Western dependence on Russia (west_depend)
(4) "The West" as a threat to Russia (west_threat)
(5) Justification of the invasion (just_invasion)
(6) Criticism of government (gov_criticism)
(7) Targeting Russian minorities (targ_minorities)
(8) Fight against Fascism (fight_fascism)

Intercoder Reliability Report

To address potential issues with the reliability of qualitative data analysis, inter-coder reliability (ICR) measurement was done using a sample of data. Ten percent of available data from each language version were randomly chosen and coded by two researchers independently. The results were compared, the agreement was calculated using MAXQDA software[4], and the codebook was adjusted in both scope and content. The rules for coding were followed by both coders and set as follows:

(1) The coded unit is always a complete sentence;
(2) Only one code can be selected per each sentence;
(3) The articles are coded from and include the text from the title to the last sentence.

Following the recommendations of O'Connor and Joffe (2020), we coded the sample of data in several iterations to assess ICR. We coded the datasets independently. A possible limitation of our research is that no external judges tested the application of the codes (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002, 590). In the second step, we compared the codes we had assigned to the particular sentences. These were discussed if differences arose between our coding since the goal was to reach a shared understanding of the codebook. Furthermore, such feedback led to a refinement of the codebook. Since some of the codes arose from inductive coding, we had to discuss during the first rounds what patterns were discovered in the data and whether they required a new code. The whole process was repeated until sufficient reliability (measured by kappa) was achieved. In the end, a kappa of 0.8 was achieved. This figure indicates substantial reliability as per the common understanding (Landis and Koch 1977).

Analysis Of the Russian Regime's Strategic Narratives

Comparative Analysis Of Code Occurrences

As different numbers of articles were analyzed from each Sputnik News language version, comparing absolute numbers is impossible. We used SPSS software to perform an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the three languages to find significant differences in the narratives – see Table 1 for data on sample sizes, means, and standard deviations across the codes. Sample sizes were over 25 for all language versions, which is often considered enough for the normal distribution condition, thanks to the central limit theorem. Nevertheless, we have used ANOVA which is robust even in cases where the condition of normal distribution is not met (see Blanca Mena et al. 2017). We performed tests of homogeneity of variances (see Schechtman and Sherman 2007) to choose the correct post-hoc tests, namely Tukey's honestly significant difference tests where equal variances were assumed and Games-Howell tests for equal variances not assumed. Only significant differences are reported within this article (see Table 2), but all results can be found in the attachments. We discuss the concrete differences and similarities within the text in the following chapters.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the datasets from the analyzed Sputnik language versions.

Language	Code	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
German (N=96)	sum per article	0	27	5.41	3.620
	rus_victim	0	5	0.81	1.049
	rus_success	0	5	0.55	1.075
	west_depend	0	12	0.23	1.261
	west_threat	0	7	0.59	1.228
	just_invasion	0	5	1.27	1.010
	gov_criticism	0	10	1.11	1.602
	targ_minoritis	0	9	0.40	1.081
	fight_fascism	0	7	0.44	0.949
Czech (N=96)	sum per article	0	72	7.36	7.413
	rus_victim	0	17	0.78	1.948
	rus_success	0	9	1.98	1.892
	west_depend	0	0	0.00	0.000
	west_threat	0	35	0.77	3.637
	just_invasion	0	3	0.97	0.923
	gov_criticism	0	9	1.70	1.437
	targ_minorities	0	3	0.53	0.767
	fight_fascism	0	7	0.64	1.180
English (N=29)	sum per article	1	17	6.41	3.987
	rus_victim	0	7	0.90	1.676
	rus_success	0	4	0.55	1.055
	west_depend	0	0	0.00	0.000
	west_threat	0	7	0.79	1.521
	just_invasion	0	1	0.52	0.509
	gov-criticism	0	6	1.24	1.746
	targ_minorities	0	4	0.86	1.060
	fight_facism	0	6	1.55	1.723

The qualitative coding showed that while some articles did not contain any narratives from the final codebook (with the exception of English), the means of coded segments ranged from 5.41 (German) to 7.36 (Czech). Significant differences were found in five of the eight total codes (see Table 2 for the concrete differences). One of the codes appeared only in the German language – Western dependence on Russia – thus, while the resulting difference was statistically not significant, it is still an interesting observation. Two of the codes appeared roughly the same across the languages, namely *Russia as a victim* and *"The West" as a threat to Russia.*

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Table 2. Significant differences in code occurrences among the language versions on Sputnik News.

Multiple Comparisons (Games-Howell) – Equal variances not assumed										
						95% Confidence Interval			95% Confidence Interval	
Dependent Variable	(1) Language	(J) Language	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Cohen's d	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
rus_success	German	Czech	–1.427*	0.222	<.001	–1.95	–0.9	–0.928	–1.224	–0.629
	Czech	English	1.427*	0.275	<.001	0.77	2.08	0.822	0.392	1.248
just_invasion	German	Czech	0.302	0.14	0.08	–0.03	0.63	0.312	0.027	0.596
	German	English	.754*	0.14	<.001	0.42	1.09	0.819	0.389	1.245
	Czech	English	.452*	0.133	0.003	0.13	0.77	0.533	0.112	0.953
fight_fascism	German	English	–1.114*	0.334	0.006	–1.93	–0.29	–0.951	–1.381	–0.517
	Czech	English	-.916*	0.342	0.029	–1.75	–0.08	–0.692	–1.115	–0.267
Multiple Comparisons (Turkey HSD) – Equal variances assumed										
						95% Confidence Interval			95% Confidence Interval	
Dependent Variable	(1) Language	(J) Language	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Cohen's d	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
gov_criticism	German	Czech	–.583*	0.224	0.027	–1.11	–0.05	–0.383	–0.668	–0.097
targ_minorities	German	English	–0.466	0.202	0.057	–0.94	0.01	–0.433	–0.851	–0.014

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Sputnik Czech Republic

Apparently, the Russian leadership does not perceive the Czech Republic as a priority for its hybrid influence or fails to produce high-quality propaganda materials for a different reason. The Czech Republic anchored hybrid threats in its strategic documents for the first time in 2016 (Czech Government 2016). Since then, the impact of hybrid warfare on the state has been accentuated as significant due to the membership in NATO and the state's geographical location. Our findings partially contradict the assumption of the Kremlin's considerable focus on its hybrid influence campaign in the Czech Republic (Havlík 2021; Štalmach 2018). The articles on Sputnik CZ are very brief, often containing just several sentences and a standardized paragraph with basic information about the invasion, such as "Based on the resort, Ukrainian military infrastructure, air defense objects, military airfields, and Air Forces are neutralized with high-precision strikes,"[5] which was included in almost all analyzed articles. The primary topic of the articles in Czech is the positive presentation of Russian advances and the creation of an image of a cowardly Ukrainian army full of nationalists and Nazis.

The pro-Russian nature of the news in Czech is apparent, as the labeling of the articles concerning the invasion given by the news agency is "Demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine."[6] The tags are much more neutral in German (Ukraine-Conflict[7]) and take an even more deceptive label in English (Situation in Ukraine). Furthermore, the articles seem one-dimensional, primarily accentuating alleged Russian successes at the battlefront. Governments of countries west of Russia are often criticized, the primary target being the Ukrainian government, but at times the Czech one as well.

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In general, the communication with the audience seems to expect already the readers to be pro-Russian and seek information to strengthen their existing worldview. This might stem from a significant group of Czech society that is either pro-Russian, anti-Western, or opt for passivity in Ukraine for economic reasons (STEM 2022). The information domain is clearly a problem in the Czech Republic, as even in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 20% of Czechs consider the information war a Western (Czech government included) pretext to restrict the media and free speech (IPSOS 2022). There is no apparent attempt to gather support from yet undecided groups of people in the Czech Republic.

In general, the articles in Czech seem to attempt to shape the narrative in a simple way – Russia is a protagonist, while both Ukrainian *and* pro-Ukrainian governments are the antagonists, which is also demonstrated in the excerpts in Table 3. *Criticism of government* is also mentioned more often in Czech (M = 1.7, SD = 1.44)[8] than in German (M = 1.11, SD = 1.60). The effect size, measured by Cohen's d[9], was d = -0.38, indicating a small effect of language on the code occurrence (see Cohen 1988). There are no subtle, complex, covert ways of shaping the reader's perception and no efforts to hide the pro-Russian narrative among non-biased articles. In some way or other, even this crude type of propaganda might work, creating or reinforcing an existing echo-chamber effect (Cinelli et al. 2021; Sunstein 1999). For a pro-Russian minority in the Czech Republic, the invasion is portrayed in a black-and-white manner, primarily in regard to the power parity between Russia and "the evil West." For a Czech consumer of Sputnik News, Russia was methodically achieving the set goals in Ukraine with surgically precise strikes that avoided any civilian casualties. This can be seen in the code occurrences – *Russian invasion as successful* code appeared significantly more often in the analyzed dataset of Czech articles (M = 1.98, SD = 1.89) compared to both German (M = 0.55, SD = 1.08) and English (M = 0.55, SD = 1.06) texts. The effect sizes were d = 0.93[10] and d = 0.82,

Table 3. Excerpts from the analyzed articles highlighting their corresponding qualitative codes.

Original language, code	Excerpt in English[1]
Czech, Russia as a victim	As the Russian president said in his speech to Russian regarding the situation in Ukraine, the sanctions against Russia would be put in place no matter what – pretext will be found or made up, regardless of the situation in Ukraine, just because they [the Russians] exist.
German, Fight against Fascism	Moscow has repeatedly warned other countries from Neonazis taking control over Ukraine after there was a coup supported by the West in 2014.
English, Fight against Fascism	And we see that their [Ukrainians] tortures are the same as those of the German Nazis and their henchmen-policemen in the Great Patriotic War.
German, "The West" as a threat	"Not only do the western countries behave hostile in the economic realm towards our country, (…) but the head officers from the main NATO states express themselves aggressively towards our country, too", added the Russian leader.
English, Targeting Russian minorities	For the past eight years, Strasbourg has not had the guts to condemn the ciriminal policy of the nationalistic Kyiv regime that committed genocide against the people of Donbas.
German, Western dependency on Russia	Russian gas is crucial for heating of European households and European industry.
Czech, Justification of the invasion	The purpose of the Russian operation is to hold the puppet regime in Kyiv accountable for committed crimes, states the Russian Foreign Ministry.
German, Criticism of government	Russian President Vladimir Putin explained the decision as a result of Ukraine ignoring the Minsk agreement as a peaceful resolution to the conflict, among other reasons.

[1]Translated from the original languages by authors.

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respectively, indicating large effects in both cases. Interestingly, there is a similarity in the *Fight against Fascism* code in Czech (M = 0.64, SD = 1.18) and German (M = 0.44, SD = 0.95), but the code appears significantly more often in English (M = 1.55, SD = 1.72). The effect sizes are d = 0.69 and d = 0.95, respectively, indicating a medium-size effect in the former case and a large effect in the latter. In Czechia, the topic of fascism does not bear the same stigma as in Germany, which raises the question, why did Sputnik News not use this narrative more often in its Czech language version?

Sputnik Germany

As opposed to the Czech language version of Sputnik, the propaganda on Sputnik Germany is much more complex and nuanced. There is a distinct difference in quality when compared to the Czech language version. The articles are more diverse and longer, and those containing more apparently propagandist thoughts are partially hidden among articles that are not so obviously biased. The narrative in the articles revolved around criticism of Western and Ukrainian governments and justifying the invasion as a necessary step to help the oppressed self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Such an example can be seen in one of the articles, where it is written that "the Western politicians and media have been ignoring the victims in Eastern Ukraine."[11] However, criticism of the government code still appeared significantly less in German than in Czech, as we mentioned in the text above. On the other hand, *Justification of the invasion* appeared significantly more often in German (M = 1.27, SD = 1.01) than in both Czech (M = 0.97, SD = 0.92)[12] and English (M = 0.52, SD = 0.51). The effect sizes are d = 0.31 and d = 0.82, indicating small and large effects respectively. Russian-German relations used to be much warmer than with other European states (with some notable exceptions, such as Serbia or Hungary) (Götz 2008). Therefore, these relations may have played a role in this attempt to justify the Russian invasion to the German audience.

Victimizing Russia and portraying the West as a threat to the Russian nation, not the other way around, is also a common theme, which is common to all three language versions, as there are no statistically significant differences. The Fascist vs. Anti-Fascist struggle was omitted in the articles almost altogether, which might be explained by the national context, as the Nazi history is described by Haupt (2008) as "Germany's perhaps most socially and politically sensitive topic." However, even in Czech, mentions of fascism were quite low. Furthermore, Sputnik Germany is the only language version where the Western dependence on Russia is mentioned at times, explaining that the West needs to keep the economic ties with Russia due to gas and oil exports (see excerpt in Table 3).

The complex, much longer, and higher-quality articles are in line with the findings of the EU's disinformation watchdog's conclusion that "Germany is singled out as the main target for Russian disinformation efforts among European member states" (Babczynska 2021). The specific Russian-German relations were also mirrored in the economic sphere, where Germany figured as the top trading partner of Russia both in imports and exports, even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Richter 2022; Armstrong 2022). In this regard, a specific recurring theme in the articles arises on German or Western dependence on Russia, specifically in oil and gas exports. Overall, the targeting and prioritizing of Germany by the Russian regime's hybrid influence tools are hardly surprising. However, it is alarming how thought-through the Kremlin's propaganda is toward Germany. Even the complexity in justification of the invasion is much higher when compared to the Czech and English language versions. In German, Minsk agreements are often at the center of the justification, while Czechs are possibly considered a much less witty target audience, and the justification revolves primarily around vague statements of help requested by the Donbas and Luhansk self-proclaimed Republics or "urgency" of action.

It seems Sputnik Germany shows signs of efforts to make the news agency look more trustworthy by producing some less blatantly propagandist materials, toning down pro-Russian statements, and mixing in some sources that do not support the invasion. One of the articles even

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featured an interview with a German ex-Inspector General of the German Foreign Office, Dr. Hans-Ulrich Seidt, who does not have any ties to Russia based on the available information (Kotlyarova 2022). The questions were loaded, but it gives a sense of "objective news" anyway. Several articles in German contained no coded segments or just a small number of them.

Sputnik International

As English is one of the languages with the most speakers in the world, prioritizing its use in the information domain to spread propaganda among as many people as possible seems to be a matter of efficiency. The quantity of the articles in English is small compared to Czech and German, and the quality is also not comparable to Sputnik Germany. Nevertheless, there is one specific to Sputnik International – the portrayal of the invasion in Ukraine as a *Fascist vs. Anti-Fascist struggle* is strongly accentuated in English. *Fight against Fascism* code appears significantly more often in English (M = 1.55, SD = 1.72) than in Czech (M = 0.64, SD = 1.18) and German (M = 0.44, SD = 0.95). The effect sizes are d = 0.69 and d = 0.95, indicating medium and large effects, respectively. A possible explanation is that the Kremlin is broadly targeting to persuade the international audience that the Ukrainian government and military are nothing else than "Banderites," nationalists," or downright "Fascists." The sympathies of the international community would then shift towards Russia, which might result in smaller individual support that boomed after the start of the invasion of Ukraine. The accentuation of *Fascist vs. Anti-Fascist struggle* also substitutes a broader *Justification of the invasion*, explaining why the code appears less often in English (M = 0.52, SD = 0.51) not only compared to German (M = 1.27, SD = 1.01), but also to Czech (M = 0.97, SD = 0.92). The sizes of the effects, measured by Cohen's d, are d = -0.82 and d = -0.53, indicating large and medium effects, respectively.

Overall, the *victimization* of Russia and *demonization* of Ukraine, its government, and the military seem to be the main topics in the English language version of Sputnik News. Russia is often presented as a victim of the evil "West," and "the genocide" of Russian minorities in the Donbas region is often mentioned, such as in the following excerpt: "For the past eight years, Strasbourg has not had the guts to condemn the criminal policy of the nationalistic Kyiv regime that committed genocide against the people of Donbas." The *Targeting Russian minorities* code appeared more often in English (M = 0.86, SD = 1.06) than in German (M = 0.4, SD = 1.08), with the effect size being d = 0.43, indicating a small effect. No statistically significant difference was identified between English and Czech. However, it should be noted that mentions of targeting Russian minorities do serve, among others, as a justification of the invasion, albeit more indirectly. With the image of a victim, presenting the Russian invasion as successful would be counterproductive, as one cannot be both the victim and the aggressor. This starkly contrasts the Czech language version, where presenting Russia as a victim seems to be a secondary narrative after the narrative about its operational and strategic successes. Hence, the explicit justification of the invasion is rather lacking in the English version.

The small number of articles and seemingly low effort put into generating more materials can be explained in three ways – (1) the general (English-speaking) international audience is perceived by the Russian regime as unimportant; (2) it is considered a waste of resources to an audience that is already decidedly anti-Russian; or (3) there is an attempt to present Sputnik International as less biased by not over-representing the topic of the invasion among other events happening in the world. However unlikely the first explanation might sound, in the context of the already ongoing invasion of Ukraine, there is no reason to believe that online media would convince the Western governments to abandon material and non-material support to Ukraine. Despite no available data on private donations to Ukraine, countries' geographical proximity will likely affect the amount of money sent and vice versa. English-speaking countries would then, in theory, be of lesser importance for the Russian regime's hybrid influence, as at the level of individual people, other nations are more logical targets.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Narratives of Russian State-controlled Media – Same Products, Different Packaging

The main question asked in this article was, *How do the German, Czech, and international branches of Sputnik inform about the launch of the invasion in Ukraine?* Before we answer it, let us briefly discuss the supporting questions, which might help us understand the bigger picture.

> SQ1 How did the quality and quantity of the articles compare on Sputnik Czech Republic, Germany, and International?

Despite the small number of labeled articles on Sputnik International, the texts are overall more focused on discrediting Ukraine and its Western allies, while boasting of Russian successes is not the primary message. That cannot be said of the articles in Czech. It seems that the target audience in the Czech Republic is perceived as already prone to disinformation. The texts are generally just standardized paragraphs with few sentences of factually new information. *Repetitio est mater studiorum* is seemingly the pro-Kremlin media's strategy for influencing the Czech audience. A notable exception is the full speech of Vladimir Putin regarding the invasion of Ukraine.

In general, it is apparent that there are considerable differences in resources allocated to the various Sputnik News language versions. The quality is vastly different and follows a hierarchy of priorities that is to be expected from the Russian government – Germany first, thanks to its economic relations with Russia and strong political position in the EU; International audience second, as it allows to encompass a vast number of states and people easily; and the Czech Republic at the last place – at least in the analyzed trio – due to its relative insignificance in the international arena.

> SQ2 How did the narratives projected by the Sputnik branches differ?

Despite the core narrative being stable among the language versions, we found that there are significant differences. These seem to stem from the target audience analysis, where some topics might be sensitive for some audiences and at the same time crucial for justification of the Russian leadership's actions, such as the Fascist vs. Anti-Fascist struggle, while other topics might be accentuated to strike awe in the readers, such as the emphasis on precision strikes against Ukraine on the Sputnik Czech Republic. In the German context, the anti-Fascist narratives might be sensitive and do not seem to be accentuated nearly as much as in English, but counterintuitively, even in Czech, the anti-fascist narratives are quite muted. However, it should be noted that in Czech, the denazification narrative is nevertheless not avoided as much as in German.

Nevertheless, there are still some similarities in all three analyzed language versions. Notably, two codes occurred in similar numbers within the datasets – *Russia as a victim* and *"The West" as a threat to Russia* (see Table 1 for the means). Sputnik International focused mainly on portraying the Russian state as a victim, not a piece of well-oiled machinery reaching all of its strategic and operational goals in Ukraine. The justification of the invasion itself is a topic even next to the victimization of Russia. Criticism of the government is closely related to this issue – most often, the Ukrainian government is criticized, sometimes even demonized. Some of the narrative choices are hard to explain, such as accentuating criticism of the government and the Russian invasion as successful in the Czech language. Towards Germany, the narrative seems to be the most consistent, taking into account how some messages can nullify each other, notably the victimization of Russia and presenting its invasion as successful.

> How did Sputnik Czech Republic, Germany, and the International inform about events of the Russian invasion of Ukraine?

The short answer would be *uncritical of the Russian regime's decisions and actions.* All three language versions seem to be tightly regulated when it comes to the information published about the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. Standardized paragraphs were presented in all three languages to set a narrative of (1) the Russian state starting a "special operation" to help Donetsk and Luhansk

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the goals of (2) demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine and (3) achieving these goals by precise strikes on Ukrainian military structures with no threat to civilians.

Based on Dunn's (2014) assumption that Sputnik is in tier one of the Russian regime's propaganda machine, the degree of consistency and similarity in narratives was expected. Nevertheless, there are some notable specifics in the analyzed languages, as well as the apparent difference in the quality of the texts. Primarily Sputnik Germany contains a clever combination of strongly pro-Russian, propagandist articles with less biased coverage of some topics. This can help boost the trust of the audience in the source and is a common technique of various disinformation websites. What remains unsaid is also important. Any successes of Ukraine and its allies are not reported on, and the broader context is often lacking in articles about the international situation and relations.

The potential impact of international state-owned media such as Sputnik News or RT – often framed as alternative media – on the citizens of Western countries is now severely limited by suspending these outlets by the EU. However, the initial days after the invasion were crucial to setting the narrative. The anchoring effect may play a role in this case. "The anchoring effect is the disproportionate influence on decision makers to make judgments that are biased toward an initially presented value" (Furnham and Boo 2011, 35; see also Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Presenting the narratives about the invasion first can play a role in how the audiences perceive the conflict despite being presented with contradictory evidence. This explains the deliberate inclusion of standardized paragraphs in most of the analyzed articles. It is hard to ascertain to what extent this worked in Western audiences. This article can form a basis for future research on the precise impact of the narratives set by Russian state-controlled media immediately prior to and after the invasion of Ukraine.

Conclusion

This article researched the case of Sputnik News and how the Russian state-controlled media tailor their narratives to meet the cultural, social, economic, and other specifics of their various national audiences. To inquire about our assumption, we examined the narration of the recent invasion of Ukraine by Sputnik News. The fitting of the narratives was demonstrated by qualitatively coding articles published on the invasion in Czech, German, and English. The analysis has proven that even though the particular language versions partially overlap in narrating the invasion, there are indeed significant differences among them. These are mirrored not only in the quality or length of the articles but especially in the reasoning and excusing of the invasion.

Hence, our analysis strengthens the assumption that the narratives forged by the Russian state-controlled media are specifically tailored. The narratives were either prepared upfront, which does not align with the conclusions of other research (Fridrichová 2023), or possibly differed among the languages due to the Russian propagandists' thorough knowledge of the target audiences that swiftly reacted to the new reality. However, the core narrative is, in fact, the same in all three language versions. It fits the strategic narrative groomed by the Russian regime and its affiliated media, namely presenting the Kremlin as the "good guy" in the international arena. The practical implications of the presented analysis are not negligible – a common strategic narrative behind the distinct ways of hybrid influence in the information domain can enable the construction and coordination of counternarratives.

At the same time, different parts of this core narrative are accentuated in each language as the significant differences among the assigned qualitative codes demonstrate: – justification of the invasion in German, Russia as a mighty military machine fighting against bloodthirsty yet incompetent Ukrainian nationalists in Czech, and Russia as an anti-Fascist hero helping to stop the genocide of Russian minorities in English. We also perceived differences in general text quality during the analysis, which helped to reveal the priority targets of the Russian regime's information warfare. Specifically, the Czech language version seems to be the lowest priority for the Russian

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regime, containing mostly less-sophisticated, short news with a standardized paragraph likely merely translated from another language.

There is no apparent effort to construct different core narratives in various European countries. This approach is intuitive and ingenious at the same time. In an increasingly connected world, it might as well be impossible to construct vastly different narratives tailored to each country. This would be even more problematic in European countries, which have a high share of English speakers and often consume news in another language besides their mother tongue. On the other hand, different regions and languages can be presented with differently accentuated strategic narratives, as we might observe in Arabic, with pro-Russian voices echoing anti-democratic, anti-Western narratives.

It would also be worth researching the emerging narratives in other geopolitical areas, such as the Middle East or China, which might influence audiences that are not currently viewed as the priority by the West in regard to the Russian regime's information operations. The implications of the possible impact of the anchoring effect might also be significant, and in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we suggest focusing future research on assessing the possible impact on the audiences in different countries.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.89.

Financial support. This publication was written at Masaryk University with the support of a Specific University Research Grant provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. It was also written as a part of the research project "Resiliency of the armed forces and armed security corps to hybrid threats" (VJ01010122) financed by the Ministry of the Interior of the CR / Strategic Support Program for Security Research in the Czech Republic 2015-2020 (IMPAKT 1).

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 Other language versions of Sputnik news were researched in papers, e. g. the justification of Crimean occupation for Spanish-speaking audience (Cerulli and Rhodes 2022), popularity of the news among Romanian and Moldovan audiences (Ştefan 2020), or the narratives spread in Nordic countries (Deverell, Wagnsson, and Olsson 2021).
2 Available at https://archive.org/web/.
3 In German and Czech "ukraine-konflikt", "demilitarizace a denacifikace ukrajiny" respectively.
4 MAXQDA calculates the kappa from agreements/disagreements of coded segments of texts with at least 90% similarity. In case of this study, full sentences were always coded – this means that an agreement in achieved in case both coders identified *the same sentence* and selected *the same code.*
5 "Podle resortu jsou velmi přesnými zásahy vyřazovány z provozu vojenská infrastruktura, objekty protivzdušné obrany, vojenská letiště a letectvo Ozbrojených sil Ukrajiny" (all quotes are translated by authors).
6 Demilitarizace a denacifikace Ukrajiny.
7 Ukraine-Konflikt.
8 M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.
9 This is the case for all further effect size reports within the text.
10 The Table 2 reports different order of the means to keep the language pairs in the table consistent. However, Cohen's d is an arbitrary value and value can be reversed, essentially indicating the same relationship with different direction. We decided to report the reversed values in the text wherever appropriate.
11 „Jahrelang haben westliche Politiker und Medien die Opfer in der Ostukraine ignoriert."

12 It should be noted that we report this result with significance of 0.08, which is slightly above the 0.05 threshold.

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Cite this article: Burda, Robin, and Veronika Bundzíková. 2025. "Tailoring Narratives on War in Ukraine: Cross-national Study of Sputnik News". *Nationalities Papers* 53: 1077–1098, doi:10.1017/nps.2024.89