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RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

In the proposed article, the author examines the sources and political consequences of American susceptibility to Putin's extensive propaganda, deployed in particular in the USA. It is emphasized that information campaigns in the media, in political organizations and in conservative religious circles have a certain influence on public opinion. More interesting, in the researcher's opinion, is the question of why many Americans have become susceptible to the topics of Russian propaganda in recent years.

Attention is paid to the most effective anti-Ukrainian topics, which in particular influenced the mood among Republicans. There were four such topics – first of all, this is the monetary component of US aid to Ukraine. Secondly, the media discusses the issue that Ukraine does not support religious freedom, but it is the Russian Federation that stands as a defender of Christianity and traditionalism. The third topic is the anti-global sentiments and actions supported by many Republicans.

Ukraine, as is known, has a political aim to join the EU. And the main “horror stories” of the conservative worldview in the USA are the European Union and the World Economic Forum. And, finally, the fourth topic is the “coup” of 2014: in the minds of American conservatives, it is the transformation of the Revolution of Dignity into a “coup” against the democratically elected Viktor Yanukovich, sponsored by the State Department of the Obama era. According to the author, today we should concentrate material resources and psychological efforts to develop potential counterstrategies to the dangers and challenges of modern psychological warfare. In this context, art can also play a role in making Americans less susceptible to the themes of Russian propaganda. The brilliant documentary about the Revolution of Dignity “Winter on Fire” was created ten years ago and can be re-presented to an interested public. Supporters of Ukraine should emphasize the basic political value – national sovereignty too. It is unlikely that any American administra-

¹ Professor of the University of Tennessee, USA, E-mail: abusch1@utk.edu.

tion will be able to sit on two chairs – simultaneously supporting the principle of national independence and being condescending to neo-imperialist goals in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Keywords: Influence of Putin's propaganda in the USA, Russian-Ukrainian war, conservative worldview, Republican Party, D. Trump administration, counter-strategy of supporters of Ukraine, defense of democracy.

Російський вплив у Сполучених Штатах Америки

У запропонованій статті автор розглядає джерела та політичні наслідки американської сприйнятливості стосовно розгорнутої зокрема у США путінської розгалуженої пропаганди. Підкреслено, що певного впливу на громадську думку набувають інформаційні акції у ЗМК, у політичних організаціях та у консервативних релігійних колах. Цікавішим, на думку дослідника, є питання, чому багато американців стали сприйнятливими до тем російської пропаганди в останні роки.

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Особлива увага звертається на найбільш ефективні антиукраїнські теми, котрі зокрема вплинули на настрої серед республіканців. Таких тем було чотири – передусім це грошова складова допомоги США Україні. По-друге, у медіа дискутується питання що Україна не підтримує релігійну свободу, проте саме РФ виступає є захисницею християнства та традиціоналізму. Третьою темою є підтримувані багатьма республіканцями антиглобальні настрої та дії.

Україна, як відомо, має політичний намір вступити до ЄС. А головними «страшилками» консервативного світогляду у США є Європейський Союз та Всесвітній економічний форум. І, насамкінець, четвертою темою є «переворот» 2014 року: у свідомості американських консерваторів – це перетворення Революції Гідності на «переворот» проти демократично обраного Віктора Януковича, спонсорований Державним департаментом доби Обами.

Як вважає автор, сьогодні слід зосередити матеріальні можливості й психологічні зусилля щоби виробити потенційні контрстратегії небезпекам і викликам сучасної психологічної війни. У цьому контексті мистецтво також може зіграти певну роль у тому, щоб зробити американців менш сприйнятливими до тем російської пропаганди. Блискучий документальний фільм про Революцію Гідності «Зима у вогні» був створений десять років тому і може бути знову представлений зацікавленій публіці. Прихильникам України варто

зробити наголос на базовій політичній цінності – національному суверенітеті. Вряд чи будь-яка американська адміністрація зможе вистіти на 2-х стільцях – одночасно підтримувати принцип національної незалежності і поблажливо ставитися до неоімперіалістичних цілей у російсько-українській війні.

Ключові слова: впливи путінської пропаганди в США, російсько-українська війна, консервативний світогляд, республіканська партія, адміністрація Д.Трампа, контр-стратегія прихильників України, захист демократії.

Efforts by the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation to influence public opinion and political decision-making in the United States have a long history. For decades, the Soviets provided a financial subsidy to the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), which also replaced its leadership at least twice on the orders of Moscow. The Party ran candidates for election, but its more important work was in advancing the aims of Soviet foreign policy through infiltration of media, popular culture, and other avenues (Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes 1998). More directly, the KGB had a directorate dedicated to disinformation aimed at promoting Soviet propaganda themes (John Barron 1983).

Unsurprisingly, given Vladimir Putin's KGB background, the Russian Federation has redoubled its efforts in this area. During the 2016 campaign, Russian sources bought up to 5,200 political Facebook ads, worth \$150,000. Most did not reference candidate but were aimed to inflame opinions on hot-button cultural issues. About 10 percent of the ads appeared in contested states, with some supporting Donald Trump or criticizing Hillary Clinton. (In comparison, the two campaigns spent a combined \$145 million on internet advertising (Darren Samuelsohn 2017). Russian troll farms managed the operation, and the U.S. Justice Department indicted 13 Russians and three Russian companies for their participation in the operation (Alana Abramson 2018). U.S. intelligence also concluded that Russia was behind the hacking and publication of damaging Democratic emails during the campaign (Raphael Satter, Jeff Donn, and Chad Day 2017). It was unclear whether Russian intervention aimed primarily to aid Trump, hurt Clinton, or simply sow disruption in the American political system (James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch, and John J. Pitney Jr. 2016), and extensive investigation failed to establish that there was any coordination between Trump and Russia (Special Counsel

Robert S. Mueller). Again in 2024, Russia bought ads, this time attacking Kamala Harris with manufactured videos (Clint Watts 2024).

Arguably of much greater significance have been efforts to influence conservative Americans through media, political organizations, and conservative churches. This indirect approach attempted to “influence the influencers.”

Tucker Carlson is by far the most important media personality in this category. Once a star commentator on Fox News, Carlson was released by Fox in April 2023 and began his own internet media operation posting on X (formerly Twitter). He has around 10 million followers, and some of his videos have had many more viewers than that (Lewis Pennock 2023). Carlson has offered his viewers a steady diet of criticism of Ukraine and rationalizations for Russian aggression echoing Russian propaganda themes, and acknowledges that he is “much more sympathetic” to Putin than to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Zachary Leeman). In February 2024, he travelled to Moscow to conduct an interview with Vladimir Putin that many observers, including Putin, characterized as a “softball” interview [For the interview transcript]. Carlson’s sympathy for Russia seems to be ideologically-motivated; the Russian government seeks to leverage it, as through the Putin interview. Carlson, in turn, has the ear of President Trump and his son, Donald Trump, Jr., and observers noted that Trump Jr. and Carlson jointly exerted significant influence over appointments to the new administration (Nick Wadhams 2024).

Other commentators have gotten caught up, sometimes inadvertently, in Russian influence operations. In September 2024 the Justice Department accused two Russian state media employees of funneling \$10 million into a conservative media company to produce, license, and post videos “often consistent with the Government of Russia’s interest in amplifying U.S. domestic divisions” (Siladitya Ray 2024). The six influencers posting under the company had a combined total of more than 7 million subscribers. At the same time, the Justice Department seized 32 internet domains that were being used to “spread Russian government propaganda with the aim of reducing international support for Ukraine” and influence voters in American elections (Siladitya Ray 2024).

Some conservative political organizations have also been targeted. In one notable case, Russian national Maria Butina was jailed for 18 months for serving as an unregistered foreign agent whose task was to infiltrate conservative political groups (Butina admitted to the charges as part of a

plea deal) (Ewan Palmer 2022). One of the organizations she targeted was the National Rifle Association (NRA), one of the most effective lobbying organizations in the country. The NRA is hated by American gun-control advocates, who seized on the argument that the organization was subservient to Russian interests. For its part, the NRA admitted to receiving around \$2,500 in dues, subscriptions, and donations from Russians and Americans living in Russia, a very small fraction of its annual budget. Allegations were made by Democrats that the NRA funneled money from Moscow into support for the Trump campaign and that top NRA officials sold access to the American political system, but they were unproven.

A third prong of Russian influence operations has been to build connections with traditionalist religious organizations in the United States. Along with the NRA, Maria Butina allegedly targeted the National Prayer Breakfast and other religious organizations. More broadly, for nearly two decades Russian Orthodox leaders have worked to forge ties with American evangelicals and other conservative religious forces on the basis of shared antipathy toward Western secular liberal elites (John P. Burgess 2018). Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul writes that “Putin deputized the Russian Orthodox Church to nurture relations with like-minded churches in the West, including evangelical ones in the United States. He personally fostered ties between the Orthodox Church in Moscow and its counterpart in the United States, a union that later helped him win endorsement of his annexation of Crimea from many in the Russian diaspora. When I was the U.S. ambassador to Russia, I witnessed the Russian Orthodox Church’s aggressive courtship of conservative Christian leaders from the United States” – leaders ranging from evangelical Franklin Graham to the growing congregations of the Russian Orthodox Church in the U.S. (Michael McFaul). To put this into full context, the current Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (Kirill) was an agent of the KGB for at least twenty years (from the late 1960s to the late 1980s), during which time he worked to sway the World Council of Churches toward the Soviet line (Felix Corley 2018). Under his direction, the Church has been strongly pro-Putin and has been, as it was throughout Soviet and Russian history, an arm of the Kremlin.

Sources of American Receptivity. Altogether, the mechanics of Russian influence operations have not changed much since Soviet methods in the Cold War. What is more interesting is the question of why many Americans have become receptive to Russian propaganda themes in recent years.

The prerequisite for successful Russian propaganda has been the collapse of political trust in the United States combined with the rise of what American political scientists call “negative polarization” (Alan I. Abramowitz 2018). There is no longer a common set of sources for political information; cable news, talk radio, and the internet have multiplied and fragmented the information space. At the same time, polarization has led to a mentality that is automatically suspicious of, if not hostile to, information or analyses perceived as coming from the “other side.” Many, if not most, Americans identify a few politically trusted sources and disregard the others. This makes them vulnerable to manipulation if malignant actors can “influence the influencers.” There have always been a variety of sources and Americans have always developed preferences among them, but this tendency has gone to an extreme.

64 — One might ask why Republicans have become the primary target of Russian propaganda rather than Democrats and the political left. During the Soviet era, it was the reverse, as portions of the American left were more instinctively sympathetic to ideological themes emanating from the Soviet Union (Paul Hollander 1981). Even as late as the Obama presidency, which ended in 2017, Republicans were more likely to be suspicious of Russia and to support military aid to Ukraine than were Democrats. During the 2012 presidential election, Obama ridiculed Republican opponent Mitt Romney for urging an assertive posture against Russia (Chris Cillizza 2022).

Public opinion polls of Democrats and Republicans showed a dramatic change of opinion in 2016. On balance, voters in neither party approved of Russia, but prior to 2016 Republicans were significantly more disapproving than Democrats; after 2016, Democrats disapproved at a higher rate than Republicans (Margaret Brennan 2018). Nothing in the world had changed, except that Democrats began to believe that Putin liked Trump, and Republicans began to see that Democrats consequently hated Putin. This was negative polarization at its worst.

Moreover, conservative Americans had many reasons to distrust the predominantly liberal media in the United States. Outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and major network television news were often favorable to Democrats and unfavorable to Republicans, not least when many embraced Russian collusion allegations against Trump that were ultimately abandoned. Consequently, conservative Americans have sought out sources such as Fox News and Tucker Carlson who they believe will stand up against untruths advanced in the “mainstream media.”

Even though Donald Trump initiated military aid to Ukraine, when the full-scale Russian invasion began in 2022 and Joe Biden significantly increased that aid, aid became vulnerable to negative polarization. For many Republicans, if Biden, most Democrats, and the New York Times were for aid, there must be something wrong with it. At first, these suspicions were outweighed by Republicans' instinctive desire to support a small country fighting for freedom, but the suspicions left an opening for anti-Ukrainian themes, many of which overlap with Russian propaganda themes, to erode that support (Moira Fagan 2025).

Effective Anti-Ukraine Themes. What themes have been most successful in eroding Republican support for Ukraine?

1. **The monetary cost of U.S. aid.** Though they have an inconsistent fiscal record in office, Republicans have for decades been the party more concerned about excessive federal spending overall. There is also a strand of Republican politics, reaching back to pre-World War II isolationists, who are resentful of U.S. resources being provided to foreign countries, regardless of the cause. Republican presidents from Eisenhower through George W. Bush have succeeded in restraining that impulse, but that restraint is now gone. It is common for conservative critics of Ukraine aid to exaggerate the total amount of aid given by the U.S., overstate the amount of aid given in cash relative to the value of military equipment and ammunition, and understate the amount of aid given by Europeans and others (Lori Robertson and Robert Farley 2025). These arguments, while mostly homegrown, can converge with Russian propaganda themes emphasizing corruption in the Ukrainian government and economy.

2. **Anti-globalism.** With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, anti-communism lost its role as a glue holding together conservatives. For some, "anti-globalism" took its place. Globalism here is a vague concept. At one extreme, it can mean a program of abolishing the nation-state and turning all people into "citizens of the world" governed by a transnational government. By this definition, all conservatives are anti-globalist. Depending on who is making the argument, though, globalism can also mean free trade, collective security arrangements, or even, arguably, any sense of responsibility for the well-being of other countries. Globalism is frequently tied to international corporate elites who, in this view, are downgrading national borders for their own economic interests. Two of the most prominent "boogey-men" of this worldview are the European Union and the World Economic Forum, which famously meets in Davos,

Switzerland. Ukraine hopes to join the EU, and Zelenskyy has attended Davos, leading some conservatives of this school to call him a “globalist puppet of George Soros and the Clintons” (Ken Meyer 2022).

3. **Religious freedom and traditionalism.** Another common theme that has reached American conservatives is that Ukraine does not support religious liberty and concurrently, that Russia is a defender of Christianity and traditionalism. Republicans today are much more likely to attend church and to hold traditionalist social views than Democrats, so such arguments are potentially more effective with them. How have these descriptions of Ukraine and Russia, which are so contrary to reality, taken hold? The first – that Ukraine is hostile to religious liberty – is derived from the Ukrainian government’s efforts to manage the potential Fifth Column represented by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (Robert Amsterdam 2024). Whatever the complications inherent in those efforts, in general Ukraine is characterized by religious pluralism. Ukrainian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim all worship freely. The only religious organization that has been limited in Ukraine is the one connected to Moscow (the UOC-MP announced its independence in May 2022, but has never actually declared autocephaly). On the other hand, the only religious organization permitted to operate freely by the Russian government is the one intertwined with the state and led by a former KGB agent.

The Russian Orthodox Church has for years sought to persuade American evangelicals and other religious groups of the second myth – that Putin, the former KGB colonel, is a brave defender of the Christian world against the moral corruption of Western Europe, a claim that boils down to little more than that he doesn’t like gays. Together, these myths have gained traction because American Christians know little about Ukraine or Russia, including the connections of the UOC-MP to Russia, the degree to which the Russian Orthodox Church is an arm of the state, or the conduct of the Russian forces toward independent churches in occupied Ukraine. They are, however, well aware of the secular amorality of Western Europe and their own American critics, and are also aware of the persecution of Christians globally.

4. **The “coup” of 2014.** Finally, a theme that has penetrated the consciousness of American conservatives is the conversion of the Revolution of Dignity into a “coup” against the democratically-elected Viktor Yanukovich, sponsored by Obama’s State Department and the

ubiquitous, nefarious State Department official Victoria Nuland (Amil Imani 2025). Here is a theme straight from undiluted Russian propaganda, which takes full advantage of the opportunities afforded by negative polarization. Some Republicans and many anti-globalists are eager to blame the Democrat Obama for the world's ills, forgetting that Obama refused to aid Ukraine and it was Trump who later reversed that policy.

For the most part, this list of claims against Ukraine are easily disproven. That they continue to hold power demonstrates two important things. First, in the current political and informational environment, it is not enough to have the facts on your side – you must also have allies in the information space who are trusted by those you need to win over. Having the endorsement of the Washington Post and actor Sean Penn for a position is meaningless, or even a negative, for half of Americans – moreover, the half, at least for the time being, that has its hands on the levers of power. Second, in many cases, Ukraine is a side casualty in internal American politics: negative polarization, the crusade against “globalism,” longstanding popular skepticism of foreign aid, and legitimate fears by American Christians about the moral drift of their own culture have nothing to do with Ukraine but all have played a central role in some conservatives’ reluctance to embrace Ukraine. Russian propaganda has often capitalized on these trends, but did not cause them. This will not be easily fixed.

Potential Counter-strategies. To be successful, supporters of Ukraine will have to recalibrated some of their arguments and approaches to account for the new governing coalition in the United States. The recent visits to Ukraine by Franklin Graham and Pastor Mark Burns, Donald Trump’s spiritual adviser, are an overdue step toward appealing to conservative Americans. Ukraine has a vibrant civil society which can and should connect more often with conservative American religious leaders and new-style media personalities.

The arts could also play a role in making Americans less susceptible to Russian propaganda themes. The brilliant documentary on the Revolution of Dignity, *Winter on Fire*, was produced ten years ago and could be reintroduced to the interested public. New documentaries such as *A Faith Under Siege* can be a powerful corrective, as well.

Not least, supporters of Ukraine can find a message that might resonate with the anti-globalists by focusing on their prime political value, national sovereignty. The 2022 National Conservative manifesto lists “National

Independence” and “Rejection of Imperialism and Globalism” as its first two principles [National Conservatism]. It can be emphasized that Ukraine’s fight is not just a fight for liberty but for sovereignty. It is not hard to make the case that Russia’s neo-imperialist invasion is the greatest assault on the principle of national sovereignty that the world has seen since Iraq attempted to swallow Kuwait in 1990. America can either have a world in which the principle of national sovereignty is secure, or it can have a world in which Russia gets its way in Ukraine. It cannot have both.

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