How Propaganda Works: Political Biases and News Credibility in Autocracies

By

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To Elena, Masha, and Liza

Abstract

How does authoritarian propaganda work? Existing research mostly assumes that citizens are skeptical about propaganda, and governments should use various persuasion techniques to counteract this skepticism. However, this argument is at odds with the research in political communication that finds that the persuasion capabilities of media messages are limited. It also contradicts the recent empirical evidence on autocracies, which suggests that often, state-controlled propaganda outlets are popular and trusted. I develop a theory of affirmation propaganda that allows me to explain why and under what conditions citizens trust the narratives of state-run media. A key insight from the theory is that when the autocrat has a strong base of support, and the opposition is politically distant, an effective use of propaganda is to maintain the pro-regime majority through belief affirmation rather than to win new supporters through persuasion. By sending belief-affirming messages, governments not only reinforce their connection with supporters but also convey to the latter that propaganda outlets are on their side and are thus trustworthy.

I test this argument using cross-national survey data and three original surveys in Russia. I show that media trust is on average higher in non-democracies despite extensive media manipulation in these regimes. Moreover, citizens who support ruling parties find the media more trustworthy, and this relationship is much stronger in autocracies than in democracies. In randomized experiments and surveys in Russia, I demonstrate the two key implications of the theory of affirmation propaganda: First, pro-regime Russians

are substantially more likely to believe propaganda messages but to reject propaganda-inconsistent messages; and second, many pro-regime Russians find state-run media accurate and trust such propaganda outlets more than independent news organizations. Moreover, regime supporters, especially consumers of state media, are highly vulnerable to the Kremlin's disinformation.

This dissertation contributes to the research on authoritarian regime support, the limits of information manipulation in autocracies, and susceptibility to misinformation. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of this analysis for propaganda and regime support in Putin's Russia and other contemporary autocracies.

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1 Introduction

Authoritarian leaders across the world use propaganda and disinformation to acquire and consolidate power. Governments in China, Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, and many other countries try to shape public opinion through an extensive apparatus of television, print, and online media, overwhelming the public with their own, very distorted version of reality. Despite substantial research on autocracies, social scientists still debate how exactly propaganda works and how citizens respond to it.

Some scholars raise serious doubts about propaganda's ability to convince citizens. They point out that citizens learn to be skeptical about official narratives and the messages of state media, which are often too improbable to take at face value (Mickiewicz 2008; Huang and Yeh 2017). Then, instead of trying to convince skeptical citizens, autocrats use propaganda to project their power and intimidate the opposition (Huang 2015b; Wedeen 1999), to induce attitude falsification (Little 2017), or to confuse and distract citizens (Pearce and Kendzior 2012; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). Thus, while propaganda may fail to persuade, it can fulfill other strategic goals.

On the other hand, a growing number of studies argue that persuasion is still possible: Autocrats can make propaganda more believable through sophisticated manipulation techniques, such as careful mixing of fact and fiction, misattributing responsibility, or fusing political messages with entertainment (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Tolz and Teper 2018; Mattingly and Yao 2020).

Mastering the art of communication thus allows governments to compensate for the inherent untrustworthiness of propaganda. They can further reduce disbelief in official narratives by shutting out independent sources of information (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Müller 2013).

This dissertation offers a different perspective on how and why propaganda works. What if citizens are not as skeptical about propagandistic narratives and authoritarian state media as existing research implies? Less skepticism means that persuasion is less necessary, and that has major implications for our understanding of the mechanisms of authoritarian propaganda and authoritarian rule in general. In this dissertation project, I outline how autocrats can design their propaganda if the "persuasion constraint" is relaxed; further, I investigate the degree of skepticism about propaganda in autocracies and the specific factors that make citizens more susceptible to propagandistic messages, focusing, in particular, on how political biases shape the perceptions of media and propaganda. I examine these issues via cross-national survey data and three original surveys and experiments that I conducted in Russia, an authoritarian regime notorious for its use of propaganda.

My analysis builds on several important insights related to the perceptions of media and propaganda in autocracies. First, state-controlled media in these regimes, which are used by autocrats to spread disinformation, nevertheless remain popular. There appears to be a demand for state media even when there are independent media that offer more truthful reporting. It is also important not to exaggerate the sophistication of authoritarian propaganda: Much of its content amounts to unabashed praise of the leadership, blunt denials of government failures, or fabricated stories about regime opponents. Such content is unlikely to convince a critically-minded person. These observations are difficult to reconcile with the accounts of propaganda described above—it appears that citizens may not be especially skeptical about propaganda even when governments use rather primitive manipulation tactics. Rather, such an outcome is reminiscent of partisan information

processing usually found in more competitive political regimes, whereby citizens treat politically like-minded information more leniently but avoid or discount information not congruent with their existing views (Taber and Lodge 2006; Gaines et al. 2007; Van Bavel and Pereira 2018).

I develop a theory of affirmation propaganda that complements existing theoretical accounts of authoritarian information manipulation and allows us to explain the surprising lack of skepticism among citizens. This theory integrates recent work on autocracies with decades of research on partisanship and political communication. The starting point for this theory is that contemporary autocrats often enjoy substantial and genuine public support, and such support shifts the calculus in information manipulation. I show that if there is a sufficiently strong political connection between the leader and the supporters, and if the autocrat's support base is large enough, it is no longer necessary to persuade the regime critics (e.g., by employing various tactics mentioned above). Moreover, such persuasion efforts can be counterproductive, as some supporters may be lost as a result. Under such conditions, the regime can instead focus on affirmation propaganda, which entails continually sending belief-consistent messages to existing supporters. Supporters perceive such pro-regime messages as more plausible than critical messages produced by alternative, independent news organizations, as I show in a large-scale survey in Russia, in which participants evaluated a wide range of news stories. Thus, affirmation propaganda allows the regime to maintain a connection to its supporters.

Moreover, by sending belief-affirming messages to regime supporters, state media convey that they are on the side of citizens. This alleviates the problem of their inherent untrustworthiness and improves their credibility among regime supporters. On the contrary, the more critical, even though more objective, reporting by independent media hurts their credibility in the eyes of pro-regime citizens—such reporting goes against their political biases. These expectations are confirmed by my empirical analysis. First, using survey data on more than 100 countries, I show that support for ruling parties is associated

with higher trust in media. Then, in two randomized experiments conducted in Russia, I demonstrate that supporters of the president Vladimir Putin are more likely to believe news messages when these messages are attributed to state-run media outlets rather than independent news outlets. In another survey, I find that Putin supporters mostly believe state propaganda outlets to be accurate and uncensored, even as they admit that these media are not objective or politically independent.

Considering propaganda through the framework of politically biased news processing helps to explain why many citizens in countries such as Russia stay within the bubble of state media even when they have access to alternative sources of information, and even when state-run media turn more and more propagandistic. The emphasis on affirmation propaganda allows autocrats to continue promoting fabricated stories and shaping the news agenda for the public, as the latter lacks reasons to abandon state-run media. This has major consequences for the spread of false information. In my analysis of over 1 million decisions on the veracity of news stories, I show that Russians supportive of president Putin were highly susceptible to the Kremlin's disinformation, especially if they were regular consumers of state-run media.

A downside of affirmation propaganda is that it cannot convince opposition-minded citizens. Moreover, regime critics may be further alienated by affirmation propaganda, becoming even more skeptical about state propaganda outlets. Indeed, my analysis finds strong disagreements between opposition-minded Russians and pro-Putin citizens about the veracity of pro-regime and critical stories and about the accuracy and credibility of state-run and independent media. Thus, affirmation propaganda may exacerbate political polarization, causing both regime supporters and critics to become more entrenched in their views and perceptions of news and media. Moreover, such polarization makes it costlier for the regime to switch from affirmation propaganda to a more moderate propaganda strategy that could appeal to the opposition. In other words, the regimes that use affirmation propaganda may become locked into it, being forced to rely on this

strategy more and more.

One contribution of this research project is theorizing and empirically demonstrating an important strategy of information manipulation that helps to prop up authoritarian rule. The focus on this strategy, affirmation propaganda, helps us explain the long-term political successes of authoritarian rulers such as Vladimir Putin and their ability to maintain strong public support despite various political and economic crises.

My dissertation does not imply that other uses of propaganda—intimidation, distraction, sowing confusion, or persuasion—are meaningless or ineffective. However, this analysis suggests that having a substantial support base reduces the constraints on the extent of deception and censorship that authoritarian leaders can use, and it opens space for other strategies such as affirmation propaganda. More broadly, my analysis highlights that it is necessary to pay more attention to the scope conditions for various propaganda strategies.

Relatedly, this dissertation demonstrates that when affirmation propaganda is feasible, autocrats are much less constrained by alternative information sources. Previous work has argued that such media can provide autocrats with useful information or make citizens more content. My research suggests that when affirmation propaganda is at work, independent media are not an attractive alternative for most regime supporters, and these citizens would reject critical information reported by such media. Thus, independent journalism, long thought to be a bulwark against authoritarianism (Muratov 2021), is not enough to combat authoritarian disinformation and propaganda. Facilitating access to independent media is important, but we should not expect such efforts to incentivize regime supporters to leave the bubble of state propaganda.

At the same time, my research emphasizes that autocrats who use affirmation propaganda have to follow the beliefs and preferences of their supporters, and it may be dangerous to deviate from the core beliefs of supporters when designing propaganda efforts. This adds to our understanding of how contemporary autocrats are often con-

strained by public opinion (Rosenfeld 2018; Rozenas and Stukal 2019)—meaning, they are not all-powerful masters of persuasion. Existing research on autocracies emphasizes the strategic decisions by leaders and elites (Svolik 2012), but my research suggests that we may underestimate the role that the public plays in such regimes. While citizens in authoritarian regimes are not free and autonomous, we should pay more attention to how their beliefs and preferences influence the behavior of leaders.

My work also bolsters the understanding that political biases and "partisan" filtering are a universal and global phenomenon (Ditto et al. 2018). Moreover, my findings challenge some existing research on autocracies that portrays their citizens as sophisticated, skeptical, and discerning news consumers. I show that Russians, despite having experienced information manipulation for decades, are often wrong about the veracity of news stories, and in many cases, these errors are driven by politically biased processing. This illustrates that fighting misinformation when citizens view the media through a political lens is very challenging.

The findings of this dissertation are also relevant for more democratic regimes. First, propaganda and misinformation are on the rise globally, and politicians in democratic countries more and more often adopt propaganda tactics pioneered by autocrats. Affirmation propaganda can thus be viewed not only as a strategy of authoritarian rule but as a general communication strategy that can be effective in a variety of political settings, posing threat to the prospects of democracy.

Second, my findings prompt some reevaluation of recent claims by journalists, politicians, and some scholars about the extent to which foreign governments affect politics and public opinion in democracies. For example, Vladimir Putin has often been credited with building an extensive and effective global propaganda machine (Van Herpen 2015). However, we should carefully investigate how such propaganda works and whether it does or can actually change minds. It is tempting to explain extreme partisanship, polarization,

or conflict by the strategic efforts of cunning foreign adversaries, but we may overestimate the impact of these efforts. Foreign propaganda may appear effective simply because it tells citizens what they want to hear, or because it is amplified by powerful domestic actors. Underestimating authoritarian interference in democratic politics is dangerous, but exaggerating it and ignoring more fundamental issues within democratic polities themselves may also be harmful.

A methodological contribution of this study is a novel experimental design applicable to studies of propaganda and misinformation. While most studies on this topic examine the perceptions of news and media in a standard survey setting, one of my surveys was designed and promoted as a quiz that offered the participants to test their ability to recognize misinformation. This approach places the evaluations of news and media in a setting similar to casual online news consumption, and it creates a convincing pretext for the evaluation of a large number of news messages, maintaining sufficient interest from the participants. This study format is also designed to reduce dishonest responses that are often a concern for surveys conducted in autocracies.

Lastly, the results of this analysis are relevant to the formal theoretical work on censorship, propaganda, and Bayesian persuasion, which often assumes a uniform response to information manipulation among citizens, as well as their ability to observe the level of media bias. Incorporating the heterogeneity of political preferences and news perceptions in these models may enrich future formal work on these problems.

1.1 The Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is comprised of three essays that examine the perceptions of news and media in authoritarian regimes, the relationship between pro-regime attitudes and news credibility, and the consequences of politically biased news processing with respect to everyday news consumption and citizens' ability to recognize misinformation. Taken

together, these studies provide evidence that authoritarian state media often command substantial trust, and that belief affirmation can bolster the credibility of propaganda among regime supporters.

Before discussing these three empirical studies, it is worth summarizing the key observable implications of the theory of affirmation propaganda. First, autocrats are more likely to choose belief-affirming tactics over other approaches to manipulation when there exist a large pro-regime majority, an identity connection between the regime and its supporters, and a politically distant opposition. Second, citizens who have an identity connection to the regime (regime supporters) are more likely to trust propaganda messages but less likely to trust messages inconsistent with propaganda, compared to regime critics. Third, regime supporters are more likely to trust propagandistic state media and less likely to trust independent (critical) media, compared to regime critics. Fourth, when propaganda attempts to appeal to regime critics, it is less attractive to regime supporters. Fifth, affirmation propaganda tactics are more effective with respect to core regime supporters than with respect to moderate supporters.

This study focuses on testing the individual-level implications of the theory (2–5), as it seeks to establish how citizens perceive media and propaganda in authoritarian regimes. The first implication, which requires a variation in regime-level characteristics and cross-national data on propaganda strategies and messaging, can be explored in future work. In the conclusion to the dissertation, I discuss the strategies that can be seen as alternatives to affirmation propaganda, and the possible conditions for these strategies to be preferable to belief-affirming tactics.

The **first essay** investigates whether trust in media is greater in more democratic or in more authoritarian regimes. Some previous research has suggested that citizens of autocracies report higher media trust, but this research has only considered a limited subset of available cross-national data on attitudes. I use a large-scale data set from

the World Values Survey (WVS), which covers more than 100 countries in 1981–2020, to establish, first, whether media trust is indeed consistently higher in authoritarian regimes, and second, whether this difference can be explained by various country-level features or respondent-level characteristics, including support for the ruling party.

I find a robust negative relationship between the level of democracy and trust in press and television. This relationship is consistent in different subsamples of countries surveyed by the WVS. A difference exists not only between authoritarian and democratic regimes, but also between more and less restrictive autocracies and between more and less competitive democracies. A substantial difference remains even when several individual and country-level variables, including age, education, economic development, political polarization, and internet access in the country, are taken into account.

Further, the relationship between support for the ruling parties and trust in press and television is positive, and the analysis suggests that this government support partly accounts for the gap in trust between autocratic and democratic regimes. Moreover, this relationship is weak in democracies and much stronger in more authoritarian regimes, which may suggest that in autocracies, citizens are more likely to associate the media with the government or the ruling party. However, political dispositions do not fully explain the gap in trust, which remains sizable even after controlling for regime support.

An important conclusion from this analysis is that citizens in autocracies often find the media relatively trustworthy even though most media in such regimes are state-controlled and often used to spread propaganda. This result challenges the idea that citizens in authoritarian regimes are highly skeptical about media and propaganda. It also calls into question a well-established argument that trust in institutions is primarily driven by the underlying institutional quality, as state-controlled media are not independent, and they usually fail to provide objective news reporting.

These cross-national findings highlight that it is important to investigate the reasons for