



'I still trust the Russian media more'

**NARRATIVES
AND PERCEPTIONS**
OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA
IN KYRGYZSTAN

July 2023

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Executive Summary

When Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24 2022, strict control over the Russian media became absolute. New laws and amendments to existing legislation made it all but impossible to report freely from inside the Federation, forcing remaining independent media to close and most international media to either leave or severely curtail their reporting. The remaining state-led or controlled information provided via traditional, online and social media is actively being used by the Russian government and its affiliates to promote propaganda both at home and abroad. Such propaganda resonates particularly well in Kyrgyzstan given the strong political, economic, and historical ties that exist between the countries; the Russian language has an official status; is widely used – and competition from local and international alternatives to Russian media is modest at best.

This report assesses the impact of current Russian propaganda on audiences in Kyrgyzstan. It does so at three levels. First, it maps the scope of Russian media outlets in Kyrgyzstan. Second, it analyses the narrative of Russian propaganda and Third, it assesses perception of these media and their messaging among audiences across Kyrgyzstan.

Scope

Narrative

Perception

The research for this study covers the period 24 February 2022 to 1 December 2022. A research team in Kyrgyzstan began by mapping the major Russian media outlets available in Kyrgyzstan. They subsequently collected, categorised and analysed news items from six Russian TV channels, three newspapers, and one online news agency, and established a content database. At the same time, a series of six focus group meetings were held in Bishkek, Naryn, and Osh to assess how Russian propaganda is being perceived locally.

The research team considered a variety of Russian state propaganda sources including broadcast television, printed papers and social media accounts. As will be further explained, traditional/social media boundaries are blurred and intertwined. Some outlets such as Sputnik.kg exist entirely online, while others have websites and vast social media presence next to their conventional audience reach (broadcast television/radio/print). As websites of the media outlets serve as default archives of news items, the research team opted for working with these archives as primary sources of Russian state propaganda.

This study finds that the scope of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan is massive. It includes propaganda broadcast and distributed through traditional media and disseminated across online and social media platforms. It ranges from the traditional Channel One and Moskovskij Komsomolets to streaming via YouTube and messaging via VKontakte and Telegram. The sheer number of media outlets and volume of output on a daily level simply dwarfs that produced by Kyrgyz or Third Party media.

A spike in special news items was observed with the start of the invasion and had the clear objective of capturing audience attention.

The narrative of Russian propaganda can be discerned into four main messages – on Ukraine, the West, on Russia – and Kyrgyzstan. Ukraine is portrayed on the one hand as an artificial state that has no reason to exist and as an inseparable part of Russia which is being ruled and ruined by Western-supported 'Nazis'. Ukraine is presented as confused in both 'belonging to Russia' and as being 'influenced by the West'. Russian propaganda creates a broad enemy image of a collective and evil West that interferes in other countries and stirs up problems worldwide.

It is mainly 'holy' Russia and the Russian-speaking world that stands up to the West's 'immoral' policies. In this sense, Russia has 'been forced' to 'react' in Ukraine to 'Western aggression'. Kyrgyzstan is portrayed as an extension of the Russian world, heavily dependent on Russia for its economy (labour migrants) and its security (foremost the Collective Security Treaty Organisation).

Perception in Kyrgyzstan is largely Russian-driven. Local Kyrgyz media in comparison to Russian is weak in size and output and is viewed as being run by corrupt politicians. International (Western) media has little traction and is perceived as 'immoral and alien' to most Kyrgyz. The Russian narrative by contrast is seen as 'familiar, trustworthy and a stable middle ground' between the 'corrupt' Kyrgyz and the immoral Western media.

Our research and report concludes with a series of 18 recommendations targeting various actors and as a means whereby the malign influence of Russian propaganda can be reduced by combating its influence and by providing more effective alternative sources of information.

This study is the outcome of the research (November 2022 to April 2023) implemented by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) in cooperation with the EUCAM programme of the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS).

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Research – Methodology

The study makes use of an inductive approach¹ informed by grounded theory principles.² The approach excludes hypotheses to be tested or theories to be proven, focusing instead on the gathered data. The coding process here is performed parallel to the analysis, avoiding biases, and assumptions and not trying to fit the data into pre-designed codebooks. This approach prioritises depth and meaning over the numerical representation of data. The narrative, choice of words, images and potential impact are central to this approach.

As part of the inductive methodology, the study in part leans on ‘thematic analysis’³ to present the broader narratives observed in Russian media. In addition, ‘discourse analysis’⁴ helps zoom in on the nuanced meaning behind the use of specific words, images and their combinations. The analysis of focus group discussions (FGDs) was done through a ‘constant comparison’⁵ approach, paying attention to both individual responses as well as the intra- and inter-group dynamics. When individual participants offered their answers, the analysis focused on the entire group’s reactions, such as nodding, affirmation, and disagreement. General responses were subsequently compared with those made in other groups.

Two research teams, managed by a primary investigator (PI) worked on the analysis of media content and FGDs over the period of four months (November 2022 to February 2023).

The content analysis team consisted of five local researchers in Kyrgyzstan with experience in media analysis. The focus group team consisted of two Kyrgyz researchers. The project was led by a local coordinator in Kyrgyzstan, an international coordinator in the Netherlands and a PI from Central Asia residing in the Netherlands. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it was decided to anonymise the research team.

The first phase of the study implied mapping of the major Russian media outlets that reach audiences in Kyrgyzstan. The idea was to select a diverse sample though include the main outlets that are significant in terms of volume and popularity in Kyrgyzstan. Given this logic, outlets such as Russia Today (RT) were not included in the study, as this international broadcaster is not specifically targeting audiences in Kyrgyzstan. This exercise resulted in the identification of six TV channels – Channel One, MIR, NTV, RBC, RenTV, VGTRK;⁶ an online news agency – Sputnik.kg; and three newspapers – Argumenti i Fakti, Komsomolskaya Pravda, and Moskovskij Komsomolets,

In the second phase, the research team began tracking these media outlets with a view to understand their reporting practices, such as thematic focus, volume, and publishing formats. The selected media can no longer be treated as purely traditional due to the convergence effect as they exist in multiple on- and offline formats.

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1. Thomas, D. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
 2. Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research (2nd ed.). Sage.
 3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
 4. Iedema, R. (2003). Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. *Visual Communication*, 2(1), 29–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002001751>
 5. Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Dickinson, W. B., Leech, N. L., & Zoran, A. G. (2009). A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800301>
 6. The All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company operates various television and radio channels. The current research analysed news pieces on Vesti news programme featured on VGTRK’s Russia 1, Russia 24, and RTR. Vesti also has its own website <https://www.vesti.ru/>

As such, TV channels are available via cable but their content can also be accessed via their websites and mobile applications. The same applies to newspapers that exist in printed and digital formats. Moreover, all these outlets run various social media accounts that make their content available to social media users in diverse formats; videos, text, images, links, etc. These social media products can penetrate users' feeds via other users and as an algorithmic decision, creating an echo chamber effect.

The research team collected news items published since Russia's full-scale war was launched against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and until the data collection start date of 1 December 2022. While collecting data, the research team occasionally reviewed material from the weeks leading up to the war and used this data as a reference point, but not in a structural manner.

Given the large volume of news items and the qualitative nature of the study, the team focused on carefully selected topics in the process of news collection. The most prominent and obvious topic was the invasion and war. Some media outlets break down their news thematically, and when this was not the case, search options were used to separate the news by topics and publication dates. The first round of analysis revealed a multitude of sub-topics packed into the general topic of the war: There are news pieces that focus on the West more broadly, on Russia itself and on former-Soviet states.

All news items were saved in the form of entire page screenshots and analysed with Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis. The research team organised vast amounts of qualitative data into condensed themes through three phases of coding – open, axial and selective. Open coding implied marking all observations with quick categories resulting in hundreds of initial codes. Axial coding process merged the vast open codes into groups, eliminating redundancy and repetition. Finally, selective coding condensed the findings into rich final themes presented in the current report.

Parallel to the analysis phase, a third phase procedure whereby on-the-ground perceptions of Russian media were researched through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A total of six FGDs were held in three cities; Bishkek in the north, the second-largest city of Osh in the south, and Naryn in the centre of the country (two gatherings per location). FGDs lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and attracted participants aged 18 to 60. A total of 58 people participated in the FGDs; 29 women and 29 men. Everyone participating in the FGDs was financially remunerated for their time. Participants were recruited via messengers and chat platforms (e.g. village chat, neighbourhood chat, etc.) and through "snowball" sampling. The research team selected participants from various professional, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In Bishkek FGDs were held in Russian; in Osh, a mix of Russian and Kyrgyz were used; and in Naryn discussions took place entirely in Kyrgyz. Discussion language was a choice of participants, and not that of the researcher team.



58
participants



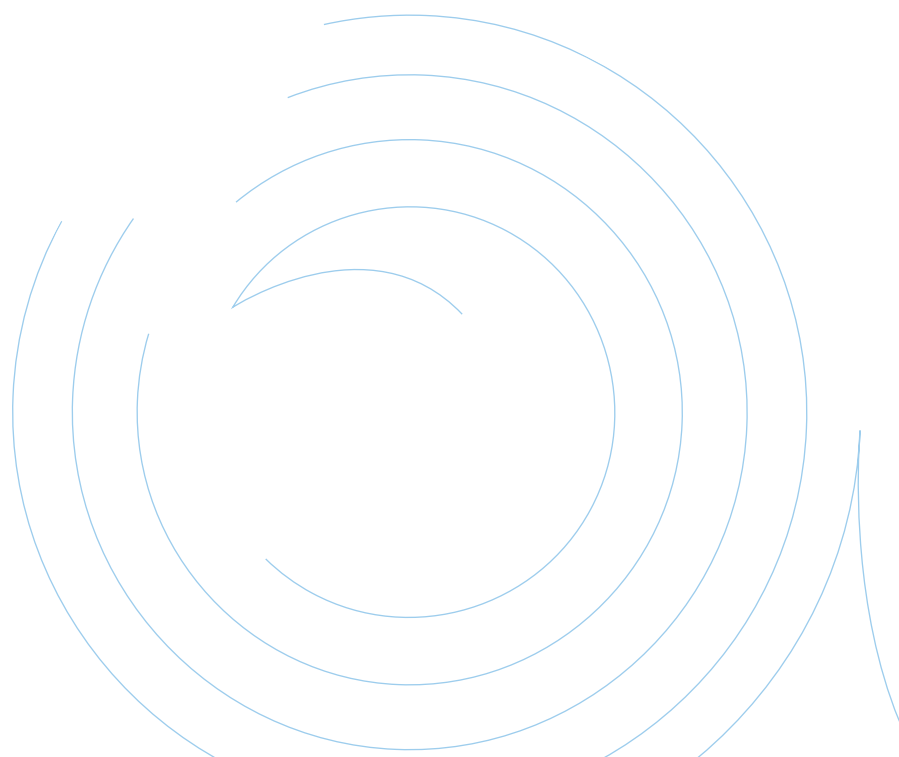
The FGDs were recorded both on audio and video, for the sake of not only generating transcripts but also having the ability to re-experience the discussions in the process of analysis.

In line with the ethical considerations and given the sensitivity of the topic as well as the political situation, the research team took all possible measures in accordance with its data management plan to protect the privacy of FGD participants by using their responses in broader terms and not revealing their identity beyond the age group they represent and FGD location when quoted directly.

The current report was drafted by the PI with the assistance of the Kyrgyzstan-based research team (delivering input and reviewing pieces of text) and the Netherlands-based coordinator (reviewing, editing, and summarising). The full report will also be published in abbreviated formats so as to reach different target groups.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

There are limitations to the current study. As a primarily qualitative work, the study identifies only certain models as a starting point for further investigation. The research focused solely on Russian state propaganda and does not include local outlets or those of other states such as China, Turkey, or Western countries. Future research should analyse the presence, nature and impact of propaganda flow from China, Turkey and other states, as well as from domestic outlets. When it comes to the perception side, the results of FGDs aid in identifying preliminary models but cannot be generalised to nationwide trends or patterns due to the inductive and qualitative nature of the study.



Part 1

Russian media in Kyrgyzstan

Sources and approach

The research here focuses on the most prominent Russian media outlets (with news components) available to audiences in Kyrgyzstan. The mapping resulted in six television channels (Channel One, RTR, NTV, RenTV, RBC, MIR), one internet news agency (Sputnik) and three newspapers (AiF, MK, KP). The selected media outlets are available in multiple formats, given their convergence and active presence on a plethora of social media platforms.



This section provides some basic background information on the selected media outlets, such as audiences, ownership and budgets. This part offers an analysis of Russian media reporting, summaries of their focus and the repertoire they offer.

Russian media outlets penetrate audiences in Kyrgyzstan through many channels with a large volume of news. Channel One, and VGTRK's RTR, that include major propaganda shows and news, are available to Kyrgyz audiences free of charge as the Kyrgyz government subsidises their broadcasts. MIR television and radio company products are subsidised through the Commonwealth of Independent States agreements. The Sputnik News Agency, and the three newspapers (AiF, MK, and KP) have local branches in Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, many Russian media outlet directors, producers and anchors fell under Ukrainian, EU, US and Canadian sanctions.

Finding accurate and up-to-date information about the budgets of individual Russian state media outlets is a challenge. The overall official annual budget allocation for state media in 2021 per Russia's Ministry of Finance was 113.9 billion rubles (roughly 1.4 billion USD) and in 2022 this number rose to

128,2 billion rubles (roughly 1.6 billion USD).⁷ Meanwhile, many Russian media outlet directors, producers and anchors fell under Ukrainian, EU, US and Canadian sanctions. In terms of coverage, estimating accurate viewership and readership is a challenge as well – yet it is important to include online audiences when considering the total reaching capacity of Russian media outlets. As such, Annexe 1 presents detailed information on the social media presence and following of selected media outlets.

The Ministry's draft budget law foreshadows a decline in the mass media budget for 2024 and 2025, although in the first quarter of 2022 alone, state media support in Russia is reported to have increased more than threefold compared with the same period in 2021.⁸

In terms of coverage, estimating accurate viewership and readership is a challenge as well. Relatively illustrative data can be drawn from

7. Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation. (2022). Бюджет для граждан 2023-2025. Проект федерального закона о федеральном бюджете на 2023 год и на плановый период 2024 и 2025 годов (Budget for citizens 2023-2025. Draft federal law on the federal budget for 2023 and for the planning period of 2024 and 2025). minfin.gov.ru. https://minfin.gov.ru/ru/document/?id_4=300588

8. The Moscow Times. (2022, April 12). Миллиарды на пропаганду. Расходы бюджета на госСМИ подскочили втрое на фоне войны (Billions for propaganda. Budget spending on state-run media tripled amid the war). <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/04/12/milliardi-na-propagandu-rashodi-byudzheta-na-gossmi-podskochili-vtroe-na-fone-voini-a19511>

social media based on the number of subscribers and followers. Annexe 1 presents detailed information on the social media presence and following of selected media outlets.

KTRK (aka NTRK and OTRK) is the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic and its largest television and radio broadcasting corporation. After the visit of a Russian delegation and negotiations with the director of KTRK in 2017, some Russian television channels were included in KTRK's social package⁹ and so are now subsidised under the state budget. Russian state television channels thus became de facto state channels in Kyrgyzstan. As such, they should now fall under the legislation of Kyrgyzstan that demands that at least 50 per cent of the content should be domestically produced and delivered in the Kyrgyz language. However, due to the fact that they are foreign, de jure they are governed through international agreements, which currently serves as a loophole to circumvent Kyrgyz law.¹⁰



Russian media in Kyrgyzstan differs in style, repertoires, dominant thematic focus and propaganda techniques. While some are giving the stage to Putin and Russian officials, others combine official messaging with select propagandists putting things in perspective for audiences.

Some feature the invited 'experts' who range from local Russian to Western (yet critical of the West) and Kyrgyz (endorsing Russia). Outlets also differ in the volume of information they produce. If a keyword search of 'Ukraine' generates 2,000 articles published in the selected period on Sputnik, on Channel One this number is 10 times greater.

All three newspapers (MK, KP and AiF) have local branches in Kyrgyzstan, but publish in Russian and fully focus on the Kremlin-led narrative. Newspapers are available online and in print. Sputnik News Agency also has a local branch in Kyrgyzstan and publishes in Russian and Kyrgyz. The fact that branches are local is likely the reason for the occasional use of the de-Sovietised version of the name of the country 'Kyrgyzstan' (especially on Sputnik) rather than the locally-resented colonial form 'Kirgiziia'.

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9. National Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic, (n.d.). Российские каналы ОРТ и РТР будут транслироваться в телесемействе КТРК (The Russian channels ORT and RTR will be broadcast as part of the KTRK TV family). <https://www.ktrk.kg/kg/post/13345/ru>
10. Aidarov, J. (2022, January 6). Все должны соблюдать правила выхода в эфир (Everyone must abide by the broadcasting rules). Radio Azattyk - Kyrgyz Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31642147.html>

Part 2

Message sent



Sources and approach

This section constitutes the outcome of the data collected, categorised and analysed. The findings are presented below in a descriptive manner. The narratives presented across Russian media outlets are either addressed in broad terms concerning the general themes and propaganda approaches or are linked to specific outlets and news pieces. The authors of the report have chosen not to annotate all items taken from the database, also because some

news items have been removed from the researched news outlets' digital archives over time. When an annotation is used, it refers to items that do not come from the 10 monitored outlets.

Russian propaganda can be structured in four clusters offering a view of the war in Ukraine, the position of the West, Russia's objectives, and Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations. In the first, Ukraine is portrayed as an artificial state where Nazis have taken over parts of the country. According to the Russian narrative, Ukraine is 'confused' in ignoring its Russian heritage and in looking westwards. In the second, the West is argued to be the underlying problem in Ukraine as well as oppressing people worldwide as it falls into moral decay. The West is depicted as 'collective' and as 'evil'. In the third narrative, Russia is the defender of moral values as it stands up to the West and offers help to those who are in need.

Russia is 'holy' as it shows others (Ukraine for instance) the 'righteous/moral' way. The fourth storyline on Kyrgyzstan is an extension of the Russian world while the notion of 'dependence' is regularly stressed. Within these broader themes, there are various sub-themes that vary per media outlet, as each news source has its own repertoire. The findings are presented both in broader summaries and as direct quotes of specific passages.

1. Confused Ukraine, the artificial Nazi state

None of the news pieces on Channel One use the word 'war' in the context of Russia and Ukraine, referring to it instead as 'a demilitarisation', 'denazification of Ukraine', 'operation in Ukraine', 'special operation', 'special operation to ensure peace', 'events in Ukraine', 'the situation around Ukraine', 'Ukrainian conflict', and so on. Channel One has periodically published articles, news, videos and documentaries about Ukraine being an artificially created state. Some vivid examples of such products include a film

called 'Project Ukraine', a geographical story claiming that Russia is reclaiming its territory, and a live-stream programme 'Time to Remember' where arguments are presented that Ukraine would be better off under Russian control and about Ukraine's supposed collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War (WWII). The storyline is often that Russia is not fighting against Ukraine or Ukrainians, but against different groups that pose a threat.

The enemy – referred to as nationalists, neo-Nazis and Banderites¹¹ – is depersonalized as dangerous, bestial and murderous, whose goal is to kill the Russians. Regular references to WWII help in creating a narrative of good versus evil where Russia once again has to fight against nazism in Europe.

From the start of the Russian war in Ukraine until the end of 2022, the demonisation of the Ukrainian army has intensified on Channel One, with reports on the alleged rape and cruelty of Ukrainian terrorists, extremists, radicals and militants. Ukrainian armed forces are described as mercenaries of all stripes, modern Nazis, drug addicts, pro-NATO, pro-bandera, spies, criminals, and fascist invaders. While doing so, Channel One simultaneously portrays the Ukrainian armed forces as weak, arguing that Ukrainian soldiers are ready to lay down their arms and surrender. Russia is portrayed as a safe haven providing all the necessary assistance to those who surrender.

Ukrainian authorities and the armed forces are framed as a threat not only to Russia but to Ukraine itself as well. News items use terminology such as ‘cleansing among civilians’, ‘militants strikes on civilians’ launched by the ‘Kyiv regime’ across the regions of Ukraine. News reports claim that the Ukrainian armed forces are attacking Donetsk, Mariupol and other cities, killing innocent civilians.



Headlines are designed to trigger emotions by focusing on the cruelty of Ukrainian soldiers towards children and the elderly.

Sputnik frames Ukraine’s government members as enemies of their own people, attacking civilians. Narratives such as ‘Ukrainian authorities gather people under one pretext or another, fire at them and offer Western media to record these bloody staged shootings’, ‘Kyiv authorities deliberately strike at peaceful Ukrainians’, ‘most of Mariupol was destroyed precisely by the Ukrainian military, who

understood that they will not return to the city’. One of the headlines on Sputnik reads ‘Kyiv is killing civilians and blaming Russia for it – they said at the UN Security Council’. The headline is misleading as the Security Council meeting was not formal and the statement was made by Maxim Grigoriev – director of a fictional Russian NGO, a propaganda website named the Foundation for the Study of Problems of Democracy.



The image of Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Sputnik.kg is constructed in the key of ‘comedian’, ‘jester’, ‘actor’, ‘drug addict’, ‘hysterical’, ‘eternally dissatisfied and capricious child’. All while Putin is framed as a leader with a firm position who ‘demands’, and ‘warns’.

This image of Putin echoed in the FGDs, as participants acknowledged his confident leadership as a positive factor.

Channel One also bashes Zelenskyy, portraying him as a beggar constantly asking Europe and the US for money. A card-stacking propaganda technique is applied here where the truth is presented selectively and facts are manipulated when tied with lies. As such, Zelenskyy has been asking the West for support amid Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine indeed, yet Channel One reports that financial support from Western countries is pocketed by Zelenskyy. Europe is framed as tired of the colossal spending on military aid and refugees from Ukraine. The narrative of a tired Europe is also picked up by Sputnik.kg. Initially, both Channel One and Sputnik.kg reported the same news about the supply of weapons and military equipment from the US and Europe. Yet, six months into the war, the narrative changes as Sputnik.kg begins to report that ‘the West is reducing the supply of weapons to Ukraine’, ‘Europe is tired of supplying weapons to Ukraine’, ‘Europe is tired of Ukrainian refugees’, and so on.

11. Named after a faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists led by Stephan Banderite

MK has been instrumental in narrating Russia's war against Ukraine, publishing a daily chronicle of the 'special military operation in Ukraine', in which there is an expression of joy over the blackouts in Ukraine and the large-scale destruction of infrastructure. At the same time, measures are taken to protect the image of Russia and reports of the destruction of infrastructure in Ukraine are supported with narratives that with the arrival of Russia, the infrastructure gets reconstructed and improved. In the daily chronicle, MK highlights a Russia that is winning battles while cases of withdrawal are presented as strategic, surprising the enemy.

MK actively promotes participation in the special military operation for residents of Russian regions far away from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and including ethnic minorities. They are offered benefits in hospitals, kindergartens, deferment of bank payments, deduction of transport tax, and even free firewood. Sputnik.kg also often reported that those mobilised received a payment of 195,000 rubles (about €2,500), potentially informing audiences in Kyrgyzstan that joining the Russian armed forces is a profitable endeavour.

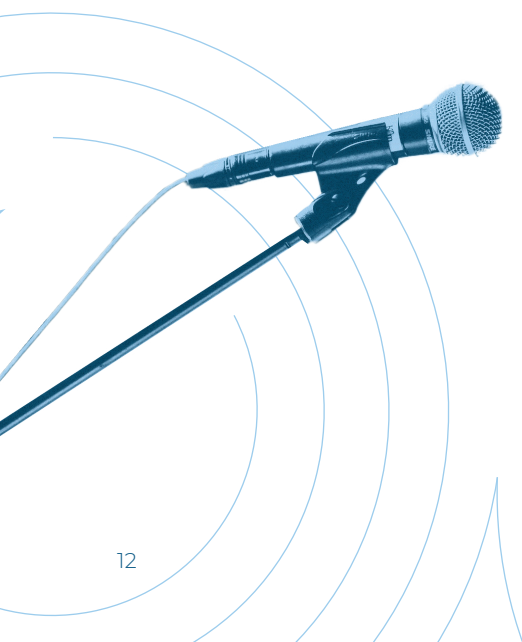
When narrating the war, MK refrains from naming specific forces or individuals involved, instead noting that Ukraine is being attacked by Russian drones and missiles. In the rare reports when individual members of the Russian armed forces are mentioned, MK stressed the heroic side of dying for your country. No information is provided about Russian casualties, while losses among the Ukrainian armed forces and the 'liquidation of the Ukronazis' appear daily in the chronicle.



FROM PROTECTING RUSSIANS TO 'WE HAD NO CHOICE'

The portrayal of Ukraine, its people and its political leadership has undergone an evolution in the Russian media discourse. While the main narrative of accusing Ukrainians of neonazism remains a constant factor, the justification of the full-scale war has changed over time. Initially, there were a lot of stories about the protection of Russophone residents and those who affiliate themselves with Russia from the aggression of the Kyiv regime. The same mantra-like phrases accusing 'Ukrainian Nazis' of 'killing the children of Donbas for eight years' have been repeated across media outlets. As the war progressed, the 'Russia had no choice' narrative focused on the benefits of the special military operation amid the potential threat of the use of nuclear and biological weapons by Ukraine. Finally, the justification of the full-scale war became framed as a mission to save Ukraine from the 'colonial invaders'. The invaders, in this case, are the West represented by the US, NATO and the EU.

On RBC the war language becomes more emotionally loaded over the monitoring period and starts appealing to the patriotic feelings of Russians, portraying them as defenders of the 'suffering people'. At the same time, new reports continue dehumanising and demonising Ukrainians. The coverage of the Bucha massacre is an illustrative example of Russia's misinformation and hate speech. Reacting to the global media reports on mass killings of civilians there, Russian media call these reports 'fake' and a 'product of Ukrainian propaganda'. On RBC, news that Bucha events are fake come together with a warning about criminal responsibility for fakes and the discreditation of the Russian army and its special military operation. RBC reports that Russia's communication censor Roskomnadzor ordered the media to use only official Russian sources when reporting on Ukraine. In line with these measures, RBC reports that the mayor of Ukraine's Chernivtsi will be examined by Russia's Investigation Committee on spreading fakes.



Such reports position Russia as not only the source of truth but also a country that has the power and the right to investigate state authorities in Ukraine. Sputnik.kg also reacts to Bucha in the key of accusing Ukraine of spreading propaganda. Relying on local ‘experts’ such as Artur Medetbekov, chairman of the public association of veterans ‘Antiterror-Alfa’ and ex-deputy chairman of the State Committee for National Security, who is featured in the news claiming that Bucha was an example of manipulation of public opinions with the use of progressive technology. Some outlets report contradictory narratives. As such, like others, KP initially frames Bucha as a planned production invented to initiate and justify the genocide of ethnic Russians. Yet some KP reports also contradict this narrative and claim that civilians in Bucha were shot by Nazis.

Akin to Channel One, Sputnik.kg makes a claim that Russia had no choice but to ‘defend itself

and Ukraine.’ Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Peskov, Sergey Naryshkin, Dmitry Medvedev, Sergei Shoigu, Maria Zakharova, Aleksey Pushkov, and Dmitry Polyansky are among the most often quoted. Yet Sputnik.kg also features Kyrgyz experts when covering Ukraine. Some vivid examples are news articles claiming that Ukraine is preparing biological, genetic and nuclear weapons that can be used against Kyrgyzstan, featuring a ‘security expert and veteran of special forces Nurlan Dosaliev’. Dosaliev is quoted stating that ‘nationalists in Ukraine were working very seriously to create a ‘dirty’ nuclear bomb’. The ‘expert’ goes on to link COVID-19 with a ‘US-sponsored’ bio lab in China’s Wuhan that he considers responsible for spreading the virus as a strategy to weaken Russia and China. Sputnik.kg accuses the US of starting the war to which Russia had to react. Sputnik claims that the US started this war to destroy Russia and to sell weapons to Ukraine.

2. The ‘Evil West’ as global troublemaker



THE WEST, UNDER US LEADERSHIP, MANIPULATED UKRAINE AND PROVOKED RUSSIA

Western powers, led by the United States, are accused of manipulating Ukraine into becoming an enemy of Russia. Europe is often portrayed as a victim of US manipulation as well, although it is discursively included in the collective West. The collective West is present across all the identified themes and incorporates NATO and even UN institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Committee, for instance. The collective West is blamed for imposing its values on other states to achieve global dominance. As the war in Ukraine progressed, this narrative emphasises that Russia is a defender of global multipolarity and its attack on Ukraine is a preventive measure that challenges the Western-imposed value system for the sake of the rest of the world. Yet further, Channel One reports claim that the Kyiv regime, with the support of the West, has criminal plans to use chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Channel One frames the US as the number one enemy of Russia. Various labels are used in relation to the US for its demonisation. When Channel One reports on the US, the word ‘war’ is used in the contexts such as ‘the US started this war’, and ‘the US has an interest in this war’. A rich share of reporting is dedicated to US President Joe Biden. Reports use words such as ‘insane’, ‘incapacitated’, ‘unscrupulous’, ‘weirdness in public’, ‘family skeletons’, ‘lost in time’, ‘war criminal’, ‘holy war Biden’, ‘crazy’, and ‘chief beneficiary of the current war’. These narratives echoed in the FGDs as participants expressed their perception of Biden as inadequate. While the war is portrayed as beneficial to the US, anti-Russian sanctions are reported to be hurting Europe, especially amid the ‘energy crisis’.



In the context of anti-Russian sanctions, Channel One highlighted that this was an opportunity to develop Russia’s potential and establish cooperation with other countries.

VGTRK's Vesti also picked up this narrative, reporting, for instance, that amid tourist trips to Europe becoming an impossible endeavour for Russian citizens, local destinations such as Yamal are patriotic alternatives. For people who still want to go abroad, destinations in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) states are portrayed as 'open' to Russian citizens. Western sanctions are further framed as harmful for the imposing nations, rather than for Russia. Vesti reports that Germany is freezing without Russian gas, while Poland is suffering without Russian coal. Financial problems in the UK are tied to the loss of access to Russian gold, and the freezing of Russian assets in Europe is presented as a threat to the entire dollar system. While Vesti is vocal and critical of unfriendly states, it identifies friendly nations such as Belarus, China, North Korea and Hungary. RBC offers a more extensive list with broader references to 'former Soviet states' and EEU members, as well as India, Pakistan, Serbia and Venezuela.

Curiously, perhaps amid the worsened economic situation in Russia, AiF reports feature informal leaders such as actors, arguing that 'poverty is not a vice.' The repackaging of Soviet-era and newer artists as propaganda voices is a common practice across Russian media. As such, since the beginning of the war, KP praises the artists who in spite of Western sanctions continue supporting the motherland. At the same time, media outlets slam on those artists who resented the war and accuse them of treason.



In the first months of the war, Channel One was neutral regarding Europe, reporting on phone calls between European leaders and Putin. Some news reports even stressed the support of some European countries for Russia's actions. Eventually, countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the Netherlands were heavily criticised for supplying weapons to Ukraine. Words such as 'fear', 'decline of Europe', 'gloomy prospects for the EU', 'crisis', 'inflation' and 'self-destruction' became frequent in the reports. The economic situation in Western countries is described by Channel One as having 'features of a natural disaster', where a market collapse and recessions are just around the corner. When reporting on gas prices, some of the information presented is true, as countries across Europe experienced a sharp increase in fuel costs after Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.



Channel One relies on a card-stacking technique, where a part is true but the full picture is manipulated. As such, Channel One reports that Russia is not to blame for invading Ukraine, rather, Western states are shooting themselves in the foot by imposing anti-Russian sanctions.

MK's recurring theme focuses on Western sanctions against Russia. Akin to Channel One, news pieces in MK argue that sanctions will hit the initiators themselves and that the collective West is falling apart. Moreover, MK has stressed that Ukraine has become the cause of discord between Western powers. Western values are described as 'terrible', 'destructive' and 'unnatural' by promoting LGBT tolerance. MK regularly praises China as a power working to unify humanity, while the West is working to split it.

In reaction to Western media reports on Russia's armed forces shelling cities across Ukraine, Russian media reacted by accusing the collective West and the government of Ukraine of killing civilians.

For instance, Vesti writes the following headlines 'Two killed, three wounded: Donetsk is fired at from the American howitzers'.



Russia is regularly portrayed as a safe haven for refugees fleeing war. News reports talk about how refugees from Ukraine are accepted in cities across Russia and offered housing. It is reported that children are sent to sanatoriums and recreational camps.

The anti-Western narrative is not limited to public speeches and news reports in Russia. RBC reports that topics such as Moscow-Kyiv relations, Western pressure on Russia and the military operation will be included in the school curriculum via textbooks edited by Vladimir Medinsky – presidential aide and chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society. The state is also investing in mass culture propaganda products, as news reports from the Ministry of Culture's movie production contest call on socially significant themes about global geopolitical and social changes in the history of modern Russia.

3. Holy Russia and 'its' world

A major tool of Russia's soft power and influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is the Russian language. Russian is framed as unifying for the CIS countries and as the only language that is understood by all member states. Whenever attempts are made to use the local languages instead of Russian, there is an emotional counter-reaction in the Russian media. As such, Vesti journalists have been referring to the moves prioritising domestic languages over Russian as a 'catastrophe', 'total cleansing' and 'anti-Russian measures'. When Latvia, for instance, restricted Russian TV broadcasting and made Russian language classes facultative, Russian officials and journalists labelled these measures as Russophobia, chauvinistic censorship and media genocide.



THE COLLECTIVE WEST IS PORTRAYED AS EVIL AND 'SATANIC', PROMOTING 'UNNATURAL' VALUES, SUCH AS HOMOSEXUALITY.

The West is framed as a power involved in a secret global government whose aim is to promote homosexuality and drugs. These narratives also came up during FGDs when participants were asked to describe what associations they have with 'Western media', as many described them as promoting alien and immoral values such as LGBT. RenTV portrays Europe as degenerating and fading because of the popularity of LGBT and the habit of people choosing not to have children. Feminist ideas are presented as a tool to destroy families with traditional values as a way of countering overpopulation. Reports claim that the legalisation of soft drugs in Europe and the US is a way of keeping the population docile and obedient. These narratives are tied to Ukraine as reports claim that the West manipulates and seduces Ukraine into its immoral approaches. Some reports take it as far as framing Ukraine as a masonic project.

Russian propaganda after 24 February 2022 is a combination of narratives that have been circulating during the various terms of Putin as president. They are now compiled into a single mass and bombarded at audiences through a plethora of news and talk show programmes. Starting with references to Russia's tsarist history, propaganda draws parallels with Putin being a collector of the lost Russian lands, a security and dignity guarantor and a mastermind of national ideology. The Soviet period is presented as the golden age – the lost paradise that was stolen by the evil West. In the Soviet period, Russia fed its member republics and continues doing so now. Some republics, however, are not grateful and become confused, opting to partner with the seductive evil West. Drawing parallels with WWII, propaganda frames Ukraine's siding with the West as nazism.



THE WEST HAS DONE THE SAME THINGS IN OTHER COUNTRIES THAT RUSSIA IS DOING NOW IN UKRAINE

A discursive contradiction concerns the demonisation of the collective West on the one hand and copycatting the condemned activities on the other, through a 'you have done it, so why can't we' rhetoric.

Relying on Putin's speeches and expert opinions, MK creates a narrative that the United States has already set a precedent for the use of nuclear weapons when they attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki. MK also repeatedly reminds the West of the NATO bombing of Serbia's infrastructure: 'Western representatives forget how the alliance once boasted of the destruction of infrastructure facilities during the aggression against Yugoslavia (and not only)'. Common narratives: 'NATO has come close to our borders', 'NATO generals dreamed of turning Crimea into their military foothold.' In these narratives, news outlets rely on Putin's speech in which he accuses NATO of bombing one of the European capitals – namely Belgrade.

AiF seeks to put these ideas on NATO into a broader perspective, discussing competition for global dominance. The newspaper, for instance, writes, 'The desire of the West to impose its civilisational values on other countries reflects the desire of the transatlantic alliance of the United States and the European Union to take a leading position in the geopolitical space, ensuring the interests of transnational companies'.

Russia is there to protect the good people and get rid of the bad. The West is fundamentally immoral, homosexual and even practicing bestiality. It is now time for Russia to reclaim its power and the global position that was stolen from in 1991 when state enemies like Gorbachev betrayed the country and allowed the West to destroy it.



All the frustrations of the 1990s are framed in the context of Putin restoring historical justice and re-empirealising Russia. Countries like Kyrgyzstan better support this, otherwise, the consequences are the same as in Ukraine.

4. Dependent Kyrgyzstan is a default continuation of Russia

Some Russian media outlets systematically use 'Kirgiziia' as a colonial version of the name of the country, which has triggered outrage among civil society leaders in Kyrgyzstan. Russia in relation to Kyrgyzstan is presented as a helping hand, a guiding elder and a superior entity that can both support and punish when necessary. For instance, reports state that Russia forgives migrants for previous violations and allows them to return to the country for work. Russia is presented as the key trade and economic partner as well as a security guarantor; Russia is the centre to which Central Asian states gravitate.



CARROT AND STICK: RUSSIA AS A GUARANTOR OF SECURITY AND PROSPERITY

On 26 February 2022, the Russian government's official website Kremlin.ru states 'Held at Kyrgyzstan's initiative, the telephone conversation between Vladimir Putin and President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov focused on the situation with the special military operation carried out by Russia in Ukraine. Sadyr Japarov said that Kyiv was responsible for derailing the Minsk agreements and expressed his support for Russia's decisive actions to protect civilians in Donbas. Vladimir Putin thanked the President of Kyrgyzstan for his principled solidarity. The two presidents reaffirmed their mutual commitment to strengthening the strategic partnership and allied relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan in all areas.'¹²

MIR, MK, Sputnik.kg and Channel One picked up the news and reported that 'the President of Kyrgyzstan supported Russia's actions to protect Donbas'. Meanwhile, no official statements that Kyrgyzstan supports Russia's actions came from Bishkek. However, there was

a statement on the country's neutrality that was made on 9 March 2022.¹³ Given the absence of a firm and coherent reaction to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's reports on unconditional support were absorbed by audiences and echoed in the focus group discussions.

RBC coverage of Kyrgyzstan and Russia-Central Asia ties focuses on politics, economy and security. The Western threat narrative is also present. The common story in RBC reports is that Central Asia needs Russia as 'a third party to resolve inner conflicts', as an 'economic partner', a 'strategic partner' and a 'political ally' that can save these republics from harmful external influences.



Central Asian countries are depicted as dependent, and lacking their own agency to act in the international arena in light of the 'geopolitical crisis' between Russia and the West.

On RBC, the clash of geopolitical interests with the West in Central Asia is expressed in such wording as 'USAID aims to alienate Central Asia from Russia', and that the US is 'pressurising Central Asia with secondary sanctions'.

While Russia is generally framed as a guarantor of security and prosperity in Central Asia more broadly and in Kyrgyzstan in particular, some news reports on KP take a threatening tone in reaction to a potential collaboration between the EU and Kyrgyzstan within an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). Using examples of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, KP notes that Kyrgyzstan will be politically and economically dependent on the West,

12. President of Russia, (2022). Telephone conversation with President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67869>

13. Roziev, I. (2022, March 10). Садыр Жапаров: Мы должны занимать нейтральную позицию в войне России с Украиной (Sadyr Japarov: We must take a neutral position in the war between Russia and Ukraine). Kloop News. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/03/09/sadyr-zhaporov-my-dolzny-zanimat-nejtralnyu-pozitsiyu-v-vojne-rossii-s-ukrainoj/>

while warning that such an agreement could affect relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, promising potential troubles within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Reports in the MK actively promote the idea that the youth of Kyrgyzstan should be saved from the destructive influences of the West, social networks, and globalisation. Arguments are made for the necessity of installing military-patriotic values in the youth. In these reports, social networks are framed as sources of radicalism and extremism, while compulsory military education in schools is justified by the need to protect the country in the future. 'Now our youth is being implanted with ideas from the outside, and their goal is not the development of a strong and independent Kyrgyzstan', MK quotes Azamat Temirkulov, a political scientist known for his address to Putin during the Batken events in April 2022. Temirkulov asked Putin and the CSTO to take all possible diplomatic, and if necessary, military measures in order to stop the escalation of the conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Six months later, he was appointed head of the department for analysis and monitoring of reforms in the presidential administration. Amid the border conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the CSTO is framed as an entity that is ready to help. Russia is portrayed as a generous giving hand, supporting the 'former Soviet Republic'. MK stresses that in exchange for Russia's financial support, Kyrgyzstan supports the 'Russian World'.



ABSENCE OF A STATE IDEOLOGY IN KYRGYZSTAN

The absence of a state ideology is framed as the reason for 'losing everything' in Kyrgyzstan, including sovereignty. Russian media make their own points and rely on local experts to emphasize the need to create initiatives for the resilience of alien ideologies, such as those penetrating from the West. These narratives also echoed in the FGDs when participants mentioned the need to work with young people and raise them as patriots. FGD participants also stressed the need for a national ideology and state propaganda in Kyrgyzstan.

MIR reports on the fruitful and mutually-beneficial relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. There is a narrative that Russia is helping Kyrgyzstan in every possible way: 'The Russian educational project is ready to increase the number of teachers from the Russian Federation to teach in Kyrgyzstan', 'Volunteer teachers will teach in remote villages of Kyrgyzstan', 'Kyrgyzstan hosts a week of Russian education', 'Heart help: Russian cardiac surgeons operate free of charge on children in Kyrgyzstan'. Russia is framed as offering guidance and a helping hand to Kyrgyzstan, while the latter is a recipient state looking up to Russia. The EEU is framed as a promising cooperation platform that moves Kyrgyzstan forward.

Covering the armed conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in September 2022, MIR relied on information from the official press releases of the two states, yet Russia is portrayed as a conflict mediator and the CSTO as a security guarantor. The CSTO was also praised in the context of the 'January 2022 events' in Kazakhstan as 'a successful operation and proof to the world that the unity of CSTO member states is a serious force to be reckoned with'.

On Sputnik.kg Russian-Kyrgyz relations are framed as strong and beneficial. Words and phrases such as 'cooperation', 'friends', 'friendly peoples', and "Russia helps' are used in the news reports. Sputnik.kg also extensively portrays Russia as a country that educates Kyrgyz people through its various support programmes, universities and exchanges. There is a project called 'Russian Teacher Abroad', the purpose of which is to send Russian teachers to Kyrgyzstan for a certain period of time to teach. Sputnik.kg writes that 'Russia is helping Kyrgyzstan teacher shortages'.

AiF is active in using major Soviet-era celebrations to tie Kyrgyzstan to Russia. Of course, the mega event is WWII victory day celebrated on 9 May. In the article 'The Immortal Regiment', AiF listed all the events organized in the country. Some of these events triggered reaction from the State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan and the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced a ban on marching in military uniforms with the 'Z' symbol, which is used as a sign of support for Russia's war.



LABOUR MIGRANTS

Vesti news reports covering Central Asian labour migrants tend to be negative in tone. Migrants from Central Asia are often presented as parties involved in criminal cases, various scams, thefts, robberies, murders, and rape. Images that accompany such publications feature migrants wearing working uniforms and dirty clothes. They are portrayed as aggressive criminals, with images showing them fighting or being detained by law enforcement officers. RBC reports also portray labour migrants from Central Asia as a monolith and homogeneous social group, employed in physically demanding labour.

On RBC, the othering of labour migrants is performed through a focus on their fraudulent and criminal nature manifested in such acts as acquiring fake Russian language certificates and registrations, while also engaging in fights, assaulting women, and producing counterfeit beverages. News reports continuously call for stricter control over migrants who are referred to as 'gastarbeiters', 'illegals', 'people from the near abroad', and 'newcomers'. Migrants are criticised for poor integration and low knowledge of the Russian language. RBC reports claim that they construct ethnic enclaves in Russia presenting a security threat when destructive radical movements recruit members within these enclaves.

At the same time, the new economic realities in Russia as well as the outflow of people amid the mobilisation have led to a slight shift in the narrative.



From being framed as a threat to the local labour market, Central Asians turned into a desired force both in agriculture and warfare.

Without mentioning the mobilisation exodus and instead blaming workforce shortages on the covid-19 pandemic and travel restrictions,

by November 2022, RBC started making a case for the high demand for Central Asian labour migrants in Russia.

There are several conflicting narratives on RBC as labour migrants are framed as economically beneficial for Russia and at the same time as a burden on the economy when their wives and elderly parents come along and claim state benefits. Another narrative contradiction concerns foreign fighters. While RBC reported on the voluntary mobilisation of Central Asian labour migrants as an act of gratitude to Russia, they also cover the case of Kyrgyz authorities arresting their citizens for fighting on the side of Ukraine against Russia. RBC reiterated several times that participating in conflicts abroad equals to terrorism. Hand in hand with this, RBC reports rely on testimonial-type accounts where members of the Uzbek diaspora are claiming that it is their duty to pay back to Russia for the hospitality and opportunity by joining the armed forces and fighting against Ukraine.

MK extensively covers mobilisation and the role of migrants in it. Akin to RBC, MK also reported that the Armenian, Kyrgyz and Tajik diasporas in Moscow supported mobilisation. Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin is portrayed as a hero protecting ethnic Russians and Muscovites by using migrants to fill the mobilisation quotas. Those mobilised are portrayed in MK as unemployed people whose families would only benefit through their service in the army.

MK continuously dehumanises Central Asian labour migrants, focusing on the dangers that they bring and their illegal status in Russia. Phrases such as 'cheap labour', 'illegals', 'convicts' and 'child molesters' dominate the narrative. At the same time, amid the image of dangerous extremists, there are calls for migrants to join the Russian armed forces.

NTV also portrays labour migrants as alien and dangerous. A St. Petersburg deputy was detained for selling false documents to illegal migrants, 'Migrants forced a resident of Nizhny Novgorod to move out of her own apartment', 'Gastarbeiters slaughtered a sheep on the territory of a Nizhny Novgorod school', 'Drunken migrants beat a Muscovite on a playground', etc.



FLEEING MOBILISATION

The coverage of those avoiding mobilisation in Central Asia is scarce. RBC describes the arrival of Russians fleeing mobilisation as profitable for Central Asian economies and the development of the service and hospitality industry. News reports focus on the inflow of cash and human capital, whereas the risks of social tensions and economic turbulence are downplayed. On RBC, Russian dodgers were labelled as 'highly qualified', and the countries of their destination were described as 'easy to adapt', 'welcoming and sympathetic'.

MK reports that a record number of people left Russia between September and November 2022, heading to Central Asia, Turkey, and Abkhazia. However, the reports remain silent about the cause of this exodus.

RenTV describes Russians fleeing mobilisation as 'card tourists' and 'runaways from the motherland'. Card tourism refers to the practice of going abroad to open a bank account and acquire foreign credit cards amid the anti-Russian sanctions. In other reports, RenTV refers to those who fled Russia as 'runaway human rights defenders and pseudo experts' who are spreading fakes about special military operations.

MIR portrays Russians in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan as tourists. There is no mention of running from mobilisation.

NTV's coverage is particularly curious as it initially reacted with severe criticism of those who fled Russia in the first wave amid the invasion of Ukraine. NTV used such language as 'Russia cleansed itself' by getting rid of the betrayers who ran away. One of the talk shows, *The Meeting Place*, released a special programme called 'Cleansing Session' in which they proposed to divide people who fled into three categories: the frightened - those who can return if they want to; the traitor - those who disagree with 'their own' and conduct anti-Russian propaganda; and criminals - those who left and support Ukraine and its armed forces. NTV accused those running from the mobilisation of creating a humanitarian catastrophe on the Russian border and questioned whether those betraying the motherland at a difficult moment should be punished.

If other platforms focused on either the harms to Russia or the benefits to the host countries that people running from mobilisation bring about, AiF reported on the difficulties that Russians face in Kyrgyzstan. An article titled 'Tired of stupid plov. There is a new wave of people leaving the Russian Federation. But does the foreign land meet them kindly?' discourages Russians from going to Central Asia to flee from mobilisation, as the region is full of difficulties.

Part 3

Message received

Sources and approach

Focus group discussions were analysed at three levels – individual, intra-group and inter-group. The individual analysis focused on specific passages expressed by participants. The intra-group analysis considered moments of consensus and disagreements between participants of specific age groups in the given locations. Finally, the inter-group analysis was made to draw some broader conclusions and compare the three regions.



Findings are presented here as a narrative with direct quotes from participants serving as examples of the discourse.

The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) resulted in rich insights into people's media consumption practices and perceptions of respective outlets and narratives. The findings below are presented in six clusters: information sources; propaganda; perceptions of Russian media;

war against Ukraine; perceptions of Western media; and perceptions of Kyrgyz media. The sections below follow the chronological flow of the FGDs.

1. Information sources

Focus group participants in all three locations mentioned social networks as a primary channel for obtaining information and news. Television comes in second, while some participants listen to the radio and read newspapers occasionally. If they want to get an update on current events, participants simply go on their smartphones and get information via social media.

All age groups named Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Telegram and YouTube as platforms for obtaining news and other information. News on WhatsApp and Telegram penetrate via various groups participants are members of. Instagram was most often mentioned as a source of news and information by the age group 18-34 in all regions. Facebook is a preferred platform for the 35+ age group. Some participants explained that on social networks, they are subscribed to the news pages of local media such as Kaktus, Kloop, Azattyk, Akipress, News.kg, and Kabar. Azattyk is an interesting case in this regard as it is treated as local media in spite of being a local branch of US-government-sponsored Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. At the same time, other participants were unable to name any specific news portals that penetrate their social media, noting a passive exposure to the news with no consideration of the source.



I'm not looking for them (news) on purpose. But if they appear in my feed, I can read them.

FGD_Naryn_18-34



I just go to social networks, for example, on Instagram, I scroll through and there are news portals, there are news channels. They are easy to read. Yes, they accidentally come across and I read them, but I don't follow them purposefully.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

What I like about TikTok is that it selects all the relevant news for me based on my interests.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

Those participants who purposefully searched for specific news explained that they simply Google an event or a person and also do not pay any attention to the information source.



I write a request to Google and several links come up which I follow and read. But at the same time, I do not pay attention to what source I am following.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

These reactions indicate the role algorithms play when they make suggestions, helping certain news items and platforms penetrate the feeds of specific audiences or bringing specific sources to the top of search results. A search engine such as Google is treated by participants as a source in itself rather than a search tool when they do not pay attention to the sources of information.

FGDs revealed that television remains not only a relevant source of information for some participants but sometimes also serves as a fact-checking tool. Some participants associate television as something they merely use as background noise and as a form of entertainment predominantly for the elderly and children, yet others explained that if they doubt any news that they see online, they turn to television for verification.



I trust the news on television. I don't know why this is happening. If it's on TV, I basically trust it 100 per cent.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

...Sometimes there is some fake information, and you don't know whether to believe it or not. But if it is shown on TV, you start to think it's really true...

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

I also trust [television], because I also read a lot on the Internet. In the evening, when I'm cooking, I turn on the TV and always watch the Russian channels RTR or ORT. After all, I compare this information and trust the Russian media more.

FGD_Bishkek_35+



...I trust the news that I get from TV, newspapers and magazines more, and I don't always trust the Internet.

FGD_Naryn_35+

I would also like to note that there can also be false information on the phone, and verified information is released on TV, because I can also sit down and write on the phone, 'the war has begun', etc., and people will believe it. And on TV, there is basically verified information, and this is the plus side of TV...

FGD_Osh_18-34

Considering the magnitude of Russian propaganda both on- and offline in Kyrgyzstan, the idea that 'fact-checking' takes place online or via television is equally worrisome if sources that are used to 'debunk' and clarify information are actually the primary source of disinformation.

There is a diversity of practices when it comes to news consumption. All age groups in Naryn and Osh and the 35+ group in Bishkek mentioned watching Russian television such as Channel One and RTR. In all three locations some members of the 18-34 age group named BBC, DW and Euronews as information sources. There were participants in Osh and Bishkek who do not watch television at all, as they get all the information on their smartphones. Participants of both age groups in Osh and Naryn read local newspapers Nur, Super Info, Kut Bilim, and Tenir-Too. The 35+ group in Naryn believes that newspapers publish reliable information, unlike news online.



It is easier and more convenient to read on the phone, for example, you just scroll on the screen, if you don't like some news, you skip it and continue to scroll, and newspapers require more time. But newspapers cover reliable information, they bear some responsibility for the reliability of the publication, and Internet news may not always be reliable. Despite this, we still read online news, hoping that at least 10 per cent of what we read will be reliable.

FGD_Naryn_35+

Participants in Bishkek (35+) and Naryn (both age groups) receive information via Russia's Radio Mir. The radio is a convenient source of information due to their occupation; some prepare dumplings while tuning in, others drive taxis and listen to the radio in the background. Another important source of information and news is relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances. This was mentioned more often by respondents from Naryn (35+) and Osh (18-34).

As for the language in which they receive information, respondents from Bishkek (both age groups) more often read/watch the news and receive information in Russian, FGD participants from Naryn and Osh in Kyrgyz or in Kyrgyz and Russian.

FGDs revealed that smartphones are playing an increasingly important role. First, if media penetrate people's phones, then the online presence and active posting of content can increase the chances of these media reaching audiences. Second, there is a role algorithms play as they select the news that they deem most relevant to a particular user based on previous search interests. At the same time, traditional media remain not only relevant but are trusted more than online news.

2. Propaganda

FGDs revealed that some participants have a basic understanding of what propaganda is and explained that it is a tool for forming public opinion or manipulation. Participants also noted that there is always some person or a group of people responsible.



In the past, by media, we understood television, radio, and newspapers. Now we have the Internet. Journalism now works according to the market economy. If people demand something, they [journalists] publish it. They are not interested in whether this information is useful, whether there is harm from it, or what the impact is. They are more interested in their site becoming popular so they can earn more money. Television also works to raise its rating and thus earn money. Bloggers also do this, they release what the people demand and they are not interested in whether this will harm someone or if children will read it.

FGD_Osh_35+

The media are no longer independent, they are controlled by someone.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

A respondent from Bishkek cited as an example that in the US there is propaganda around the American Dream to attract cheap labour.

Participants in Naryn understand propaganda as election campaigning. In all discussions, the majority of participants expressed the view that there is a significant influence of foreign propaganda in Kyrgyzstan. Some have noted that local and foreign propaganda is equally powerful. Foreign propaganda is often understood as Western propaganda of LGBT issues and feminism.



Despite the fact that there is propaganda from both Russia and the West, it seems to me that more propaganda comes from the West. In the past, for example, when I was still in school, there was no such thing as LGBT in our country. Now, through Western films or TV shows, everything is openly shown.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

Participants also noted the presence of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan, but only one person from Bishkek was expressively critical of it. This participant explained that Russia relies on propaganda to justify and legitimise its war in Ukraine. This opinion was rather an exception than a rule across all FGDs.



PROPAGANDA NECESSARY FOR THE STATE

Some participants perceive propaganda as a positive and necessary phenomenon for the state. Respondents complained that in Kyrgyzstan, the state conducts weak propaganda and more propaganda is needed to promote patriotism, national values and ideology, a healthy lifestyle, and proper upbringing of children.



I would like to see propaganda in Kyrgyzstan. At least the propaganda of patriotism, education, culture, so that we as a nation could grow in cultural understanding and have a sense of patriotism. Why? Because our children are not proud that they are Kyrgyz. I want them to be proud. Just promote patriotism for their homeland, for their people without fanaticism... For the sake of patriotism for their homeland, for raising their spirit.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

I want to add here. Now we must promote the correct upbringing of children. From an early age children need to discern what is right and what is wrong.

FGD_Naryn_18-34



And we catch all this garbage from the west. Although it is out of the corner of our eye, we see that there is a gay or a lesbian in every movie. Even Disney announced that they will be in cartoons. Peppa Pig has an LGBT character now (all group members sighed in response, with some exclaiming 'horrible').

FGD_Bishkek_35+

Russian propaganda and traditionalist values in Kyrgyzstan clearly go hand in hand. Russian news and items about how the West that is in moral decay resonate with many people's views. Hence, Russian media are often seen as saying how it is while the Western media is often seen as propaganda. Moreover, the very term 'propaganda' is often perceived by people through a positive lens. They see propaganda as an important tool for raising children correctly – in a patriotic and moral manner. This narrative is also very present in the Russian media more broadly and in the reports on Kyrgyzstan specifically, as they argue that Russia and Kyrgyzstan could collaborate in the domain of raising patriots.

At the same time, some participants affiliate propaganda with LGBT and blame the West for spreading 'wrong and alien values' in Kyrgyzstan through movies, cartoons and entertainment in general.

3. Russian media perceptions

Perception of Russia and its media differed per age group and location. Some participants believe that Russia is a protector state and a strategic partner, which is manifested through the CSTO, the EEU, and the Customs Union. Amid this discussion, participants noted the vulnerable position of Kyrgyzstan due to its dependence on Russia.



I support Russia. Because if we were part of the Russian Federation, we would live differently right now. Since we are now a separate state, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan begin to attack us. Who can we ask for help? Only Russia.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

We look up to Russia. But this is inevitable, after all, this is our strategic partner, the CSTO, the SCO, we are dependent and look at them. Thanks to Russia, neither China nor America touches us.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

I associate Russian media with magnitude because they have a very big influence both in Russia itself and in its closest neighbours and other countries. But our relationship with Russia is also very important to us because we have large debts to Russia.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

Some participants believe that Kyrgyzstan endorsed Russia's war against Ukraine yet questioned the protector status of Russia since during the hostilities on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2022, Russia did not support Kyrgyzstan and covered the events through the position of Tajikistan. Since border issues are directly affecting the lives of the people in the south of the country, FGD participants in Osh expressed disappointment with Russia's reaction to the Tajik-Kyrgyz border clashes.



This is big politics here. In the war with Ukraine, we supported Russia, and in our dispute with Tajikistan, Russia supported Tajikistan. So, politics plays a big role here.

FGD_Osh_18-34

Some participants noted that they are accustomed to watching Russian TV channels since childhood due to the lack of other alternatives. They consider Russian media to be native to them and do not view it as foreign.



I have never made a divide between local and Russian television. I never considered it to be foreign. In my subconscious, Russia and Kyrgyzstan are still together. I still have this, so I never treated [Russian media] as foreign and always watched it, like our news. I trust in it.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

Participants also highlighted the high quality and professionalism of Russian media products. They noted both the sentimental value of the programmes they grew up with and also the technological side of broadcasting.



If we talk about Russian television, we grew up with Russian television, ORT, RTR, KTRK, we only had three channels when we were little, we watched the Piggy¹⁴ at that age. We're on schedule, Piggy first, then the news. Now, when I have time, I can watch the news on Russian channels, everything is also interesting there, everything is reliable. I also like Putin, because he is a leader, and they show world news too. Their information is accurate, accessible, and there are subtitles, everything is accessible there too.

FGD_Osh_18-34

For the most part, Russian media has the advantage of being trusted due to its familiarity and sentimental value to audiences in Kyrgyzstan.



How can I explain it to you? I don't know, I don't have any associations. It's just that I'm either used to it [Russian media] or I understand it more. Let's say if I watch Ukrainian news, I still believe the Russian ones. Someone says this or that, that there is a level of fake news, but I still trust the Russian media more.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

Participants in Osh noted that in the regions where people do not have the opportunity to connect to satellite or online television, Russian TV channels remain the only option. High levels of trust in the Russian media are linked to capacities such as the scale of news coverage, and the availability of resources that allows sending reporters to the scene and covering a wide range of international news. In spite of the perceived siding of Russia with Tajikistan, some respondents believed that all Russian products are a priori of high quality, including the media and that the Russian mentality is similar to the Kyrgyz one.



Probably, as they used to say, everything Russian is of high quality. Even the medicine, if made in Russia, is of better quality. Unlike ours or from other countries. Because of this, perhaps, we have trust. And plus their mentality too.

FGD_Osh_18-34

In my opinion, the Russian media is good media. The information there is reliable. For example, as was discussed, the American media basically broadcast violence. I recently read, just don't remember where, some well-known brands like Gucci or Louis Vuitton supported open children's clothing, and I think that this is violence. Mostly violence, so the Russian media is better.

FGD_Osh_18-34

14. A character in the children's show 'Good Night, Little Ones!' (Спокойной ночи, малыши!) broadcast since 1964.

Participants in Bishkek also noted that Russian media should not be treated as a homogenous entity. While state media can be trusted, there are independent media outlets that have the status of foreign agents in Russia and there is no trust in them due to foreign funding. This perception indicates that when Russian state censors label certain media outlets as foreign agents, these platforms lose credibility in the eyes of the audience as the law requires them to disclose their foreign agent status in large letters.

One participant from Bishkek believed that it is necessary to limit the broadcasting of Russian TV channels in Kyrgyzstan and produce more materials in the national language, following the example of neighbouring Central Asian countries that introduced a policy of promoting the national languages.

“ These [Russian media] are lies, negativity, deceit, shoeing, concealment of crimes, including war crimes. They helped the Tajik side, covering only the Tajik side when there was an attack on our country. They called for riots, for the overthrow of the laws of our government. Like it or not, they chose him anyway. They want to influence our elections, and just like they did in America, they want to bring their people here, I won't name names. They want to influence.

As for the choice of the Jogorku Kenesh,¹⁵ in all these three revolutions and coup d'état there is the presence of the Russian media. The context is also very important here, as already mentioned, these are state-owned media, they are propaganda, they are edited by the FSB, so I think this is a direct threat. If it were really the media, they would not be blocked all over the world, their accounts would not be frozen, and the European Union would not impose sanctions against them. But within 10-20 years we should be completely disconnected from them.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

In any case, Russian media are in an advantageous position across Kyrgyzstan. This position is informed by familiarity and sentimental values of certain programmes that people grew up with. In combination, these sentiments lead to perceptions of Russian media as native to Kyrgyzstan. Russian media products are praised for their high quality, which adds another layer of perceived credibility. The perception of Russian media as trustworthy and reliable is further strengthened when compared with the local media outlets that participants consider corrupt and weak, or with Western media that are viewed as scandalous and alien.

15. Since May 1993, the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan has been called Jogorku Kenesh <http://kenesh.kg/ru/article/show/38/istoriya-kirgizskogo-parlamenta>

4. War against Ukraine

Discussing Russia's war against Ukraine, participants noted that there is a lot of information in the media and that it is difficult to navigate the reliability of one source over another. They mentioned that there is an information war between Russia and Ukraine. During the discussions, participants used words such as 'conflict' and 'war' more often than 'special military operation'. It is important to take into account that most participants expressed a general rejection of following news about the war due to the large volume of information and the uncertainty about its reliability. FGDs also revealed intrafamily disagreements on the topic when spouses find themselves on different sides of the war.



I don't follow Russian news. We all know that there is a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In the beginning of this conflict, I felt sorry for the Ukrainians, because innocent people were being killed on both sides. I really wanted them to come to a truce. And for some reason my husband supports Russia. At first, it really seemed to me that civilians were dying... But my husband still believes that Russia is doing the right thing. And we argued about it. He said that I did not understand anything, he said that Putin was doing the right thing. And now I don't know which side I'm on.

FGD_Naryn_18-34

I listen to Russia, then to Ukraine, and just find myself in a dilemma.

Wherever you get together, this is a topic for conversation. Someone is for Ukraine, someone is for Russia, it almost escalates to a fight, especially when you drink.

FGD_Bishkek_35+

Information about the war is mainly received from the Russian media due to the lack of Ukrainian sources in Kyrgyzstan, although some participants claimed that they were following the Ukrainian media, but could not name any specific sources. Western media are viewed with scepticism and distrust. For instance, the case of an airstrike on a hospital in Mariupol was brought up and participants noted that Russian media debunked Western fake news. A participant in Bishkek openly expressed support for Russia in the war with Ukraine, explaining the position with arguments broadcast by Russian state propaganda about Nazis and Banderites in Ukraine.



I support Russia. I think that Russia did the right thing by invading Ukraine because they are all Nazis. There is even some kind of Nazi group in Ukraine, a banned Bandera group.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

In the FGDs in Naryn and Osh, several times participants mentioned that Kyrgyzstan has to support Russia in the war with Ukraine due to economic and political dependence on Russia. A participant in Osh believes that Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia are a lever of pressure on the Kyrgyz government and, unlike Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan does not have sufficient political will and resources to openly condemn the war.

Narratives expressed by FGD participants in all locations echo those actively spread in Russian media. Russian news reports portray Kyrgyzstan as dependent on Russia and people obviously pick up and absorb these notions.

In general, people did not have any strong opinions opposing Russia's war against Ukraine, for the most part, either supporting Russia or appearing confused amid the information overflow.

5. Western media perceptions

The US and European media are most often perceived as channels for spreading Western values, agenda, and propaganda. Participants in Bishkek noted that they watch and read such European media sources as BBC, DW, and Euronews in Russian, while participants in other regions could not name any US or European media. European media are watched as sources of EU-focused news, sports news, as well as technology-related news. In Bishkek, participants shared that they are upset and tired of the constant negative information about Putin in the European media and in relation to Russian politics.

In Naryn and Osh, participants noted the colonialist past of European countries, as well as Islamophobia. Narratives of the colonial past of Western states echo those in Russian state media. Terms such as 'neocolonialists' are used by Russian media to describe Western powers and to accuse them of attempting to colonise Ukraine and Central Asia in the same way they colonised Africa and the Americas.

"I believe that European countries have developed at the expense of other countries. It also seems to me that these are countries opposed to the religion of Islam."

FGD_Naryn_35+

"I don't know for sure, but mostly they have Islamophobia."

FGD_Osh_18-34

At the same time, there were select participants who noted that European media carry the right values of human rights, freedom and democracy, which are presented and perceived as alien, although they are universal. Some noted the high quality of work of journalists and technical equipment or European media and believe that Kyrgyz media specialists should take an example from their European colleagues.

Participants in the 18-35 age group in Bishkek noted that they associate the US media with entertainment, for example, shows such as Ellen. Participants could not name any specific US media outlets but had vivid perceptions of them and of life in the US more broadly. Some participants in the 35+ group in Bishkek believe that the US media are not serious.

"For me (the US media) it's a circus; a clownery. You listen to them, you laugh. The President walks around and does all sorts of nonsense."

FGD_Bishkek_35+

This narrative is consistent with Russian propaganda, which constantly ridicules US politicians. Some respondents noted that the US media promotes and normalises violence. Participants believe that US foreign policy is based on aggression and spreading wars.

Participants in Bishkek noted that they follow the activities of a US journalist Scott Ritter, explaining this by the fact that he is an opposition journalist who criticises the government. It is important to add here that Scott Ritter is actively referenced by Russian media propaganda. He also publishes articles for RT and Fox News and promotes conservative values.

Thus, the Western media face a number of credibility issues in Kyrgyzstan. While the perceived abundant resources of Western media are acknowledged by participants, they generally view Western media as scandalous, violent, and Islamophobic. FGDs make it evident that Russian propaganda narratives echo in people's

perceptions of the Western media. Individual journalists from Western countries who are professional propagandists themselves are perceived as credible informants. People also do not endorse narratives critical of Russia and Putin in the Western media.

6. Domestic media perceptions

When it comes to perceptions of the domestic Kyrgyz media, participants offered different assessments of quality and trust. In the 18-34 group in Bishkek, the combination of the words 'Kyrgyz mass media' sparked laughter, indicating their weak credibility. Participants mentioned the small scale of coverage and limitation in the scope, which reduces the levels of people's trust. They also noted the low quality of the published materials: in their opinion, local media often translate and republish news from foreign sources, or even social media posts of regular users, and rarely release any exclusive analytical materials in Kyrgyz or Russian. The lack of informative and entertaining content in the Kyrgyz language was mentioned as a major problem of the domestic media.

A participant in Osh noted that the Kyrgyz media and television channels simply copy all Russian television programs, and even then still lag behind in development and scale, as there is no state support.

For some reason, I associate the Kyrgyz media with helplessness. No matter what information is there, they seem so insignificant and small.

FGD_Bishkek_18-35

If the Kyrgyz media offered more truth, then people would have more faith and trust in it. False information still prevails. Information on Kyrgyz media is not very good. Every journalist does everything to raise their own rating.

FGD_Osh_35+

It has become our habit to imitate Russia, and we cannot invent our own programmes.

FGD_Osh_35+

Participants expressed concerns that there is a lot of negative information, sensationalism and even misinformation in the domestic media. They described the Kyrgyz media as unreliable and lacking credibility; as a political tool in the hands of the powerful people who purchase stories in the news.

They are reporting inaccurate and false information. They delivered one-sided information.

FGD_Naryn_35+

Power abuse was mentioned as threatening to Kyrgyzstan and its citizens. Anti-corruption activism and investigative journalism were brought in as examples of state crackdowns on narratives that challenge the authority of the powerful. Participants in the 18-34 group in Bishkek mentioned that journalists face a number of threats in Kyrgyzstan, from made-up accusations of crime to physical attacks and murder.



If they keep silencing everyone, it will explode, we might have another coup which no one needs. You cannot put the lid on the boiling water.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34

Discussions about the role of bloggers and traditional media journalists sparked disagreement among FGD participants. Some ranked bloggers as mass media and others disagreed with this opinion, believing that only professional journalists can have such a status. Participants noted the growing role of bloggers in the media, given their mobility and the ability to transmit information fast. Money was mentioned as a factor both in relation to bloggers and professional journalists. Those who did not perceive bloggers as journalists explained this view via the fact that bloggers get paid for covering specific events. At the same time, professional journalists were also accused of one-sided reporting caused by financial interest.



If we are talking about the media, then we are talking about journalists. For me, journalists have become secondary, that is, they lag behind bloggers. Now bloggers have a very strong influence on society, even on the country. Today, as soon as a blogger publishes some information, society reacts to the publication, and then the authorities react. Journalists no longer play such a role, they are lagging behind.

FGD_Naryn_35+

Participants in Osh criticised the media, including RFE/RL's local service Azattyk (which they perceive as domestic media), for inadequate work during the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In their opinion, bloggers and civil activists did a great job of covering and translating materials. Participants praised the speed of blogger publications, which, according to one of the respondents, made it possible to win the information war against Tajikistan.



We are just now beginning to understand that there is an information war in Batken, and we started losing this war. As young activists who know the language and can convey information, we were invited to get involved and only after that...we won the information war, which was a big plus for us.

FGD_Osh_18-35

At the same time, the question of censorship and whether it is necessary for Kyrgyzstan or not also sparked debates. In spite of the praised role of bloggers in information warfare in Osh, some participants in Naryn believe that censorship is needed to prevent the spread of misinformation by bloggers. They expressed support for an anti-fake news law for reasons of national security. Participants in Bishkek noted that censorship will only exacerbate the already terrible situation with freedom of speech and pressure on journalists, citing the case of Bolot Temirov, who was expelled from the country for his critical reports.

In spite of these differences of opinion, pressure on the media, freedom of speech restriction and persecution of journalists was named as one of the major problems by participants in all regions.



In my opinion, Kyrgyz media are all about sucking up to someone and praising someone, that is, they still, unfortunately, do not know how to do anything else. Perhaps this is done in order to receive some kind of reward or money, or there are family ties and friendships, or maybe they were (in prison) together. This is especially true of the state media. For example, they put people in jail over the Kempir-Abad issue, but they are our citizens, and they also have the right to express their points of view. And now they sit idle. That's what I don't like. Things might change in 10-20 years.

FGD_Bishkek_18-34



But at the same time, ensure that the rights of these people are not violated and that they do not call for the seizure of land or the burning of something. Everything should be done in a civilised way.

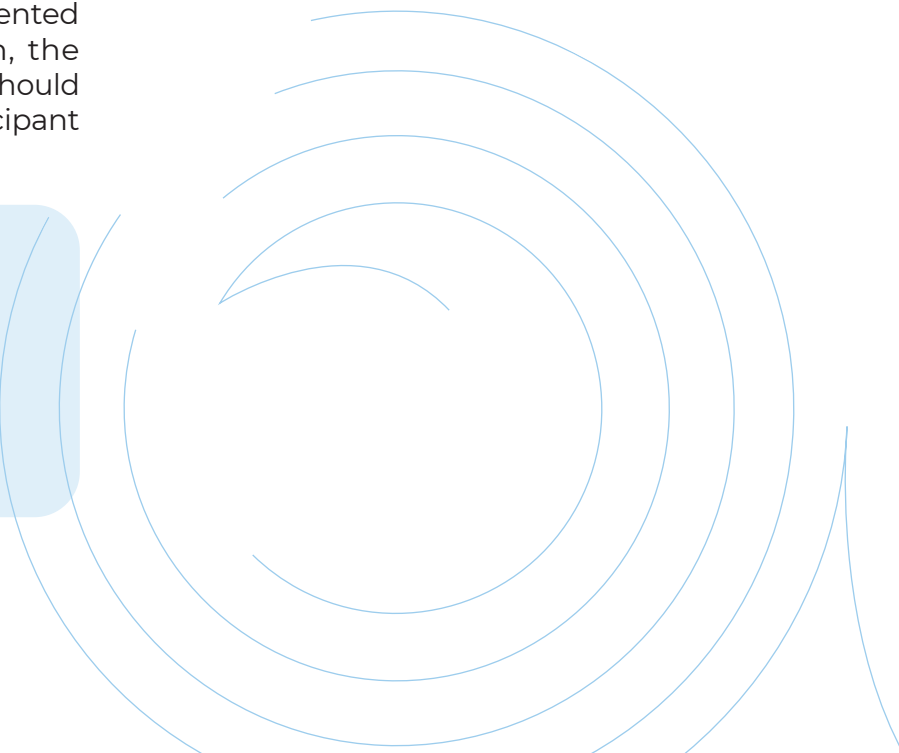
FGD_Bishkek_18-34

Local media in Kyrgyzstan face a number of problems that impact their credibility in the eye of the people. While lack of resources, poor quality, low journalistic professionalisation and copycat practices were named as major media problems, some of the expressed concerns are actually attributed to the state. It is those with power who apply pressure on the media and individual journalists and either buy their loyalty or demand it by force.

People view insufficient state financial support for the media and the lack of qualified specialists as major problems as well. Several participants in Bishkek noted that they would like to receive more information, news and analytics in the Kyrgyz language. The state, represented by the President, the Jogorku Kenesh, the Ombudsman, and the Ministry of Culture should deal with the media problems. One participant argued in support of independent media:



It is necessary to support independent media, go to peaceful rallies, demand and unite in something or join a party.



Conclusion & Recommendations

Russia remains very influential in Kyrgyzstan. It exerts this influence through the security domain (the military base in Kant and CSTO); economic ties and pressure levers (the EEU and labour migration); sociocultural matters (Rossotrudnichestvo – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs; Ruskiy Dom, etc.); and education (Russian Slavic University, various exchange programmes). The domain of influence that brings all others together, puts them in perspective, and influences public opinion is Russian media.

Our research found the scope of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan to be massive. It includes all traditional media and is omnipresent on television, via websites, mobile applications, in print and across a plethora of social media platforms. Whereas all broadcast and publish in Russian, Sputnik.kg also offers news in Kyrgyz. The sheer volume of media outlets and daily messaging dwarfs any local Kyrgyz or other external media party. With the start of the war, a spike in special news items can be observed with the objective of capturing media consumers' constant attention.

NARRATIVE

The narrative of Russian propaganda can be discerned into four main messages on Ukraine (confused), the West (evil), Russia (holy), and Kyrgyzstan (dependent).

1 First, Ukraine is portrayed on the one hand as an artificial state that has no reason to exist while on the other hand, it is an inseparable part of Russia that is being ruled and ruined by Western-supported Nazis. The consumer of Russian news could feel that Ukraine as a land is confused.

2 Second, concerning the West, Russian propaganda is crystal clear compared to the narrative on Ukraine. Russian propaganda creates a broad enemy image of the 'collective West' that, under US leadership, interferes in other countries out of self-interest and stirs problems worldwide. If the special military operation in Ukraine needs defending, Russian propaganda argues that Russia merely does what the West has always been doing.

3 Third, it is holy Russia and the Russian world that stands up to the West's immoral policies. In that sense, Russia was forced to react in Ukraine upon Western aggression. Russia also positions itself here as a guardian of friendly neighbouring states. The encoded message implies a lost paradise that Putin is trying to restore. The paradise was lost once when the Russian Empire became the USSR and then again when the USSR ceased to exist. Now Russia is taking all measures not to allow any further harm to itself by godless neocolonial powers.

4 Fourth, Kyrgyzstan is portrayed as a natural extension of the Russian world, heavily dependent on Russia for its economy and its security. On the one hand, Russia is a patron and friend, and on the other, Kyrgyzstan is portrayed by Russia as immature and sometimes problematic, as evidenced by the negative presentation of the labour migrants. Kyrgyzstan is given a warning that nothing good will come out of friendship with the West. At the same time, it is threatened that if any moves in that direction are dared to be taken, the country risks becoming next after Ukraine.

PERCEPTION

The focus group discussions resulted in rich insights into people's media consumption. Six conclusions along the discussion clusters can be drawn here.

1

First, discussions revealed a passive approach to information consumption online, as people just go on their smartphones and automatically get informed without paying attention to the sources. At the same time, if anything is in doubt, people use TV as a fact-checking tool. Generalising this practice to the entire nation is impossible in a qualitative study of this kind. However, the fact that FGD participants in all three locations expressed unconditional trust in television in general and Russian television in particular is a worrisome sign.

2

Second, the majority of people understand the basic principles of propaganda as an information strategy aimed at influencing opinions. Yet propaganda is on the one hand attributed to the Western media accused of spreading LGBT propaganda, and on the other hand is perceived as a positive tool that Kyrgyzstan could use in developing its national ideology.

3

Third, in discussing perceptions of Russian media, the FGDs revealed that people tend to trust Russian media due to their 'professionalism', and 'objective reporting', wide availability, and habitual/sentimental values that make people treat it as native media.

4

Fourth, people are either supporting Russia or are confused about the situation when they refer to Russia's war against Ukraine. Only a few regard Russia as an aggressor.

5

Fifth, Western media are seen as resourceful and fully capable, but also as too critical of Russia, Islamophobic, and with an agenda of spreading LGBT tolerance around the world.

6

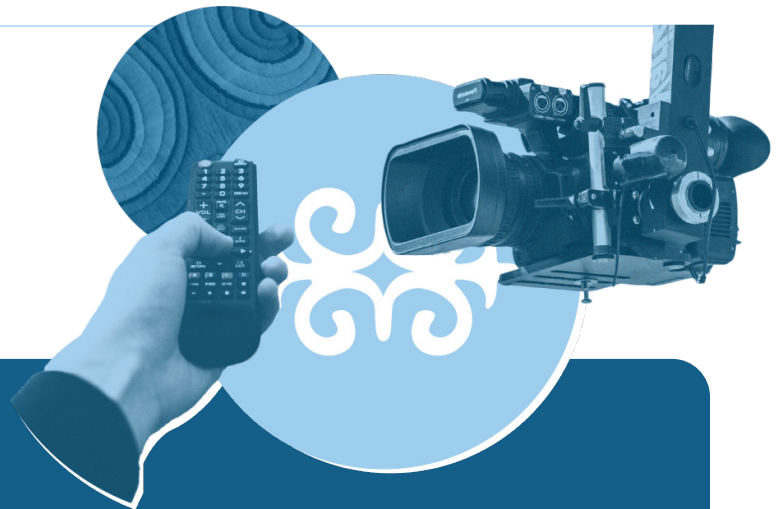
Sixth, Kyrgyzstan's domestic media has no credibility in the eyes of FGD participants. Domestic outlets are perceived as weak and unprofessional as well as tools in the hands of powerful people.

SO WHAT CAN AND SHOULD BE DONE?

A series of simultaneous steps and investments will be necessary to form an alternative to Russian propaganda as well as counter its negative consequences. No one actor alone will be able to achieve this or obtain substantial results. This is why most of the recommendations for action below, demand joined action. A combination of the Kyrgyz authorities with educational institutions or projects funded by Western donors in cooperation with Kyrgyz media outlets is the way to go. Ideally, action is taken that involves Kyrgyz authorities, Western donors, as well as the journalistic, civil society and research communities of Kyrgyzstan. Some recommendations below demand action now – broadcast Ukrainian news in Kyrgyzstan – while others are long-term – modernise journalist education in Kyrgyzstan – but all are geared towards the development of a productive, diverse, inclusive, and healthy media landscape in Kyrgyzstan that can withstand the pressure of Russia's propaganda.

The **18 recommendations** listed below as a result of our research have been devised by IWPR and EUCAM staff and by applying their past experiences with media developments. Obviously, while some can be implemented immediately and by unilateral action, other changes and interventions are more ambitious and will take longer and require significant consensus, collaboration and/or funding.

Recommendations



Below is a set of 18 recommendations tailored to the Kyrgyz authorities; Kyrgyz media outlets and journalists; local academia and the research community in Kyrgyzstan; as well as international donors and Western policy-makers. As indicated by the current research, the overall challenge is to build a post-colonial identity and mind-set in Kyrgyzstan that could confront the current dependency on Russia, its narratives and subsequent perceptions. In this pursuit, opposing Russian propaganda with counter-propaganda is not sufficient.

A comprehensive and granulated approach involving a multitude of actors and their collaboration is essential. Media literacy, critical thinking and resilience; gender equality; journalistic freedom; improved domestic media and other steps suggested below would help in transitioning from the status quo of increasing dependence on Russia that is threatening the Kyrgyz statehood.

To all stakeholders

1. COLLABORATE MORE

There is a continued need for the Kyrgyz authorities, international donors and media plus civil society to jointly counter Russian propaganda and develop Kyrgyz journalism. This is easier said than done. The Kyrgyz authorities have restricted Kyrgyz media instead of developing it and local journalists and civil society actors suffer from reputational damage, often due to government defamation.

International donor support to countries where Russian narratives dominate needs to be stronger. As these four groups are all partly dependent on each other in terms of resources, collaboration and political will, it makes sense to bring them together in different settings to exchange views and set up mechanisms for cooperation and reducing Kyrgyz dependency on Kremlin-led propaganda.

2. PROMOTE KYRGYZ CONTENT AND LANGUAGE (AND SO IDENTITY)

This project is not the first to promote more attention to Kyrgyz as a media language. Several things have already been tried but did not yield success (quotas for Kyrgyz language output or translation of Russian language pieces to Kyrgyz). For Kyrgyz media to attract readers and viewers it will need to produce more content that is high quality. To achieve that, the education of journalists needs to modernise (see later) and Kyrgyz media outlets need to professionalise by becoming economically viable businesses that attract funding through advertisement (here the Kyrgyz authorities need to offer space to develop). Concrete actions could include, increasing the number of Kyrgyz language editors to support local content creation and coverage of diverse perspectives; setting up 'local Kyrgyz departments' in media outlets to ensure the production and promotion of content in the Kyrgyz language focused on specific regions of the country; introducing online business models in making Kyrgyz language media outlets attractive to companies wanting to advertise digitally.

Kyrgyz-language content should be promoted across the board and in a variety of ways beyond the media and by including creating platforms and/or events that bring together Kyrgyz translators, content creators, media outlets, Wikipedia

writers, language enthusiasts, and other stakeholders. Such collaborative efforts can lead to valuable insights and practical solutions. Translation and localisation grants specifically designed for translating books, articles, dubbing movies are all important and to ensure the success of dubbing projects, partnerships with local broadcasters, streaming platforms, and film festivals should be established. Collaborating with these entities can help create wider distribution channels for the localized content and generate broader audience engagement. Localizing mobile apps should also be pursued so as to normalise the consumption and usage of entertainment products in Kyrgyz language, making them more user-friendly and appealing to Kyrgyz-speaking audiences. Supporting the repackaging of classic and traditional materials and knowledge of the Kyrgyz people for a modern context and younger generations should also be considered - and resources and assistance given to enthusiasts who are passionate about promoting specific topics related to Kyrgyz culture and heritage.

3. OFFER UKRAINIAN NEWS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Instead of Western media explaining Russia's war in Ukraine, broadcasting Ukrainian television and making Ukrainian media produced in Russian more accessible to audiences in Kyrgyzstan is a direct measure of countering Russian propaganda. Although the Western media cannot compete with Russian media in offering a sense of belonging and a shared past, Ukrainian media outlets can

potentially allure Kyrgyz people. There are efforts in Ukraine to produce content in Russian, specifically with the aim of reaching Russophone audiences with alternative messages. Some content produced in Russian and Ukrainian can also be translated and subtitled in Kyrgyz (including sign language), making it even more accessible.

4. EMPOWER WOMEN THROUGH MEDIA

Even worse, Russian broadcasting promotes 'traditional values' that are used for normalising gender-based violence – a compelling reason for countering Russian propaganda and developing balanced home-grown media. Through education, projects and awareness-raising, Kyrgyz media should develop the capacity to depict the diverse roles that women play and devote more

attention to the views of women on all matters of consequence. This is not about portraying women in a Western way but about giving space to the female voice. Both women and men should be capable of offering opportunities to women in shaping debate and the news.

5. COUNTER RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA THAT TARGETS LGBT RIGHTS AND WESTERN VALUES AS DECADENT

The Kyrgyz government is copying Russia's strategy, starting with a law on sex education for teenagers. Now the state is talking about banning the mention of same-sex relationships in the 5th edition of the proposed media law. Fear mongering is being used as a strategy and LGBT people are the obvious scapegoats. Many international organisations say that they talk with the government/president's office behind closed doors and international institutions like the ADB/World Bank might consider making future support conditional on better rights-based policies. From the Kremlin playbook we know greater authoritarianism begins with pressure on LGBT people, and then the pressure spreads to democracy and freedom of speech.

Western tactics should highlight commonalities and what unites as opposed to what divides and by using softer and more positive messaging and approaches. This could include, for example, promoting inclusivity as opposed to hate speech just as we

would promote 'accountability as opposed to corruption.'

Russian propaganda is detrimental to LGBT rights in Kyrgyzstan. Negative attitudes in Russian media and inflammatory language resonate well with 'traditionalist' groups in society and with the Kyrgyz authorities. The best action taken to support the LGBT community in Kyrgyzstan is to counter Russian propaganda. LGBT-focussed projects that are supported and advertised by Western donors can have adverse effects and even create additional risks to different groups. Smart actions that begin and end with civil society insight on local circumstances can be supported. Ideally such projects would engage LGBT groups as part of society and not as a specific group; here one could think of music festivals (reported in Kyrgyz media) that are supported by a donor and the Kyrgyz government. Just as Russian TV employs talk shows, local Kyrgyz media should do the same with Western experts speaking the local language.

6. MAKE LOCAL MEDIA MORE ATTRACTIVE, INDEPENDENT AND ECONOMICALLY RESILIENT

Research the ways media outlets can build their financial resilience and independence in the context of Kyrgyzstan. This research will help to understand nuances of Kyrgyz speaking audience and ways to secure

media outlets financial independence from donor funding. Based on this research, international organisations can offer training on building business models or provide acceleration programs for Kyrgyz media.

The research based capacity building campaign will ensure the effectiveness in terms of contextualised content of the training.

There are many short-term possibilities that can be developed in supporting local media. Providing funding and opportunities to bring together media and civil society organisations to advocate for media reform and support media development is a basic one. Together they can develop projects for local content studios to encourage the creation of high-quality Kyrgyz content and develop business models for media to become economically viable. Another worthwhile initiative is content sharing whereby a network that is easily accessible online offers the best content of several media outlets. Such an initiative entails more than setting up a network as Kyrgyz media outlets often consider each other more as competitors than colleagues. Overall, training is necessary whereby young journalists gain experience from seasoned Kyrgyz and Western journalists. Opportunities for trainee/intern/

fellowships at Western media outlets in Europe should have an increased availability.

In its quest for professionalisation and economic viability, Kyrgyz media should also become more attractive. Of course, Kyrgyz media should aspire to offer fact-based news on Kyrgyzstan as well as on Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and actively debunk Russian propaganda. But in addition that, potential consumers should feel more welcome through entertainment that could include documentaries and culture-focused shows. One option is to increasingly include arts, sports but also religion as fields to bring people together on social media platforms and through television shows. Another option to improve the quality of Kyrgyz content available is to collaborate with Kyrgyz filmmakers to produce high-quality content for global platforms like Netflix. Additionally, translating selected popular global content into Kyrgyz with high quality can provide new and exciting content for Kyrgyz audiences and offer an alternative to the dominant Russian media landscape.

To the Kyrgyz authorities

7. STOP CURTAILING KYRGYZ JOURNALISTS AND DEVELOP KYRGYZ CULTURAL RESILIENCE

The 2021 'fake news law' is damaging to media producers and consumers alike in Kyrgyzstan. It also runs counter to the country's state-building ambitions and in the short term, the stability of the government. The Kyrgyz authorities should stop countering independent journalism and instead render support to Kyrgyz media and journalists to professionalise the sector. The current situation, in which people barely use local media, and where there is a disconnect between pro- and anti-government outlets and between classical newspaper/television and activist online bloggers, is detrimental to the people's view of their country and the people that run it.

To succeed in countering Russian propaganda, Kyrgyzstan needs to go through a broader process of constructing cultural resilience.

This is a process that should be led by the Kyrgyz government. Russian propaganda is not only penetrating through television, the internet, and newspapers, it is ingrained in the social fabric through a cultural code – education, literature, architecture, names of the streets and city districts, symbols, statues, language, celebrations, entertainment, and so on. A nationwide reflection after decades of denial of national identity formation is needed. This process is not to be confused with the manipulation and 'traditionalisation' of values to, for instance, justify gender-based discrimination and violence. Rather, it is a process of sealing Kyrgyzstan's own identity through (re)discovery of its own history, literature, holidays, national heroes, and symbols, and the creation of its own entertainment products.

8. STOP OFFERING PRIMETIME SPACE TO RUSSIAN PROGRAMMING

Several Russian media outlets are part of the Kyrgyz public broadcasting system. It is hard to grasp why Kyrgyz people should be exposed to Russian propaganda via the public channels. This practice should be ended by the Kyrgyz authorities. At the same time, Kyrgyz media should be given a chance to take up more space in the public

broadcasting system. This is not about excluding the Russian language, but about promoting Kyrgyz as a language of news consumption, next to Russian. Offering the possibility for Russian media to broadcast on a vast scale also runs counter to the interests of the Kyrgyz government that seeks to develop the Kyrgyz identity.

To Kyrgyz media outlets and journalists

9. BUILD AN INCLUSIVE AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

This argument mirrors the former in which journalists need to build skills and acquire tools to do their work more professionally and have a greater impact. Journalists also need to come together to develop a professional association or guild of Kyrgyz journalists that is inclusive. Investigative journalists, bloggers, think tankers and NGO representatives should increasingly work together on journalistic projects. These do not need to always address politics or conflict but should be attractively written, accessible in different languages, widely distributed, and meet high editorial standards of research

and fact-checking. Today many journalists and bloggers have not necessarily obtained a degree in journalism or gone through a process of training on journalistic values, tools, and skills. Developing a place where journalists can exchange experiences and information would help develop cohesiveness in Kyrgyz media. Interaction should go beyond the existing labour unions. An association or guild could for instance also organise meetings with Kyrgyz editors to provide training and masterclasses on best practices in media management, content creation, and audience engagement.

To local academia and the research community

10. PAY ATTENTION TO ONLINE LITERACY IN ALL-AROUND EDUCATION, CRITICAL THINKING AND PERCEPTION

Even though the internet penetration is on the rise and more people have access to smartphones, there is a lack of understanding of the effects of digitalisation on people's daily lives in general and more specifically concerning disinformation and its related risks. There is a continued need for Kyrgyz schools and universities to familiarise their students with digital tools. While children easily navigate the internet and discover the possibilities of digitalisation, they also need to become aware

of the risks that social and digital media bring with them in terms of propaganda, dis- and misinformation and the power of algorithms. Existing initiatives and projects that seek to address media literacy need increased and long-term support, starting with addressing the matter at an early age through the school system.

11. MODERNISE THE STUDY OF JOURNALISM

Building on earlier projects, Kyrgyz universities should further modernise their education in journalism and media studies to prepare journalists for working in a quickly changing digital environment. Teachers in journalism faculties should receive on-the-job training. Improved curricula should become more attractive to young people, especially as, many journalists in Kyrgyzstan have not attended one of the ten or so journalism studies available in universities and schools. Curricula need to become less dependent on Russian or Western teaching

by establishing material in Kyrgyz as well. Young journalists should learn to function in a local Kyrgyz setting as well as an international environment. Clearly, the centre of attention will need to move to online journalism while focusing on visual and text content. Besides the craft of research and writing, more effort needs to be devoted to developing media outlets as a business. Local media in Kyrgyzstan's regions should be supported to offer attractive short-term internships to students of journalism.

12. INVEST IN APPLIED AND DATA-DRIVEN RESEARCH AND INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS

Research communities in Europe, but also in Central Asia itself, know little about Central Asia media consumption and public opinion, and how these are shaped by local and foreign actors. This research exercise in Kyrgyzstan has resulted in a wealth of information that can help researchers (and policy communities indirectly) to better understand Kyrgyzstan's media landscape and its challenges. Additional research in Kyrgyzstan and similar initiatives elsewhere in Central Asia would help Europeans, Central Asians and others to understand how

societies are evolving. Research relevant to policy-making should be expanded in the sphere of countering Russian propaganda and developing Kyrgyz media. Suggestions in the former case could include an assessment and comparison of similar countries' situations and policies that are affected by Russian propaganda, such as Moldova, South Caucasus, or other Central Asian countries. In the latter case, one can think of research on the consumption of Kyrgyz media or developing an action plan for local media development in Kyrgyzstan.

13. BETTER ANALYSE THE LINK BETWEEN MEDIA/COMMUNICATION/PERCEPTION AND INFLUENCE IN KYRGYZSTAN AND ELSEWHERE

This study has shown that Russian propaganda is Russia's primary tool in impacting Kyrgyz society. In addition to Russian media, and to much more modest extent, there are other external actors active in Kyrgyzstan's media landscape such as Chinese, Turkish, and Western media. Even though there is much insight in the geopolitical influence of Russia and China in Central Asia, much less is known about the role of online media that external actors use in obtaining societal impact and economic and political influence.

Turkey is a case in point as it has the possibility to use Turkic languages as a tool in reaching out to Kyrgyzstan, as well as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Another case is China's capacity to influence online media via social platforms that can be instrumentalised to further their interests.

To international donors and Western policy-makers

14. DO NOT ACCEPT THE STATUS QUO AND CHARACTERISE SUPPORT TO THE KYRGYZ MEDIA AS URGENT

The EU, UK, and the US – as large donors that are keen to work with Kyrgyzstan – need to step up in using their leverage to address the negative impact of Russian propaganda with Kyrgyzstan’s government. While Kyrgyzstan seeks to stay neutral between Russia and Ukraine, the largest share of its public opinion is formed by Russian propaganda. Western partners should not accept the role of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan as normal, and instead, make this clear to Kyrgyz authorities while offering cooperation and financial support in return for concrete reform and offering space for media development.

Western donors should come together in coordinating their support on media development and countering Russian media.

Donor attention is focused on Ukraine; rightfully so. European governments should however be aware of how Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine is affecting Central Asia. Russia is still able to shape opinion in quickly changing Central Asian societies through its grip on traditional and digital media. In this way, Western countries (and even China) will for the time being play second fiddle to Russia’s propaganda impact. Changing this situation will take considerable coordination and resources. If Western donors are ready to commit beyond support for Ukraine, investing in independent media and education can determine the outlook of generations to come in Kyrgyzstan, and other countries, and avoid an anti-Western backlash in Central Asia.

15. HELP KYRGYZSTAN DEVELOP QUALITY MEDIA LEGISLATION

The 2021 ‘fake news’ law is damaging to the development of Kyrgyz media but does not seem to affect Russian propaganda. Donors should help (and where needed push) Kyrgyzstan to develop new media related legislation that creates opportunity instead of curtailing media outlets. Newly developed legislation should meet international standards, especially those of the OSCE of which Kyrgyzstan is a participating state. Donors could contemplate support in the form of extra-budgetary OSCE projects.

Donors could also seek involvement of the Venice Commission (of which Kyrgyzstan is a member without being part of the Council of Europe). The Venice Commission can form an opinion on the current law and deliver advice on a new legal framework that meets Council of Europe democratic, human rights, and rule of law principles. Donors should also render continued support to existing civil society programming that addresses legal reform of media provisions; here one can think of the work of NGOs like Adilet Legal Clinic and Article 19.

16. HELP DEVELOP CENTRAL ASIAN TV AND ONLINE STREAMING COMPONENTS

Even though Central Asian countries share few home-grown regional cooperation formats and each of the countries is building its own national identity, there is also a lot that binds the people of the Central Asian countries, such as a shared history, languages, and culture. Externally funded but locally developed entertainment in the form of amusement programmes, music shows, sports broadcasting but maybe also soaps or thrillers, could potentially attract an audience in all five countries.

Larger streaming services could potentially play an advising or guiding role for local production firms. Central Asian programming would recognise the increased use of local languages (subtitles should be provided for Uzbek programmes in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz shows in Kazakhstan, and so on) and help slowly steer away from a Russian media-dominated media landscape

17. TREAT MEDIA SUPPORT AS A CROSS-CUTTING ISSUE

The issues of media development and countering Russian propaganda should be addressed both as stand-alone subjects as well as cross-cutting matters. The role of media should play a part in many donor-funded research, training, and awareness-raising projects that deal with education, social and economic issues or security and governance focussed projects. For instance, projects on gender equality could include a component that addresses media, either as a beneficiary by including

training for journalists on gender issues or as a stakeholder in getting project results across through media cooperation. With regard to countering Russian propaganda, education and training projects could increasingly include aspects of resilience against mis- and disinformation. On top of this, as Russian media narratives promote patriarchal values and homophobia, both resilience and alternative narratives need to be developed.

18. MEASURE SUCCESS AND FAILURE THROUGH BETTER MONITORING

While governmental sectors often initiate these methods, it is crucial to empower independent civil society groups such as non-governmental organisations, media outlets, and the education sector. These groups should be equipped to implement and sustain high-quality monitoring and evaluation of propaganda at the local, national, and regional levels. Collaborative efforts among these stakeholders can lead to greater efficiency, enhanced analysis, and increased influence, while avoiding duplication of efforts.

However, collaboration and ongoing dialogue with government bodies, international agencies, and other influential stakeholders and decision-makers are essential. This collaborative approach fosters the development of common solutions, with all parties being accountable for their contributions in terms of time and resources. Examples include: Media Monitoring: Fact-Checking and Verification: Audience Perception Surveys: Source and Content Analysis: Social Media Analytics: Impact Assessment: Legislative and Policy Evaluation - and a Propaganda Resilience Index.

Using an index to measure propaganda resilience offers several advantages. It provides a quantifiable measurement, allowing for comparative analysis and tracking over time. The index enables a comprehensive assessment by considering multiple dimensions of resilience. It establishes a standardised framework, ensuring consistency and facilitating benchmarking. The index informs policy and strategy development, guiding interventions and resource allocation. It serves as a monitoring and evaluation tool, tracking progress and identifying areas for improvement. Developing an index requires careful consideration and validation to ensure reliability and validity. It's important to note that developing an index requires careful consideration of the indicators, data collection methods, and validation processes.

The index should be designed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders and undergo rigorous testing and validation to ensure its reliability and validity. Several organisations have developed or contributed to the development of propaganda resilience indexes, different organisations may have varying approaches, methodologies, and specific focuses when developing propaganda resilience indexes. These indexes are continuously evolving as new challenges and contexts emerge, and multiple organisations collaborate to improve their effectiveness.

Annexes

ANNEXE 1: RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA OUTLETS' SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE AND FOLLOWING. DATA FOR MARCH 2023

Social Network	Media Outlet	Following	
Dzen.ru	Komsomolskaya Pravda	1.3 million	
	Moskovskiy Komsomolets	708.4 thousand	
	MIR 24	191.5 thousand	
	NTV	381.1 thousand	
	RBC	585 thousand	
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	10.7 thousand	
	Channel One	221.4 thousand	
Instagram	RBC	512 thousand	
	Channel One	1.7 million	
	MIR 24	367 thousand	
	NTV	543 thousand	
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	564 thousand	
Odnoklassniki	Komsomolskaya Pravda	841.2 thousand	
	Argumenti I Fakti	434.4 thousand	
	Moskovskiy Komsomolets	340.1 thousand	
	MIR 24	178.7 thousand	
	NTV	915.9 thousand	
	RBC	489.3 thousand	
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	16.9 thousand	
	Vesti	1.0 million	
	Channel One	940.1 thousand	
	Telegram	Argumenti I Fakti	41.1 thousand
		Moskovskiy Komsomolets: breaking news	13.7 thousand

Social Network	Media Outlet	Following
Telegram	Moskovskiy Komsomolets: most important for today	44.7 thousand
	MIR 24	14.2 thousand
	NTV	147 thousand
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	42.7 thousand
	Vesti	136.7 thousand
	Channel One	1.9 thousand
TikTok	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	473.7 thousand
	Vesti	541.4 thousand
	MIR 24	1.3 thousand
	NTV	2.7 million
	Channel One	187.9 thousand
Twitter	Komsomolskaya Pravda	317.3 thousand
	Moskovskiy Komsomolets	143.9 thousand
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	11.2 thousand
	Channel One	2.9 million
VKontakte	Komsomolskaya Pravda	1.1 million
	Argumenti I Fakti	230 thousand
	Moskovskiy Komsomolets	86 thousand
	MIR 24	67 thousand
	NTV	567 thousand
	RBC	873 thousand
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	13 thousand
	Vesti	955 thousand
	Channel One	2.1 million
YouTube	Komsomolskaya Pravda	1.05 million
	Argumenti I Fakti	77.6 thousand
	MIR 24	40.8 thousand
	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	4.05 thousand

ANNEXE 2: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction, 10 minutes

Hello! Welcome to our focus group. Thank you all for coming. Please feel free to take something to drink or eat during our discussion. This is an open and informal conversation. There are no right or wrong answers here. Once again, my name is ____ and I am here with my colleague _____. Together we explore the impact of the media on the audience in Kyrgyzstan. Your answers will help us in this study. Have you read our informed consent form? If you accept the terms of participation in this study, please sign the form and my/th colleague will collect them. We will be recording both audio and video of our discussion, this is necessary to be able to transcribe. Your privacy will be protected as all records will be kept secure and will be destroyed after the study is completed. On the nametags, please write out the variant of your name under which you would like to be called during the discussion. For example, first and middle name or another version of your name.

Warm-up reflection, 10 minutes

Participants are invited to draw their understanding of propaganda. After that, everyone can explain the picture they drew. If some express concern that they cannot draw at all, ask them to describe an imaginary picture. This game aims to 1) relax the participants, 2) help them start thinking abstractly about propaganda, 3) reflect on what and/or whom they see as the main sources and manifestations of propaganda.

Discussion questions

Question	Estimated discussion time	Comments
Where do you get your latest news from? What/who is the source of information? How often do you seek out the latest news? How do you stay up to date with current events?	10 min	The aim is to find out if participants read the news on the Internet, in newspapers, see it on TV, or hear from friends and relatives.
Who tends to get more news on TV? (please, raise your hands) How much TV do you watch on average (per day)? What programmes? If you watch the news on TV, on which channels? In what language?	10 min	A set of questions on TV
Do you read newspapers? If so, which ones? In what language?	5 min	A set of questions on newspapers

Question	Estimated discussion time	Comments
<p>If you rely on the Internet to keep up with current events, what are the sources of information? What platforms/groups?</p> <p>What would you say are the main sources of news for you?</p>	<p>10 min</p> <p>5 min</p>	<p>A set of questions about the Internet</p> <p>This is a repeated question, it reflects the first one. The participants talked about sources of information and now is the opportunity to get clearer information after the initial reflection.</p>
<p>What comes to mind when you hear the word "media"? Why? Explain your answer, please. What associations does the word "Russian media" evoke in you? Why? Explain your answer, please. What associations does the word "Kyrgyz media" evoke in you? Why? Explain your answer, please. What associations does the word "European media" evoke in you? Why? Explain your answer, please. What associations does the word "American media" evoke in you? Why? Explain your answer, please. What associations does the word "west" evoke in you? Why? Explain your answer, please.</p>	<p>20 min</p>	<p>A set of questions about media perception. This is the main and longest point of discussion. The idea is to understand what people perceive as "good" and "bad" media.</p>
<p>What is propaganda? How do you understand it? Do you think our media cover more domestic or foreign propaganda? How does propaganda affect the worldview and mood of the people?</p>	<p>10 min</p>	
<p>Recap</p>	<p>5 min</p>	<p>Moderator clarifies points where necessary to make sure everything is recorded correctly.</p>
<p>What would you call the main media problem in Kyrgyzstan? Is there a need for censorship? What needs to be done to improve the situation you describe? Who/which institution/body should be involved in this?</p>	<p>10 min</p>	<p>Concluding reflections.</p>

This publication is developed for decision-makers, media outlets, international and local organisations, researchers, experts and any other institution or individual interested in the phenomenon of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan.

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The more condensed version of this Report is available as a Policy Brief on the website <https://iwpr.net>

