

Elina Lange-Ionathamishvili et al.: **Redefining Euro-Atlantic Values: Russia's Manipulative Techniques**. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017. NATO StratCom COE Online Library. 139 pages.

“This is a study about *us*, namely, the ‘transatlantic community’ – a community we consider to be based on democratic values,” proclaim the authors of *Redefining Euro-Atlantic Values: Russia's Manipulative Techniques* in the introduction to their publication (p. 5). Their goal is to identify various techniques and tools Russia has been using to redefine and remodel the core values of the Western, “Euro-Atlantic,” world. The publication focuses on several events that followed the uprising and outbreak of violence in the eastern parts of Ukraine. Its findings and conclusions, however, have the potential to be applied in other contexts.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and its interventions in eastern Ukraine represent, as Roy Allison aptly put it, a “frontal challenge to the post-Cold War European regional order.”¹ This aggression triggered heated debate, both political and academic, about its causes and implications. Together with the EU, NATO is the most important Western institution embodying and defending Euro-Atlantic values. Both organizations took action in response to Russia's conduct consistent with their purposes and capabilities. The publication here reviewed was produced by NATO StratCom COE, one of the newest Centers of Excellence established under the Alliance in 2014, shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The publication focuses on the Russian media and how they have attempted to redefine Euro-Atlantic values. There is a substantial body of academic research confirming the crucial role the media plays in shaping people's views. The “media is the most comprehensive platform offering a wide spectrum of tools for influencing people's hearts and minds and redefining values,” claim the authors (p. 7). They describe several tools of media influence wielded by the Russians. Among them are framing, the “highlighting process of selection and ascribing saliency to certain aspects of reality at the expense of others,” as defined by Robert Entman.² Framing is inherent in the work of journalism because frames allow journalists to simplify complex topics and make them understandable to a wide audience. There is a difference, however, between the legitimate, inevitable journalistic practice of framing a story and the careful crafting of frames designed to support certain propaganda goals.

The publication applies critical discourse analysis to Russian propaganda, relying mostly on the concept of legitimation, understood as a “strateg[y] used to influence public opinion [...] to ‘win hearts and minds and change political attitudes’” (p. 16). The authors analyze Russian media coverage of four events: the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight

¹ Roy Allison, “Russian ‘Deniable’ Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules,” *International Affairs* 90, No. 6 (2014): 1255.

² Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, No. 4 (September 1993): 52.

MH-17, the imposition of Russian countersanctions against the West, the first “humanitarian aid convoy” from Russia to eastern Ukraine, and the Minsk II agreement aimed at achieving a ceasefire. The authors selected two Russian television channels for analysis, Pervyi Kanal (PK) and RT (formerly Russia Today). Each of those channels targets a different audience: PK is the leading TV channel in Russia, while RT is an international TV network aimed at audiences outside the country. The difference in the two channels’ target audiences is crucial for understanding the difference in their coverage.

The authors focus on Euro-Atlantic values and seek to explain how Russia has been trying to redefine them through the reporting on the two media outlets. Values are the glue that holds every society or alliance together, and any external attempt to modify them “must be addressed with the highest attention, since this process may end with [...] a crisis in society” (p. 18). Values are vulnerable to becoming objects of strategic political communication and distortion by propaganda. The authors acknowledge the difficulty that Western countries have had in responding effectively to Russia’s communications and the techniques of manipulation used by its media outlets. In their opinion, the difficulty is due to several factors, among them the fact that Russia’s goal is not primarily gaining territory but rather increasing its influence in the West and sowing discord. The West is loath to fight propaganda with counter-propaganda, because that contradicts certain of its fundamental values (such as freedom of speech) and blurs the line between war and peace, leading to a chaos of information (p. 21).

The authors offer a broad catalogue of Euro-Atlantic values and sort them into four categories: political values, economic values, moral values, and international law. In each category they identify a Western and a Russian interpretation of the values. In the West, for example, democracy is an uncontested political value. The people support the liberal values of democracy: protection of minorities, trust in institutions, and unfettered participation in politics. On the other hand, the authors argue, a majority of people in Russia conceive of democracy mainly as a means of assuring social and economic benefits. Even so, only 38% of Russian respondents found European-style democracy desirable, according to polls taken by the Levada Center in 2013, while the remainder believed Russia “needs a strong ruler and power concentrated in one hand” (p. 33).

In general, say the authors, Russians express a very different understanding of the role of the state in society and expect more involvement by the state in more aspects of everyday life than Westerners. Compared to Western respondents, the Russians polled ascribed much less value to freedom of assembly, the right to be elected to public office, and civil values in general. Russia’s public political participation rate is much lower than in the West. According to one PEW Research Center poll from 2011, the Westerners surveyed “demanded good democracy more than good economic situation” while 78% of the Russians would chose a strong economy over democracy, which was preferred by only 14% (p. 27).

The Russians also put less importance on certain elements of the free market such as competition and private property. In the category of moral values, compared to Russian citizens, those in Western countries express greater tolerance for homosexuality, and

a preference for gender equality and multiculturalism. Russians also see a strong correlation between morality and the church, with which many of them more or less strongly identify. At the same time, materialistic views are very common in Russian society, according to the authors. On the international law dimension, Western countries tend to support use of force to maintain global order, but only when it is authorized by the United Nations (p. 29). That organization is understood in Western countries as a platform for maintaining global peace and is widely supported, while Russians' support for it is selective (p. 33). The Russian public is dismissive of the trustworthiness of international organizations and reflects the zero-sum game approach of Russia's foreign policy (p. 50).

The authors also develop a catalogue of the manipulative techniques used by Russia. My selection of the most important techniques they mention would be: authority, repetition, simplification, labeling, moral superiority, hypothetical future, victimization, statistics, pseudo plurality, and lesser evil.

The authors selected four events for which they analyzed Russian news coverage. Each chapter of the publication deals with one case study using an identical structure. It first describes the Russian agenda and the tools of communication used by the Russian media. It then proceeds to describe how Russia seeks to redefine Euro-Atlantic values, and finally it identifies the narratives it uses. The standard period of time over which media reporting was sampled was six days.

The first case study deals with the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17. While RT and PK used different approaches in their coverage of the event, the authors claim that they obviously shared the same end goal: to defend the innocence of Russia. PK raised a great number of issues related to the catastrophe, such as potential technical problems with the plane, the theory that Vladimir Putin himself was the real target of the attack, quotations from anonymous local sources, etc. The techniques PK used were "expertise," "statistics" and the "common man." On the other hand, with its international audience RT did not use any of the same issues raised by PK. The key issue for RT was the (lack of) credibility of the Western media. The political value on which both channels were most focused was the "presumption of innocence." Their anchoring messages were identical: "it is unprofessional to assign guilt [to Russia] before the investigation is over" (p. 64). They blamed the Western media for failing to uphold that political value.

PK focused more than RT on assigning blame to United States and Ukraine. The United States was presented as the main villain, who would profit economically from worsening EU-Russia relations, while Ukraine was portrayed as a "failed state," unable to maintain order inside its territory (disparaging references to "color revolutions" were made). Selected historical events were used to make the case that both countries were untrustworthy (e.g., Colin Powell's testimony at the UN prior to the Iraq War). A crucial role was assigned to Vladimir Putin. He was portrayed as a comforting international politician, calling for an independent investigation – and as a strong domestic leader, reassuring his citizens that Russia would never fall into chaos like Ukraine. The main legitimizing strategies used by the channels in defending the Russian government's position were "rationalization" of the events and "previous experience" with such disasters.

The second case study concerned the implementation of Russian countersanctions in response to Western sanctions on Russia in the wake of its deliberate destabilization of Ukraine. The crucial strategy both TV channels used was to downplay any Russian link to events in Ukraine and push for a geopolitical explanation of the situation in which Russia was portrayed as a victim of Western sanctions forced to take countermeasures. “Expertise” and “victimization” were the most often used techniques identified in this case study. Russian TV invited experts to highlight the negative consequences of the countersanctions on European farmers and the positive ones for Russian farmers. The central political value in this case centered on the role of the state, which was framed as the defender of the national interest, which all (patriotic) citizens were expected to support. In the economic dimension, the TV channels redefined the free market, describing countersanctions as a way of curbing “aggressive Western imports” which would have positive implications for domestic farmers (p. 87). In discourse, the Western world was divided between United States on the one side, which was framed as the main driver behind the sanctions on Russia, and the EU on the other side, which would have to bear the consequences in the form of Russian countersanctions. On the international law dimension, the Russian channels flatly stated that the countersanctions were in compliance with WTO rules.

The third case study dealt with the first “humanitarian aid convoy” that Russia sent to eastern Ukraine in August 2014. The authors argue that unlike the downing of MH-17, this event was pre-planned by the Russian authorities and supported by narratives they controlled (p. 93). This was underlined by the visual appearance of the convoy, as all trucks were painted a neutral white and carried orthodox religious icons, etc. The rhetoric of both Russian TV channels focused on the local population’s “need and danger,” the “growing humanitarian catastrophe,” and the “offensive actions of the Ukrainian military.” They held up the image of Ukraine as a “failed state,” reinforced by anti-Ukraine narratives such as “radical groups are out of control,” an alleged lack of trust by Ukrainian citizens in their officials, and the irresponsibility of the Ukraine government in waging war against civilians and its own citizens.

RT also decried “sins of the American military.” The key values being redefined in this case were moral and humanitarian. Kiev and Washington were framed as not caring about Ukrainian civilians, while Russia’s solidarity with them was praised. Accordingly, the verbal and visual technique used on both media platforms appealed to emotions such as feelings of solidarity, empathy with suffering civilians and fear stoked by warnings of a dystopian, hypothetical future.

The final case study analyzed coverage of the Minsk II agreement, which aimed at bringing about a ceasefire in Ukraine. PK and RT employed three main narratives: blaming Ukraine for the conflict, highlighting the success of Russian diplomacy, and condemning Ukraine for allegedly violating the agreement. Vladimir Putin was portrayed as the most important leader at the summit, in contrast to his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko. For the first time, the technique of “infotainment” was used to present Poroshenko as a weak leader (by showing him yawning in meetings, etc.). The Ukrainian army and parliament were also discredited by the Russian news coverage, along with

the United States, whose foreign policy was alleged to be anti-democratic. The U.S. was depicted as the aggressor, while European countries were patronized as “less bad.” In general, the Russian channels portrayed Russia as the actor trying to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. A narrative of Russia’s moral superiority was employed, together with an appeal for solidarity under the banner of “one big happy family” with Russian compatriots living in Ukraine.

All in all, while the subject matter of the authors’ publication is highly relevant and current, there are several flaws in its presentation. The bulk of the publication is structured in a way that is inconvenient to the reader and that pays too much attention to small details at the expense of the larger picture. Its very detailed descriptions of media coverage make it hard to focus on its most important findings. Perhaps, given the authors’ affiliations with NATO, they felt a need to demonstrate absolute transparency in all their findings, yet the overtly detailed exposition may at times obscure the point. No attention is given to the question of what exactly Euro-Atlantic values are. The authors simply cite a catalogue of values, and then back their selection up with data provided by various surveys. How and why they selected the list of particular values is never explained. Furthermore, the surveys they use are sometimes as old as the year 2011. The publication was written in 2017. A lot happened in the six years in between that had the potential to change public opinion and shift its value orientation. Since the surveys are the only source on which the publication bases its selection of values, using such old data casts doubt on its relevance.

The publication’s concluding section is very short – only three pages out of 137 – which I find insufficient. It correctly focuses on the broader implications that Russia’s attempts to redefine Western values have for the Euro-Atlantic community. However, in such a small space it cannot go deep enough. The implications of these attempts are, in my opinion, much more important to any reader than a detailed description of the research’s findings – unless the reader is a media theoretician, which should not be the primary audience of a NATO publication. From my point of view, the unfortunate design of the publication effectively lowers its utility.

That being said, the authors do present findings that deserve closer attention and that will have value in countering Russia’s subversive activities in other situations. One of the principle objectives Russia has been pursuing, according to the study, is dividing the Euro-Atlantic community. Over the period of time tracked by the study, the authors found that this goal is being pursued on two separate tracks, with the aim first to divide the U.S. from the EU and second to divide the EU internally. Russia has been able to carefully craft narratives that aggravate long-time grievances among certain parts of Western society. One example of that is the anti-Americanism that is widespread among some segments of the European population.³ The authors’ case studies show that the Russian media has raised doubts by referring to controversial episodes from American foreign

³ James Kirchick, “Russia’s Plot Against the West,” *Politico*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-plot-against-the-west-vladimir-putin-donald-trump-europe/>.

policy history, such as Colin Powell's testimony to the UN Security Council prior to the invasion of Iraq, and the entire Iraq War itself, which created a major rift in the Euro-Atlantic community. In recalling these episodes, Russia deliberately targets those divisions, discredits Western policies, and presents itself as a champion of an alternative form of government. Russia's media messaging shows how long-term the consequences of those controversial foreign policy actions have been and how effectively they can be used to undermine the very same democracy in whose name they were said to be undertaken. As Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, points out: "the hangover of that [the Iraq War] has made Americans and the rest of the world very hostile to the idea of democracy, and democracy promotion. It has handed a propaganda tool to people like Putin in particular."⁴

As has become clear from the events and developments of recent years in Russia, nowadays the country has little in common with liberal democracies of the Western type. However, carefully maintaining the illusion of democracy in its messaging allows Russia to manipulate Western values and float a narrative of Russia as a democratic alternative. According to annual Freedom House surveys, 2017 marked the twelfth consecutive year that democracy has declined worldwide. Democratic standards have even been eroding in the countries that have long been its principal defenders, including the United States.⁵ The decline of liberal democracy within the Euro-Atlantic space goes hand in hand with a shift in values among its peoples. The role that Russia may have played in this value shift is a question of the utmost importance. It is highly relevant from NATO's point of view because it is adherence to commonly shared values that has ensured the Alliance's survival after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union as the common threat. At the end of the day, the weakening of the connecting "glue" caused by the erosion of liberal democratic values may prove to be the NATO's greatest problem. Seen from this perspective, the publication here reviewed is an important contribution, no matter its flaws. Other research should be conducted to deepen understanding of the Russian contribution to weakening the bonds of the Western alliance.

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⁴ Michael J. Abramowitz, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracies," Council on Foreign Relations, April 23, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/event/rise-illiberal-democracies>.

⁵ Michael J. Abramowitz and Wendell L. Wilkie II., "We looked at the state of democracy around the world, and the results are grim," Freedom House, January 18, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/we-looked-state-democracy-around-world-and-results-are-grim>.