



# International Politics

East and Southeast Europe



## IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND THEIR ECHOES IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

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# Preface

This study reveals the central ideological narratives of Russian propaganda and its localization in Armenia and Georgia. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian propaganda machine has intensified its work and influences ex-Soviet countries in a particularly intensive manner. At the same time, the Russian propaganda machine is also utilised by the Kremlin in other European countries and adapts the narrative to the public mood and social contexts in the respective country. Far-right conservative ideology is the central theme of the propaganda. Frequently used topics include homophobia, so-called family values, dubious conspiracy theories, the West as an alleged warmonger, or supposed democratic deficits to spread distrust among citizens.

While Russia is preoccupied with its neo-imperialistic war in Ukraine, other countries are seeking ways of decreasing Russian influence on their societies. Russia looks at ex-Soviet countries as its “backyard”. Whatever these states do to diversify or change foreign policy direction is perceived with jealousy and followed by negative reactions from Russia. Russia works mainly with antidemocratic forces within these countries and promotes a perception that the traditional partnership with Russia is the only proper foreign policy of the ex-Soviet states. The so-called interview of [Tucker Carlson with Vladimir Putin](#) showed once again that the agency of those states is not even discussed; they are not given the possibility to decide their future. According to Putin, these countries are manipulated by the West, by the USA, and by NATO. The same thinking is quite evident in Armenia’s current attempt to deepen relations with the EU, which Russia sees as a Western attempt to destabilize the region. This is one of the directions of a Russian disinformation campaign.

Another direction is the focus on traditions and values. As is shown in this study, the depiction of the collective West as something against ‘our’ (‘Armenian’, ‘Georgian’, ‘Russian’, the list continues depending on where the propaganda works) traditions and values is one of the central narratives of the Russian disinformation used both in Armenia and Georgia.

This study, one of the first of its kind, begins to unravel the main message of Russian propaganda in Georgia and Armenia.

I hope you enjoy reading this paper and learning about Armenian and Georgian cases. Additionally, you may be interested in learning about FNF’s other studies in this field:

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# 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the largescale invasion of Ukraine, the world has finally been encountered the imperialist policies of the post-Soviet government of Russia. However, post-Soviet states have found themselves facing these challenges for decades before 2022. This is particularly true for Armenia and Georgia, which have been suffered from the threat of Russian neo-imperialist expansion long before, albeit in very different ways and with very different responses from their societies. Among other challenges coming from the neo-imperialist Kremlin, Armenia and Georgia have also experienced the Putinist propaganda machine. Today, as the Kremlin's policies in the post-Soviet space have become more aggressive, the dangers presented by the Kremlin's propaganda have become more ardent. At the same time, today Russia finds itself increasingly weakened and isolated following its military aggression against Ukraine and international sanctions; new opportunities are being opened to get rid of Russia's influence in various spheres, including the influence of Russian propaganda. Hence, while Russian propaganda and its influence in the South Caucasus has always been an important topic to study, today it is even more urgent to deal with this issue.

Given this peculiarity of the contemporary Russian government's ideology, as a cocktail of various ideological elements, it can be quite flexible. This flexibility can make political propaganda quite efficient since it is possible to tailor-fit the propaganda messages to specific contexts. In the post-Soviet space, where the former colonial power is Russia itself, relying too much on this language could be counter-efficient. In this space, Russian propaganda emphasized other elements, such as stressing common heritage from the era of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire, such as the narrative of "victory over fascism" and "Russian language and culture". Also, in some contexts, the element that focuses on "traditional" or "family" values is stressed.

## General context

Lebanon, which had seen movements calling for democratic change even prior to the Arab Spring of 2011, faced equal difficulties as other countries in the region in transforming waves of protests into lasting political change. Despite the renewal of political energy after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, reforms remained extremely limited.

## 2. Research Questions and Hypothesis

The goal of this research is to comprehensively examine the ideological components of modern Kremlin propaganda, assess the extent to which these components resonate in the media landscapes of Armenia and Georgia, and analyze the perceptions and experiences of Russian émigrés in relation to Kremlin propaganda.

This study has three main research questions:

- What are the core ideological components of modern Kremlin propaganda, and how do they manifest in the content disseminated by the Kremlin?
- To what extent do the ideological components of Kremlin propaganda find resonance or similarity in the media landscape of Armenia and Georgia considering their differing geopolitical relationships with Russia?
- How do Russian émigrés perceive the ideological components of Kremlin propaganda, particularly considering their personal experiences with the impact of this propaganda and their subsequent exile?

With the first research question, our research attempts to determine the ideas the Kremlin is trying to spread, whether the Kremlin has a strict ideological basis it uses to justify its actions, upon what political ideology or ideologies the most widely propagated ideas rely and in what context these are presented.

The second research question aims to identify elements of the Kremlin's propaganda in the media space of two South Caucasus countries. While Armenia, is officially considered an ally (but in fact is not one [1]), Georgia is in a state of open conflict with Russia. Putin's Russia has ambitions to involve the countries of the former USSR in its geopolitical, neo-imperial goals. One of the tools that the Kremlin uses to strengthen its influence in different countries is propaganda. It is relevant to understand whether the ideological narratives of the Kremlin propaganda are widespread in these countries, whether they are identical or modified, and if so, what local themes are introduced into them.

It is necessary to note that the Kremlin's narratives have not necessarily been created by the Kremlin. In some cases, the Kremlin is just one of the distributors. Consequently, many narratives common in Armenia and Georgia could be copied from other countries, where far-right populist ideas are widespread—such as the United States, France, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, or the Philippines. Their similarity with the Kremlin's narratives could also be explained by shared ideologies between those spreading them. Given the importance and weight of Russia in the international arena and its status is one of the main players leading a large-scale information war against liberal-democratic states (one could mention the troll factory in the past associated with Evgeni Prigozhin [2]), there is

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1 See e.g. this article where one of the authors of this research paper showed that relations between Armenia and Russia are not relations between allied countries: Vardanyan, E. (2023) Is democratic Armenia an ally of Putin's Russia? Available at: <https://www.freiheit.org/node/39024> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

2 Koval, I. (2023) 'Prigozhin's troll factories in Russia: What's next? Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/prigozhins-troll-factories-in-russia-whats-next/a-66194462> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

reason to assume that when narratives identical to the Kremlin narratives are promoted openly, these narratives are a result of Russian influence. Determining exactly who introduced a narrative would require a separate study. However, even if some narratives are not connected to the Kremlin, ideological similarities offer reason to believe that the Kremlin can take advantage of this ideological closeness with the authors and supporters of these narratives by engaging them in the fight against common ideological enemies.

The third research question is based on the following considerations. Russian emigrants have felt the influence of this propaganda. Besides, this propaganda has been one of the factors that contributed to the political repression and aggression against Ukraine, which created a situation that has forced these emigrants to leave Russia. Their perception is of particular value. The paper thus also tries to identify the positions and opinions of emigrants who, by the nature of their activities—journalistic, activist, political—, were subjected to propaganda. Their knowledge can help test conjectures and the conclusions made under the first and second question. The inclusion of Russian emigrants into this research helps to better understand the workings and impact of the Kremlin's propaganda.

The central hypothesis guiding this research posits that the Kremlin's ideological foundation primarily aligns with the principles of far-right populism, albeit characterized by distinct nuances and adaptations.

### 3. Far-Right Populism and the Kremlin's Propaganda: Literature Review

One of the negative trends of recent years has been widespread ethno-nationalist, right-wing populist discourse as well as the activation of groups promoting it. Moreover, this trend has affected almost all corners of the globe. In many democratic countries, right-wing populists have taken serious positions in the political field. Many commentators believe that this trend is one of the most serious threats to liberal democracy. According to research carried out by the British Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs ("Chatham House"), 45% of the respondents who are part of the European "elite" consider that populist and anti-European parties are the main threat to the European Union.[3]

We should note here that we have a very specific definition of "populism." According to Mudde (2004), populism is a "narrow" ideology (i.e. it is not self-sufficient, existing only together with one of the "big" ideologies), according to which society is divided into two homogeneous and conflicting groups: "pure people" and the "corrupted elite".[4] According to populist rhetoric, politics should express the universal will of those "pure people".

Cass Mudde notes that far-right populism is an ideology that combines at least three characteristics: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Other researchers consider the opposition to checks and balances, disregard of minority rights, preference for monoculture instead of multiculturalism, preference for closed borders, and conservative values as features of extreme right populism.[5] One of the characteristic elements of far-right populism is the demonization of social groups. It is also important to note that although populists always refer to the people, analysis of their discourse shows that in reality, when they talk about "the people," they understand only their supporters. As Jan Werner Müller points out, the main claim of populists is that whoever does not support a populist party is not part of the real people.[6]

One of the popular narratives of the far-right populist discourse is that it is necessary to preserve "traditional values" that are on the verge of destruction. Often in the phrase "traditional values," the words "national", "family", and "Christian" are used together with the word "traditional," or the latter simply replaces it. However, this discourse is not characteristic only of right-wing populists; in fact, this is one of the most important narratives of social conservatism.

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3 Raines, Th., Goodwin, M., Cutts, D. (2017) *The Future of Europe: Comparing Public and Elite Attitudes*. London: Chatham House. (p. 31), Available at: <https://bit.ly/48oRWQ7> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

4 Mudde, C. (2004) "The populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp. 541–563.

5 Inglehart, R., Norris, P. (2016) "Trump, Brexit, And the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *SSRN Electronic Journal* [Preprint].

6 Müller, J.-W. (2017) *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (p. 20).



According to the study “Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right”, in the United States, the “family values” banner is used by social conservatives to oppose abortion, feminism, pornography, universal sex education, the institution of divorce, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, civil unions, secularism, and atheism.

“Rhetorically, the phrase ‘family values’ appealed to a wide cross-section of voters (including many non-evangelicals). It portrayed a partisan agenda as a commonsensical response to liberals’ ‘attack’ on the family. It also resisted easy definition. Conservative politicians and ministers couched their criticism of almost everything they opposed—abortion, feminism, gay rights, nuclear disarmament, and high taxes—in the language of family values.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The Russian Federation recently adopted a document on traditional values that says the following:

“Traditional values are the moral precepts shaping Russian citizens’ worldview, handed down from one generation to another and forming the foundation of Russia’s national civic identity and the country’s single cultural space as well as reinforcing civic unity, and they are reflected in the unique and authentic spiritual, historical, and cultural development path of Russia’s multi-ethnic people.” <sup>[8]</sup>

Interestingly, the document also tries to define the list of these values:

“Traditional values include life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, civic consciousness, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its destiny, high moral ideals, strong families, productive labor, the primacy of the spiritual over corporeal, humanism, charity, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and mutual respect, historical memory, and the continuity of generations as well as the unity of Russia’s peoples.”

As can be seen from the above quote, social conservative values—for example patriotism, high moral ideals, strong families, service to the Fatherland, and collectivism—have been combined with “Enlightenment” values such as humanism and civic consciousness.

The Kremlin places this document about traditional values within the framework of its narrative that there is a crisis of civilization and values in the world and that Russia is the country that is putting up resistance to that crisis. The document also notes that traditional values are considered as a phenomenon contributing to the protection of sovereignty. Traditional values are presented as something that lies at the core of the values of the entire Russian people to be used to neutralize threats from the West. Specific actors that, according to the Kremlin, are a threat to traditional values are also mentioned:

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7 Dowland, S. (2015) Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right. University of Pennsylvania Press (pp. 10–11).

8 “On Approving the Fundamentals of State Policy to Preserve and Strengthen Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values.” Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation, November 12, 2022. Available at: <https://www.prlib.ru/en/item/1846689> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

“Threats to traditional values come from extremist and terrorist organizations, some news media and communication platforms, the actions of the United States and other unfriendly foreign states, several transnational corporations and foreign NGOs, as well as the activities of some organizations and individuals in the territory of Russia.”

The following point is particularly interesting as it shows exactly which phenomena and ideas the Kremlin considers dangerous and a threat to Russian society:

“Ideological and psychological influences on citizens are leading to the dissemination of a system of ideas and values that are alien to the Russian people and destructive for Russian society (hereinafter referred to as “destructive ideology”), such as the fostering of egoism, permissiveness and immorality, rejection of the ideals of patriotism, service to the Fatherland, the natural progression of life, the values of a strong family, marriage, raising multiple children, productive labor, and Russia’s positive contribution to global history and culture as well as the erosion of the traditional family through the promotion of non-traditional sexual identities.”

One can also note that the document states that in order to protect its traditional values, it is necessary “to position the Russian state on the international stage as a custodian and defender of traditional universal spiritual and moral values.”[9]

Stoeckl and Uzlaner note that Russia’s policy of adopting traditional values as the main agenda concept has been adopted since Putin’s third term:

“It coincided with a radical shift of the political agenda from democratization and modernization, the two key themes of the presidency of Medvedev, to political authoritarianism and confrontation with the West under Putin. One of the key elements of Putin’s new agenda became the ideology of traditional moral values.”

They also note what the Kremlin sees as a threat to traditional values:

“The idea that Russian national identity is under siege by relativism, pluralism, and liberalism and has to be defended against Western values and ‘foreign agents’ became dominant after 2011.”[10]

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9. Ibid.

10 Stoeckl, K., Uzlaner, D. (2022) “The Moralism International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars’ (2022).” Politics. 1. Available at: <https://research.library.fordham.edu/politics/1> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

Curanović and Leustean note “Constructing Russia’s values in contrast to those of the West is one of two characteristic features of the Russian discourse on traditional values.”[11] Another researcher, Hovorun, argues that the state ideology of Russia is civilizational exceptionalism: “Russian civilizational exceptionalism is the dominant state ideology, through which the Kremlin rationalizes its war in Ukraine and tries to compel the Russian population to support this war.”[12] Hovorun also suggests that the Kremlin does not actually advocate for the protection of traditional values common to all but only for Orthodox values.[13]

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11 Curanović, A., Leustean, L. (2015). The Main Features of Traditional Values in Russian Discourse. In *The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status* (pp. 8–10). German Marshall Fund of the United States. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19000.6> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

12 Hovorun, C. (2023). “Traditional Values’ are Russia’s geopolitical weapons.” *Public Discourse*. Available at: <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2023/07/90088/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

13 Ibid.

## 4. Methodology

This study is a form of interdisciplinary research, combining elements of academic study, policy research, and political journalism. The research used qualitative research methods such as discourse analysis, comparative qualitative analysis, and in-depth interviews.

To identify Russian propaganda narratives, we studied all publications of the Internet version of the Izvestia newspaper and Russian-language text publications on the RT<sup>[14]</sup> website for 2022. To identify Kremlin or Kremlin-like ideological propaganda narratives in Georgia and Armenia, we studied mainly the publications of the Georgian ultra-conservative resource “Georgia & World” (geworld.ge) and the electronic version of the Armenian newspaper Iravunk (iravunk.com), which is known for its ultra-conservative nationalist agenda. As an addition, we also identified and analyzed through the Google search engine a number of publications in other sources by introducing key words such as “traditional values”, “national identity”, “LGBT propaganda”, “globalism”, “liberal” and “neoliberal”. We have chosen these keywords because our preliminary research showed that they are commonly used in the Kremlin’s ideological narratives. The media materials used for this study were taken within the following time span: January 2022 to May 2023.

We did not have the goal of identifying the breadth and frequency of specific narratives. Our goal was to identify propaganda narratives that have an ideological component. We did not attempt to identify all existing narratives or measure the most important or most widespread ones. Our aim was to identify the relevant Kremlin or Kremlin-like narratives that are widespread in the media environment.

For the third task, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews. These included 13 interviews with emigrants from Russia and Belarus, currently living in Armenia and Georgia, who left their countries because of disagreements with their own government.<sup>[15]</sup> The interviews were carried out in person. We also interviewed two experts residing in Georgia to test our observations regarding Russian propaganda narratives in this country. Some of the interviewees chose to remain anonymous; others did not object or even insisted that their real names be mentioned when quoting. The part of the research concerning Georgia was carried out in cooperation with Georgian expert Guram Jajanidze. In addition, we interviewed two experts residing in Georgia.

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14. Russia Today (RT), <https://www.rt.com/>

15. We decided to include an interview participant from Belarus since Belarus is a close ally of Russia; moreover, the two countries form a supranational union known as the Union State.

## 5. Russian Media Discourse Analysis

As mentioned, Russian propaganda promotes the idea that there exists a certain set of Russian traditional family values. Traditional values have also been included in official documents such as the Russian Concept of Foreign Policy.[16] The term “traditional values” occupies a prominent place in the official rhetoric of the Russian state, commonly reproduced by state officials and politicians. [17]

The narrative claims that while the West sees liberalism as the only true doctrine, Russia does not seek to impose its point of view.[18] Where Russia liberates territories, peace and traditional values are restored—that is, happiness, harmony and the natural order of things, including a focus on “traditional marriage”. [19] Western values are presented extremely negatively positioning same-sex marriage and gender identity as the main traits of Western civilization. This is made to overshadow other equally important things, such as equality of opportunity and human rights. In this interpretation, the entire Western civilization, the entire democratic world, is concerned only with gay marriage and transgender issues while ignoring equality of opportunity and rights, self-government, respect for different opinions, development, social justice.

Izvestia quotes the Russian political scientist Danilin: “Western values are same-sex marriage, gender identity, and so on, while the union of a man and a woman is the only possible type of marriage.”[20] Another narrative promoted is that the West is pursuing a policy of neo-colonialism

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16. Gusarov, S. (2023). “Doctrinal basis’: Putin approved the updated Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.” RT [in Russian]. 31 March. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/1130448-putin-koncepciya-vneshnei-politiki-rossiya> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

17. For example, Chairman of the Upper House of the Russian Parliament Valentina Matvienko notes, “The traditional values and unique cultural heritage of our multinational people, its cohesion, and unity serve as a solid foundation for the preservation of Russian statehood.” In the RT (2023), Matvienko said that the unity of Russians allows them to confront new challenges. RT [in Russian]. 31 March. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/russia/news/1102657-matvienko-rossiyane-splochyonnost> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

18. See e.g. Kosachev, K. (2022). “Application for the system: Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Konstantin Kosachev—about the meaning of Vladimir Putin’s words at the Valdai Forum for a new world order.” Izvestia [in Russian] 27 October. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1417041/konstantin-kosachev/zaiavka-na-sistemu> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

19. See e.g. Izvestia (2022). “In Kherson they pointed out the lack of jurisdiction of Kyiv over the region.” Izvestia [in Russian]. 6 August. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1375770/2022-08-06/v-kherson-e-ukazali-na-otsutstvie-iurisdikcii-kieva-nad-regionom> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

20. Izvestia (2022). “The political scientist assessed the changes in the Russian Federation after the adoption of amendments to the Constitution.” Izvestia [in Russian]. 1 July. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1358361/2022-07-01/politolog-otcenil-izmeneniia-v-rf-posle-priniatiia-popravok-v-konstituciiu> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

when it promotes the model of liberal globalism. No evidence for this is given.[21] According to its propaganda Russia, unlike the West, is a superior moral entity that will never give up good values: love for the motherland, faith, and traditional values.[22] “Traditional values” are seen as Russia’s brand, which not only is the basis of Russia’s international position but also helps attract international support for Russia by all those who reject “the degradation” promoted by the West. It seems that this narrative is fully represented in the following statement of Kremlin political scientist:

“But the attractive—or at least not repulsive—image of Russia in the eyes of most of the world is also due to the fact that, as the concept says, ‘the demand for traditional values is growing.’ Especially against the background of how the progressive West aggressively and even stubbornly promotes the Sodomite ideal. The spectacle of ‘Satan drinking from a full cup of idolized blood’ is not to everyone’s liking. Believers of various religions converge in such rejection as well as those who are not too religiously ardent but do not want a worldwide gay pride parade. For the time being, the majority of sinful humanity still prefers the ideal of the Madonna to the ideal of Sodom, and a country that professes just such a preference in no uncertain terms will be honored more than a country of obscene ugliness. Here, we are not talking about intrusive missionary work—this is just what the West is doing—but simply about the approval of natural law. “The human soul is, by nature, a Christian’ (albeit with all the sins and falls), and if Russia defends the human right to the traditional natural state of being, people will be drawn to it.”[23]

This narrative is used to promote pro-Russian sentiments in other countries particularly in the post-Soviet space, Eastern Europe, and the Global South. At the same time it creates the impression in Russia that the Kremlin’s conservative position enjoys widespread support outside of Russia’s borders. Thus, Russia Today is trying to illustrate this narrative with reports from Moldova,[24] Serbia,[25] and Ethiopia.[26]

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21. See e.g. Izvestia (2022). “Putin pointed out the West’s cynical use of Ukrainian civilians.” Izvestia [in Russian]. 30 June. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1357918/2022-06-30/putin-ukazal-na-tcinichnoe-ispolzovanie-zapadom-mirnykh-zhitelei-ukrainy> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

22. See e.g. Izvestia (2022). “Putin announced the battle of the military in Donbass for the security of the homeland.” Izvestia [in Russian]. 9 May. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1332096/2022-05-09/putin-zaiavil-o-srazhenii-voennykh-v-donbasse-za-bezopasnost-rodiny> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

23. Sokolov, M. (2022). “Natural law concept.” RT [in Russian]. 6 September. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1045689-sokolov-putin-rossiya-koncepciya-gumpolitika> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

24. RT (2023). “Sandu, under pressure from Western curators, wants to drag the country into a conflict”: Ilan Shor in an interview with RT—about the situation in Moldova. RT [in Russian]. 1 March. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/1117528-shor-rt-intervyu-moldaviya-sandu-zapad> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

25. RT (2022). “We are very grateful to the Russian brothers”: A mass march is taking place in Serbia for the unity of the country and traditional values. RT [in Russian]. 28 August. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/foto/1042178-serbiya-shestvie-tradicionnye-cennosti> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

26. RT (2023). “Interchurch dialogue”: Metropolitan Klinsky on cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. RT [in Russian]. 26 February. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/video/1116203-rpc-afrika-sotrudnichestvo-dialog-cerkov> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

There is also an attempt to show that traditional values are becoming more and more popular in the countries of the West, which is openly or implicitly linked to a supposed strengthening of Russia's international position. For this, Russia Today refers to Viktor Orban and Marine Le Pen,[27] to Giorgia Meloni,[28] and to American far-right figures such as blogger Tucker Carlson and politician Jamie Raskin.[29]

Simultaneously Russia claims that liberalism in the West does not exist in reality and that liberalism is nothing but a smokescreen for the West.[30] This ties into the narrative that liberalism per se is not such a bad thing, but that the West has been diverted from the "true liberal" path. What is currently being promoted in the West as liberalism is abomination. It is interesting to note that modern liberalism is presented as something opposed to classical liberalism, which, according to the Russian authorities, is the basis of European civilization. The Kremlin, thereby, promotes the idea that it supports European values, has a positive attitude toward European civilization, and regrets that all this is no longer available in the West.[31]

At the same time, liberalism is presented as something that threatens Russian traditional values and Russian sovereignty because it is the ideology of the collective West, which, according to one of the Russian narratives, wants to impose its dominance on the world.[32]. This leads to a question: Is liberalism good or bad in the Kremlin's view? In order to, on the one hand, accuse the

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27. RT (2022). Orban and Le Pen discussed the "damaging and dangerous" sanctions policy of the European Union. RT [in Russian]. 27 May. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1008412-orban-i-le-pen> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

28. Benediktov, K. (2022). Italian Version. RT [in Russian]. 27 September. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/1054025-benediktov-vybory-italiya-itog> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

29. RT (2022). Fox News host Carlson: "Biden's "religious war" in Ukraine is hurting the U.S. economy." RT [in Russian]. 28 October. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1067182-baiden-ukraina-toplivo-ssha> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

30. Izvestia (2022). "The Russian Ambassador to Canada explained the new sanctions by the dictatorship's fear of the truth." Izvestia [in Russian]. 18 October. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1411792/2022-10-18/posol-rf-v-kanade-obiasnil-sanktcii-kanady-strakhom-diktatury-pered-pravdoi> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

31. See e.g. Taran, I., Lobanov, M. (2022). "Institute of Containment": Why Russia decided to leave the Council of Europe. RT [in Russian]. 18 March. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/977221-sovet-evropy-rossiya-mid-zaharova> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

See also RT (2023). "Lavrov: Russia sees the ban on RT and Sputnik in Europe as intolerance towards pluralism of opinions." RT [in Russian]. 15 February. Available at: <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1111727-lavrov-evropa-plyuralizm> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

32. See for example the following quote: The so-called collective West in its actions assumes that there is no alternative to their model of liberal globalism. And this model is still the same updated edition of neo-colonialism and nothing else, an American-style world, a world for the elite, in which the rights of everyone else are simply violated". Izvestia (2022). "Putin pointed out the West's cynical use of Ukrainian civilians." Izvestia [in Russian]. 30 June. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1357918/2022-06-30/putin-ukazal-na-tcinichnoe-ispolzovanie-zapadom-mirnykh-zhitelei-ukrainy> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

Or another one: "The collective West seeks to eliminate everything that does not fit into the neo-liberal vision of the world because it is afraid of fair competition. He added that the fear of Western countries prompts them, in particular, to impose bans on the broadcasting of foreign TV channels and try to eliminate objectionable politicians from social networks. Izvestia (2022). "Lavrov spoke about the West's fear of fair competition." Izvestia [in Russian]. 24 June. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1354588/2022-06-24/lavrov-rasskazal-o-boiazni-zapada-chestnogo-sostizaniia> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).



West of violating liberal norms and, on the other hand, discredit the concepts of liberalism and liberal democracy in every possible way, the Kremlin uses the word “liberalism” and its derivatives with an extremely pronounced negative connotation. This also refers to phrases that included the word “liberal” such as “liberal globalism” “liberal world order” or “liberal dictate”.

The term “neoliberalism”, as it is used in Kremlin propaganda, merits a separate analysis. In Western academic literature and the socio-political environment, this term has been used to describe an economic doctrine of minimal market regulation and privatization. Examples are the neutralization of trade unions and drastic reduction or removal of social programs. [33] As exhibited by the media sources studied, the Russian government uses this term in a completely different way: Neoliberalism is the modern ideology of the West, according to which it is necessary to encourage gay marriage, LGBTIQ marches, gender transition, defining ‘one’s own gender identity, and more. Russian propaganda suggests that the West is trying to impose all this on the whole world to enslave and control everyone more easily.

It should be noted that of all the known ideological currents, only conservatism was presented exclusively in a positive context. However, the references to conservatism are quite rare. For example, in a positive light, it was noted that president Putin, promotes precisely conservative values.

“At the same time, the current conservative values that Vladimir Putin emphasized during meetings with new interim governors (patriotism, support for families with children, the value of work) are combined within the ideological priorities of the president with the need to interact as closely as possible with local communities.”[34]

Further, the West and the “Russian world” are presented as opposed to each other; the same can be said for liberalism and conservatism, which are presented as ideological characteristics to these poles.[35]

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33. See e.g. Vallier, K. (2021). Neoliberalism, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoliberalism/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

34. Orlov, D. (2022). “They come with experience.” Izvestia [in Russian]. 11 May. Available at: <https://iz.ru/1333019/dmitrii-orlov/prikhodiat-s-opytom> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

35. Kortunov, A. (2022) Demystification of Fear. Izvestia [in Russian]. 31 January. Available at <https://iz.ru/1284241/andrei-kortunov/demistifikatciia-strakha> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).



## 6. Georgian Pro-Kremlin and Far-Right Populistic Narratives

In the studied materials of Georgian media resources, most pro-Russian narratives were spread by ultra-conservative activists and groups. Some of these narratives spread by them and the media associated with them have a negative impact on public life in Georgia. Among them are far-right groups, such as Altinfo, that generally target various minorities.[36]

Nevertheless, many narratives similar to those of the Russians are spread by non-extremists groups, including Georgian authorities. As correlation is not causation, this does not mean that the Kremlin influences the narratives. There is a possibility that ideas and narratives disseminated by Georgian authorities are universal and common among the “conservative ideology”. However, this does not exclude the possibility that some narratives originated in the Kremlin. Most pro-Russian narratives in Georgia are anti-Western and anti-American. The West is accused of acts such as “perverting” the younger generation.[37]

Liberalism is one of the main targeted issues in anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda, according to the Georgian resources studied. They promote the idea that liberals are brainwashing young people through the educational system and mass media, and argue that liberalism is an absolute evil.[38] In an article published in one of the pro-Russian Georgian media platforms, the author expresses protest that in Georgia, alternative literature and narratives that differ from liberalism are not being published. According to the author, one of the scholars who should be published is Alexander Dugin, a Russian philosopher who is well-known for Eurasianism and imperialist neo-fascist narratives.[39]

Typical right-wing populist narratives in the Georgian media target the term “liberal” combining adjectives with negative meanings with this word. They also use derogatory terms introduced in everyday life by Russian anti-Westerners, created by a fusion of the word “liberal” and swear words like “pederast”, which is used in a negative connotation against homosexuals in Russian, for example “liberast”. That word has the same meaning in Georgia and Armenia. As in the Russian media, Georgian pro-Russian groups associate the word “liberal” only with issues such as LGBTIQ, gender equality, or abortion. Issues such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, tolerance, do not appear in their discourse on liberalism. They try to paint a picture of the

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36. Gabritchidze, N. (2022). “Rise of Georgian alt-right group sparks fear of unrest.” Eurasianet. 23 March. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/rise-of-georgian-alt-right-group-sparks-fear-of-unrest> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

37. Geworld.ge (2022). “Revaz Kilasonia: Liberalism is absolute evil!” Geworld.ge [In Georgian]. 8 February. Available at: <https://geworld.ge/ge/რევაზ-კილასონია-ლიბერალ/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

West wanting to destroy other 'nations' identity so as to gain control over them.[40] Some of these texts contain calls to violence: "If there will be a necessity to protect mother-church from Liberasts, I will take the weapon in my hands, and there are thousands of others like me." [41]

One of the most used propaganda tricks of pro-Russian anti-Westerners is playing on the feelings of people with conservative views and very often they use direct disinformation to play with people's fears. Thus, in societies where the church plays a large role and people discriminate against the LGBTIQ community, false statistics are provided on the number of LGBTIQ people in the West, and an unsubstantiated assumption is made that supposedly in the West, in the near future, "half of the population will be gays".

For example, there is a claim that among the youth in the United States and France, the proportion of LGBTIQ people is already 22%, and after two decades, they will be almost 50% of the population. [42] The protection of their rights is presented as propaganda of homosexuality, which implies that the West allegedly wants to convince people to become gay.[43]

In general, disinformation occupies one of the key positions in anti-Western, anti-liberal propaganda. Various invented stories from the life of Western societies are spread that present life in liberal democratic states as immoral, absurd and unnatural. Then the narrative is being promoted that rapprochement with the West, the spread of liberal democratic values, means that the same "disaster" awaits Georgia. For example, pro-Russian online media/TV channel Sezononi TV shared disinformation that at the schools of Great Britain, "they present naked men" during the lessons and that the pupils ask questions related to the genitals of these naked men. The title of the video on Facebook is "Naked teachers in Georgian schools?" [44]

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40. Ge.news-front (2023). "The pseudo-liberal ideology created by the 'Global War Party' is being propagated in Georgia by foreign agencies and relevant parties, ENGEOS' and TV stations." Ge.news-front [in Georgian]. 22 June. Available at: <https://ge.news-front.su/2023/06/22/globaluri-omis-partiis-mier-sheqmnil-phsevdoliberalur-ideologias-saqarthveloshi-utskhouri-agentura-da-shesabamisi-partiebi-enjeoebi-da-televiziebi-utseven-propagandas/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

41. Geworld.ge (2023). "The defeat of Russia in the war will be the defeat of the Orthodox world." Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 18 September. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/ომში-რუსეთის-მარცხი-მართ/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

42. Ge.news-front (2023). "The pseudo-liberal ideology created by the 'Global War Party' is being propagated in Georgia by foreign agencies and relevant parties, ENGEOS' and TV stations." Ge.news-front [in Georgian]. 22 June. Available at: <https://ge.news-front.su/2023/06/22/globaluri-omis-partiis-mier-sheqmnil-phsevdoliberalur-ideologias-saqarthveloshi-utskhouri-agentura-da-shesabamisi-partiebi-enjeoebi-da-televiziebi-utseven-propagandas/> (Accessed: 15 September 2023).

43. Myth Detector (2022). "Does the EU Questionnaire Oblige Georgia to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage?" Myth Detector. 18 April. Available at: <https://mythdetector.ge/en/does-the-eu-questionnaire-oblige-georgia-to-legalize-same-sex-marriage/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

44. Myth Detector (2023). "Georgian fact-checking platform – Myth Detector Laboratory has analyzed this news and confirmed that it is a disinformation, a video manipulation, as if naked men are being introduced to students in UK schools." Myth Detector. 24 April. Available at: <https://mythdetector.ge/en/videomanipulation-as-if-naked-men-are-being-introduced-to-students-in-uk-schools/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

It is common for Georgian anti-Western platforms to present direct translations from Russian sources that usually spread various anti-Western conspiracy theories. A quote from one such article is as follows: “Beyond the curtains, the objective of the world is to take away from the human the freedom of choice, faith, history, family, nationality, and even sex. To turn it into a zombie that will complete all the orders without hesitation.”[45] In Georgian anti-Western platforms, it is a widespread policy to target European values to discredit them and say that Georgians should avoid these values. Alexandre Chachia, founder of the NGO Georgia and the World, who is noted for his anti-Western views, states, “Pederasty is an integral part of modern ‘European values.’ It is a main measurement of the country’s ‘Europeanness,” adding that “most European politicians are degenerates, lesbians, twerps, etc.”[46] It is not surprising that one of the main narratives in Georgian anti-liberal platforms was about the need to protect traditional values or family values and that one of the West’s goals is to destroy traditional values.[47]

In other narratives the West is presented as an immoral center using religious vocabulary (“sodomites,” “Satan,” etc.) to manipulate people’s religious feelings:

“Euro-American sodomites can be proud of inquisition, indulgences, crusader wars. They can be proud of starting the first and the second world wars and the attempt of starting the third world war . . . . In the end, they [Euro-Americans] can report to . . . Satan in . . . hell about the outcomes of their obscene sodomist conquest over the holy spirituality of mankind.”[48]

Pro-Russian media outlets often targeted human rights NGOs, calling them the fifth column, puppets of the West.[49] They also pick up on the prevalent Kremlin narrative, also distributed directly by Putin, that the great Europe, real European culture, and real liberal values that once existed have sunk into oblivion, and instead, only perversions flourish in the West today.

Another article on the website Geworld.ge states, “Great European or Anglo-Saxon culture (poetry, literature, cinematography . . . etc.) has been dead already for a while, and the only value [of the West] today is to be LGBT and the ‘goods’ of it—incest, pedophilia, zoophilia . . . etc.”[1] Of particular

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45. Myth Detector (2023). Three disinformation from Svobodnaya Pressa on issues related to children. Myth Detector [in Georgian]. 17 March. Available at: <https://mythdetector.ge/ka/svobodnaya-pressa-s-3-dezinphormatsia-bavshvebthandakavshirebu> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

46. Chachia, A. (2022). “Pederasty is an integral part of modern ‘European values.’ It is the main indicator of the ‘Europeanness’ of this or that state.” Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 28 June. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/aleqsandre-chachia-3> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

47. Geworld.ge (2022). “Gentlemen, at least think about the fact that you have children and they have to create families, and the family, as written in the constitution, is the unity of a man and a woman.” Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 9 August. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/batonebo-imaze-ifiqret/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

48. Geworld.ge (2023). “A sodomist attack on spirituality.” Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 10 February. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/spetak-sulierebaze/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

49. Saginashvili, Kh. (2022). “The president, Lomjaria and almost all non-governmental organizations are actually the 5th column, financed and masterminded from abroad.” Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 7 July. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/xatuna-saginashvili/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

50. Geworld.ge (2022). “The defeat of Russia in the war will be the defeat of the Orthodox world.” Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 29 March. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/რძივი-რუსეთის-მარცხი-მართ/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

interest are attempts to link Georgia's future with Putin's Russia on the basis of a common religion, Orthodox Christianity.[51]

In general, the pro-Russian ultra-conservative Georgian discourse is characterized by a typical Kremlin propaganda narrative about the desire of immoral globalists to destroy and conquer Orthodox Christians with their traditional values. Georgian propagandists are also actively promoting the idea that Georgians are connected with Russia by a single faith and common traditional values and that globalists want to involve all Orthodox Christians in the war.[52]

Kremlin-like narratives were spread also by representatives of the Georgian authorities. However, it would be difficult to argue that this is necessarily the influence of Kremlin propaganda, especially since many such narratives are popular among ultra-conservative, right-wing populist circles of very different (and developed) democratic countries such as the United States, Great Britain, France or Italy.

Georgian authorities give a lot of space to the narrative of traditional values. In May 2023, the prime minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, attended the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, hosted by Prime Minister Orban. It would not be superfluous to say that the latter is well known for his anti-Western, anti-liberal sentiments and actions. During that conference, Gharibashvili particularly said,

"I would like to particularly thank my dear friend, Prime Minister Orbán! In this difficult era, the Hungarian people are very lucky to have such a wise and visionary national leader who defends the interests of his brave nation and Hungary, stands guarding fundamental values, and is truly an exemplary politician (ruler), fighter, and striving Christian man." [53]

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51. See e.g. Geworld.ge (2022). "A furious attack by Satanist Anglo-Saxons on the centuries-old values of traditional religious denominations, i.e. God the Father or the Devil?" Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 26 December. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/satanisti-anglosaqsebis-gaaftrebuli/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

See also "The Orthodox Russian Empire or the world corrupted by the Anglo-Saxons?" [in Georgian], December 29, 2022, <http://geworld.ge/ge/martImadidebeli-rusetis-imperia/>

or "Not to nationality, not to homeland, not to faith, i.e. religion, not to gender—the goal of the struggle of neoliberals" [in Georgian], August 22, 2022, <http://geworld.ge/ge/ara-erovnebas-ara-samshoblos/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

52. See e.g. Geworld.ge (2022). "Orthodox nations are fighting each other at the instigation of globalists, and they are trying to drag other Orthodox—Georgians and Moldovans—into war. What could be more solemn than this for a fallen Angel!?" Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 29 August. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/xatuna-saginashvili-2/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

See also Geworld.ge (2022). "Not to nationality, not to homeland, not to faith...". Geworld.ge [in Georgian]. 22 August. Available at: <http://geworld.ge/ge/ara-erovnebas-ara-samshoblos/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

53. Garibashvili (2023). Prime Minister of Georgia, "Opening session of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)". Garibashvili.ge. 4 May. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3TprRft> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

Garibashvili also broadcasts a significant part of the anti-liberal narratives (about traditional values, LGBTIQ, gender, etc.) of right-wing populists in many countries, which are also key to the ideological component of Kremlin propaganda. In fact, the prime minister is promoting the above-mentioned conspiracy theory that the destruction of traditional family values is carried out to control people.[54]

In the discourse of the political elite of Georgia, the issue of Georgian identity has also been raised, which nongovernmental organizations with Western funding allegedly want to destroy.[55] According to the quote below, in addition to the Kremlin's favorite term "LGBT propaganda" there is a direct attack on liberalism, using the Kremlin's framing, when a word with a negative connotation is used along with the word "liberal":

"Pseudo-liberal ideology, propaganda, which is being conducted with the objective to spread LGBT propaganda between the children—that is what's categorically unacceptable for us. In this pseudo-liberal propaganda, there are political parties, particular NGOs connected to them, and the opposition media." [56]

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54. Ibid.

55. Civil Georgia (2023). "GD Chair Defends Foreign Agent Law, Attacks CSOs, Advances Demands." Civil Georgia. March 3. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/528611> (Accessed: 18 September 2023).

56. Ibid.

## 7. Armenian Pro-Kremlin and Far-Right Populist Narratives

Groups in the Armenian socio-political space that use pro-Russian and ultra-conservative rhetoric can be divided into two segments, according to the level of their influence on the society. The first, relatively less influential, segment consists of marginal far-right ethno-nationalist organizations, unpopular bloggers, and small parties as well as certain groups and actors in the Armenian diaspora. The second segment, which is more influential, consists of large parties (some of them are the parliamentary opposition, and some are extra-parliamentary), influential socio-political and religious figures, and influential bloggers and organizations. A significant part of the Armenian media field belongs to the second segment, which also willingly provides a platform for representatives of the first segment and thus replicates them. Although the IRI poll shows that the most popular media is the Public Television of Armenia—which, as a rule, does not spread obvious disinformation and conspiracy theories—57% of the respondents also receive political information from social networks.[57] These widely distribute material that directly or indirectly broadcast the narratives of the abovementioned segments. This disinformation has among others led to protests that turned violent. The impact of narratives spread by pro-Russian ultra-conservatives in Armenia is significant and should not be underestimated.

Not all Armenian pro-Russian ultra-conservatives openly admit that they support Russia. As in Georgia, an overlap with Russian propaganda does not prove that they are the result of direct instructions from the Kremlin or even the result of the influence of the Kremlin. However, the complete similarity among some of them gives reason to at least put forward such hypotheses.

One of the most common narratives is that the Armenian and Russian people have common spiritual values that they must protect. As these spiritual values are in danger of disappearing Armenia must rely on and work with Russia to protect them.[58] Another narrative is that representatives of the state are ignoring real “national” problems and instead focus on protecting the LGBT community. The LGBTIQ community is again equated with the promotion of negative values.[59] The narrative follows the argument that while the Armenian people suffer from the actions of Azerbaijan, the West serves the interests of the LGBT community, and state representatives participate in Western projects, thereby contributing to the corruption of the nation. As expected, protecting traditional values is a key topic in the Armenian ultra-conservative populist discourse. Just as in the Kremlin’s propaganda, traditional values are opposed to everything connected with the LGBT community.

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57. IRI (2023). Public opinion survey: Residents of Armenia: January–March 2023 (2023) International Republican Institute. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-january-march-2023/> (Accessed: 18 September 2023).

58. Azaryan, I. (2022). “As 195 years ago, the Armenian and Russian people are fighting for ideas and spiritual values today. Father Andrias of the Russian Orthodox Church.” Iravunk [in Armenian]. 29 August. Available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/?p=234882&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

59. Iravunk (2022). “It is reprehensible for any state official to participate in any initiative or intervention that destroys the nation and distorts traditional values. Father Zareh.” Iravunk [in Armenian]. 5 September. Available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/?p=235457&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

The thesis of traditional values was also used along with the idea that there is a threat of loss of national identity that the Armenian authorities want to destroy this identity. In general, very often, traditional values went along with the term “national”. Often Russia served as a platform for the presentation of narratives about the need to protect national identity and traditional values. The following quote is from the Iravunk newspaper:

“Today I participated in the video conference ‘Europe--Asia: Dialogue of Civilization’s Preservation of National Traditional and Spiritual Values’ organized by the Russian Federation’s United Russia party. I presented the approaches and positions of the RPA [the RPA was the ruling party before the velvet democratic revolution of 2018, and currently, it is part of the parliamentary opposition] regarding national, fundamental values. I spoke about the internal political situation, about the month-long protests and rallies, about the need to remove the authorities due to the risk of losing national identity and statehood.”[60]

Civil society is the target of ultra-conservative and pro-Russian media and politicians. One of their popular narratives is that the nation is in danger because external forces (meaning Western countries and structures) have captured the state. Thus, in an article in Iravunk, nongovernmental organizations receiving Western grants were mentioned as agents of these forces. In the attacks on the state and the church (it was noted that these attacks took place after the change of power in 2018), specific representatives of the Western world were also accused:

“Faith is in danger today because since May 2018, the Armenian Apostolic Church and Catholics of All Armenians Karekin II have been subjected to unprecedented attacks. Those attacks entered a new phase when the BBC media, operating under the control of the Queen of Great Britain, joined the process against the Armenian Church.”[61]

The same article illustrates that among the Armenian ultra-conservative segment, there is a widespread way of interpreting the term “neoliberalism” as a modern Western ideology aimed at destroying traditional institutions, exactly as it is interpreted by the Kremlin.[62]

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60. Iravunk (2022). “Karine Achemyan participated in the Europe-Asia conference, organized by the RF United Russia party “Dialogue of civilizations.” Iravunk [in Armenian]. 27 May. Available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/?p=227781&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

61. Tovmasyan, A. (2022). “The existence of Artsakh, national values, state and statehood, army, traditional family and the Armenian Apostolic Church cannot be questioned.” Iravunk [in Armenian]. 21 December. Available at: <https://www.iravunk.com/?p=244369&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

62. Ibid.



The West was also accused of destroying national identity:

“The same West spends millions of dollars in today’s Armenia in the exact opposite direction— that is, to destroy Armenian nationalism, to destroy national values, religion, national institutions, [and] social and political forces and instead to introduce perversion, filthy and destructive systems.”[63]

Theses about the need to protect traditional values were often presented in the context of the narrative that the West intends to destroy the institution of the family, destroy people, and exercise control over them.[64] Policies of the Kremlin were often directly praised in different areas, specifically in the fight for traditional values. In particular, it was noted that in Russia, there is a struggle against so-called LGBT propaganda that the activities of George Soros and Jehovah’s Witnesses are banned in Russia. This narrative also included the claim that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was committed to the protection of traditional values.[65]

Homophobia within Armenian society is often exploited in outright fake news. Particularly noteworthy is a report that the president of the World Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, allegedly announced that 10% of the teams participating in the Olympic Games should be homosexuals.[3] This again shows that a recurring topic of pro-Russian ultra-conservatives is the promotion of “LGBT propaganda” by Armenian authorities by the orders of the West.[66] Another example where Armenian authorities were claimed to be acting on behalf of Western orders is in achieving peace with Azerbaijan. By doing this, Armenia allegedly again renounced national identity and national values: “The price of peace for the stateless slaves is submission to the enemy, renunciation of national values and identity, unconditional acceptance of all conditions of the enemy.”[67]

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63. Sargsyan, V. (2022). “Artsakh was completely alienated under the roar of the ANM-ism’s triumph, the statehood of Armenia is being crushed before our eyes.” Livenews.am [in Armenian]. 29 August. Available at: <https://livenews.am/press/2022/187137/29/17/09/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

64. See e.g. Babukhanyan, H. (2022). “Those who complain about leaving the CSTO are preparing a new disaster.” Iravunk [in Armenian]. 6 December. Available at: <https://iravunk.com/?p=243117&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.; Yerevan Today (2022). “Srapionyan: Why should the old man have the right to dishonor my hero and go unpunished?” Yerevan Today [in Armenian]. 15 May. Available at: <https://yerevan.today/all/society/104307/incho%D5%9Eu-petq-e-tsern-iravounq-ounena-im-herosin-anpatvi-ou-mna-anpatij%E2%80%A4-srapionyan> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

67. See e.g. Hayeli.am (2022). “The Deputy Prime Minister took part in a campaign for tolerance towards those with non-traditional sexual orientation”. Hayeli.am [in Armenian]. 7 July. Available at: <https://hayeli.am/?p=681568&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023) or Hraparak Daily (2022). “Nationalist Tatoyan was replaced by Grigoryan, who propagates European Values.” Hraparak Daily [in Armenian]. 16 March. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3RvjegP> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

68. Aravot.am (2022). “Serzh Sargsyan. The price of peace for the slave-minded is submission to the enemy, renunciation of national values and identity, unconditional acceptance of all conditions of the enemy.” Aravot.am [in Armenian]. 9 May. Available at: <https://www.aravot.am/2022/05/09/1266561/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).



In general, the Armenian authorities and various state bodies were criticized for allegedly destroying the Armenian identity.[69] Narratives used the Kremlin's method of discrediting the concept of liberalism by using it together with words with negative connotations. An example is the claim that instead of liberalism, the West instills fascism:[70] "Liberal fascists are spending huge amounts of money to mock tradition." [71]

This ties into another common narrative that Europe is in decay due to the flow of migrants but also because globalist forces are interfering to destroy Europe. This is spread not only by right-wing populists not only in Armenia but around the world.[72]

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69. "This government did one thing: it violated and crossed all traditional, moral, human, political and national red lines." [in Armenian], 28 April 2022, <https://hayeli.am/?p=673602&l=am> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

70. See e.g. Sargsyan, V. (2022). "Artsakh was completely alienated under the roar of the ANM-ism's triumph, the statehood of Armenia is being crushed before our eyes." Livenews.am [in Armenian]. 29 August. Available at: <https://livenews.am/press/2022/187137/29/17/09/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

71. Malyan, N. (2023). "Liberal Fascist Network and Effective Methods of Fighting Against it." Hraparak Daily [in Armenian]. 21 April. Available at: <https://hraparak.am/post/040cc55c4b1511d9958ae29f77a09921> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

72. Boyajian, K. (2022). "Don't Follow Liberal Europe." Hraparak Daily [in Armenian]. 18 September. Available at: <https://hraparak.am/post/16978043325fd7d74a3f2ce62d77ab6c> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

## 8. Russian Propaganda through Lenses of Russian-Speaking Emigrants

To understand how the Kremlin's propaganda works, it is useful to try to see such propaganda through the lenses of migrants who moved to Armenia and Georgia after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

When it comes to understanding Russian propaganda one must understand its ideological bases. A first question thus is: Does the Russian government have an ideology, and if yes, what is it? Existing research in the field as well as the analysis of Russian propaganda materials, and interviews conducted in the course of the project, showcases several features of the Russian government's ideology.

The current Russian government ideology is not based on an elaborate and sophisticated system of beliefs, as had been the case in the Soviet Union. While Soviet ideology was a congruent system of beliefs based on certain philosophical and political doctrines, the contemporary Russian government's ideology is a mix of various ideological narratives and beliefs.<sup>[73]</sup> These narratives and beliefs largely come from the extreme right pole of the political ideological spectrum. Many of these narratives have not been invented by the Russian government and rather have been appropriated from right-wing politicians and media from other countries, including the West. Others have been "inherited" from either the pre-Soviet Russian Empire or the Soviet period. Thus, a certain cocktail of ideas has been created that serves to legitimize the existence of Putin's government and its policies.

A Russian Armenian interviewee, who moved from Russia to Armenia after the beginning of the war and is part of the LGBTIQ community, mentioned three main elements in Russian propaganda: "Sovok" [Russian slang for Soviet Union], "Gays," and "War". Some respondents expressed the view that initially, Putin's government did not have a certain ideology; it grew in time as it became necessary to legitimize the power of Putin and his circle in the eyes of the population of Russia. This ideology thus serves the interests of the corrupt elite.

"Now there probably is a certain ideology. It was boosted by foreign policy." (Yan, journalist)

Some respondents stressed the imperialist nature of the ideology espoused by the current Russian government. They mentioned the patriarchy, conservatism, and imperialism as characteristics of Russian ideology:

"The ideology of Russia, that of a state that has the right to subjugate others—[is] imperialist, patriarchal, conservative. If we talk about specific components, it is imperialism when it comes to the relation to the outside world and conservatism when it comes to the internal aspect." (Olya, civic activist)

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73. "It is not formulated the way it was in Soviet times, when Marxism-Leninism was actually taught in universities, but it is being broadcast to the society" (Anastasia, social researcher).

At the same time, some experts believe that it is impossible to say that the Russian government has a certain ideology:

“I don’t think the Russian regime has a certain ideology. I think they just instrumentalize a certain ideology. They were Eurasians at some point. Then they forgot about this. Now they are more nationalist, but I don’t think they have a certain ideology.” (Joshua, journalist)

According to an interviewee, Russian propagandists from time to time put forward ideas depending on what will work best in favor of the authorities at a particular time. Those saying that the Russian authorities have an ideology noticed that it is built based on opposition to something.

“There is an external enemy against which we must rally. [They] are NATO, the EU, America, and other aspects of the ideology follow from this. [...] what is common in the West—okay, gays, so it means we need to fight gays because that is a characteristic of the West.” (Elvira, environmental activist)

Asked about the main ideas promoted by the Kremlin the vast majority of respondents expressed similar positions. In essence, the most commonly promoted ideas include traditional family values and the idea that Russia is currently the strongest and most spiritual force in the world, against which the rest are fighting. This also leads to the claim that one needs to obey the state.

“The idea of a traditional patriarchal family is being promoted.” (Maria Gunko, social researcher)

“Two main ideas are being promoted: ‘We are heroes, the most powerful nation in general, and all the rest are freaks and want to destroy us’ and . . . traditional values, including anti-LGBT.” (Lena Chegodaeva, teacher)

“Faith in Putin, patriotism, nostalgia for a big country, hatred for ‘the Pindosy’ [pejorative term for Americans].” (Andrey)

The interviewees had different understandings of what traditional values represent. While for some it is a purely neutral and even positive concept, for others, it has a negative connotation relying on patriarchal family and conservative values. However, there was consensus that the Kremlin captures anti-liberal, ultra-conservative ideas in this concept. As seen in Armenia and Georgia here too the ideas under “traditional values” attack LGBTIQ communities and migrants, and justify violence against women:

“The idea of a traditional family is being promoted. It is being put on a pedestal. Everything outside of it is bad—abortion is bad, LGBT is bad (. . .). It hasn’t come to extramarital relations yet, but it may come.” (Maria)

“Traditional values mean jailing trans people and beating the shit out of queer people.” (Masha)

Many respondents believe that Kremlin leaders themselves do not live in accordance with “traditional values”. They may, however, convince themselves that they are leading the supposedly righteous life that they talk about so often:

“Political technologists probably don’t [live according to these values], but in order to tell a convincing story, you must begin to believe in it. Putin rather does believe in it, perhaps Dugin and people like him . . . too, but rather, they are on some kind of paranoid vibe, as if they have closed their eyes and are trying not to look around. As for propagandists, I’d rather say they are faking it all.” (Nadezhda)

“Putin and his entourage are not at all family-oriented and not traditional. Maybe someone observes some family values, but Putin definitely does not. [The year] 2009 was declared the year of the family in Russia, if I remember correctly, and it was in this year that Putin divorced his wife.” (Lena)

In-depth interviews have shown that many associate the ideology or ideological components of Russian propaganda with a right-wing, ultra-conservative ideology. A minority of respondents even went as far as to describe the Kremlin’s ideas as fascist:

“[Russian propaganda] theses are not unique, but they do not completely repeat the thesis of one specific ideology. They are mostly right-wing ideas... Patriarchy, homophobia, violence, lack of tolerance—these are Russia’s values.” (Yana)

There were different answers to the question of whether the anti-liberal discourse on traditional values is a response to the demand that exists within the society:

“This is not so much a response to a demand as a manipulation of the fears and weaknesses of society. And this makes power more acceptable to them. Although this is all very hypocritical.” (Tatiana)

Almost everyone noted that Russian propaganda relies on the manipulation of fears, mainly of a fear of social change among the poorly educated and the older generation. This and the full force of the state machine makes it effective:

“Yes, some components are very effective . . . The imperialist component is very effective and affects almost everyone. The idea that Russia should be a big strong country is shared by many. (Olya)

“Propaganda is effective not only of its content, but also because it has a strong state machine behind it.” (Gleb)

Highly noteworthy were the opinions on the question of whether Russian propaganda, with its discourse on traditional values, affects the Georgian and Armenian societies. The prevailing view was that propaganda partly influences the moods of certain sections of the population, such as the elderly, the less educated, people in the regions. But, according to the respondents, it will not be able to make patriarchal societies more patriarchal, since they are already quite patriarchal. However, it could nevertheless increase anti-liberal sentiments among already anti-liberal groups of the population:

“It appeared here without Russian propaganda, but it is fueled by the Kremlin. It is easier for Russia to strengthen its influence if such values also dominate in neighboring countries.” (Gleb)

For example, one of our interlocutors, Nadezhda, noted that in Georgia, it is customary to characterize as “pro-Kremlin” all radicals who attack minorities (e.g., those who attacked the Gay Pride parade in the summer of 2023). However, in her opinion, there is no direct evidence indicating this and many of those attacking the Pride parade would have done so even without Kremlin propaganda.

Another interlocutor, Andrey, maintained that while Putin is seen as a defender who, on the edge of the abyss, protects against moral decay, Georgians, who had been through a war with Russia, would not suddenly favor Putin and his ideas.

Another interlocutor, Olya, who had lived in a Georgian village, noted that her neighbors were against Russia and criticized Russian propaganda. However, they were very conservative. Some called emigrants “Sorosyata” [i.e. “children of George Soros”] and spoke out against LGBTIQ rights. According to her, this is the result of media propaganda. The following words of yet another interlocutor, Masha, echo this perspective:

“I think that there are also local narratives, for example about LGBT, religion, etc. This can be exploited by Russian propaganda. This narrative that Europe wants to capture us is part of the Russian narrative, but it is difficult for me to judge to what extent.”

This ties into a belief of some interviewees that in the world as a whole, there is conservative backlash against global liberalization and that Russia is far from being the only country that pushes anti-liberal narratives.

Of particular interest are the statements of many of the interlocutors about the changing attitude toward the Kremlin in Armenia and the weakening influence of Russian propaganda on Armenian society. Although there is an anti-liberal discourse similar to that of the Kremlin, people seem to be more tolerant and restrained as there is no reproduction of violence. Contacts with Russian emigrants on the one hand and the fact that Russia does not fulfill its obligations to Armenia on the other hand contribute to a revision of the views of many Armenians on Russia. Nathaniel expressed a similar opinion:

“Armenia looks at it from a simple human perspective: if Russia betrays the interests of Armenia, then it is no longer a friend or ally. If a person talks about family values but he himself is not a reliable friend, then he loses confidence. Yes, there is anti-Western sentiment and anti-Americanism, also due to Russian propaganda. But it seems to me that all this will go away as economic development develops.”

To strengthen Armenian and Georgian societies against Russian propaganda a two-pronged strategy was proposed: enhancing education and media literacy and a strengthening of objective local media combined with blocking the broadcasting of some Russian TV channels.

Lastly, it was suggested to clearly show, for example, Georgian ultra-conservatives that some of their narratives are the result of Russian propaganda. Then perhaps, given the hostility of many Georgians toward the Kremlin, they would reconsider their views:

“For example, when I lived in Georgia, it was important for one of my ultra-conservative neighbors to hate Russia, and it would be important for him to realize that some of his ideas emerged under the influence of Russian propaganda.” (Olya)

## 9. Conclusion

A discourse analysis of Russian media shows that the ideology promoted by the Russian authorities is right-wing populism. The narratives of the Russian authorities reveal the most basic position of right-wing populism viewing the world through the prism of a struggle between good and evil. Russian narratives contain rejection and intolerance toward liberals, sexual minorities and supporters of globalism. Russia and the Russian people are presented as a stronghold of traditional values, as a center of good and as a subject that is attacked by forces of evil represented by the West.

Russian propagandists push the idea that where there is Russian presence, traditional values are protected so that people can live full spiritual lives and resist the dictates of the unspiritual West. An attempt is made to convince the population that Russian values are widely supported throughout the world.

Liberalism is presented as an ideology of corruption, exclusively associated with “gay propaganda”, same-sex marriage, and “gender ideology”, which are all presented in an extremely negative light. The narrative is that the dominant paradigm of modern liberal democratic countries does not recognize dissent. Moreover, the West is aggressively implanting this model throughout the world to destroy the national identity of peoples and enslave them.

Discourse analysis of Armenian and Georgian resources showed that all the main Kremlin ideological narratives are present in both Armenia and Georgia. In Armenia, pro-Russian narratives are often spread by conservative opposition and far-right activists. In Georgia, pro-Russian narratives are often spread by marginal groups, but some of these groups and the media associated with them have a significant negative impact on public life in Georgia. Moreover, some narratives similar to those of the Kremlin are spread by non-marginal groups, including Georgian authorities. This does not prove that the Kremlin thus influences these narratives since correlation does not always mean causation. Many ideas and narratives disseminated by Georgian authorities, for example, may be popular around the world and belong to a socially conservative ideology. However, the possibility that some of these narratives originated in the Kremlin cannot be excluded.

In general, a typical Kremlin propaganda narrative about the desire of immoral globalists to conquer Orthodox Christians and destroy their traditional values characterizes pro-Russian ultra-conservative Georgian discourse. Georgian propagandists also actively promote the idea that Georgians are connected with Russia through a common faith and common traditional values.

As for Armenia, one of the most common narratives in Armenian ultra-conservative media is that the Armenian and Russian people have common spiritual values that they must protect today. Another common narrative in Armenian ultra-conservative media is that by leaving behind real “national” problems, representatives of the state are engaged in the protection of the LGBTIQ community, which is equivalent to the promotion of negative values.

In Armenian right-wing populist discourse, the thesis about traditional values was also used combining a threat of loss of national identity with the Armenian authorities' wish to destroy this identity. Often Russian platforms (e.g., meetings and conferences organized by Russian political forces) were used to air narratives about the need to protect national identity and traditional values. Here, civil society is the target of ultra-conservatives, including openly pro-Russian ones. One of their most popular narratives is that the nation is in danger because the state was captured by external, western forces. Nongovernmental organizations receiving Western grants were also mentioned as agents of these forces.

Analysis of in-depth interviews showed that Russian-speaking émigrés considered the Russian government's ideology a mix of different ideological narratives and beliefs coming from the extreme right pole of the political ideological spectrum. In many interviews, it was said that the narrative of traditional values is a key issue in the Kremlin's propagated ideology. Russian propaganda is effective because of the huge machine working behind it and because it is based on the manipulation of fears of social change.

According to the interlocutors, Russian propaganda has influence on the moods of certain parts of populations in Armenia and Georgia. While it cannot make the patriarchal societies of Armenia and Georgia more patriarchal, it may increase anti-liberal sentiments among already anti-liberal groups. The interlocutors mentioned that fighting against Russian propaganda should mainly rely on educational programs and objective reliable local news. At the same time, most of our interviewees added that it would be beneficial to reduce or stop the broadcast of Russian channels.



## 10. About the Authors

Edgar Vardanyan is a political scientist, well-known political commentator and independent researcher from Yerevan, Armenia. His areas of interest include theory of democracy, democratization processes, civil society, populism, disinformation and media manipulations, Armenian internal and external policies. He is the author of several studies and articles on those topics. As an independent political analyst and researcher Edgar Vardanyan has collaborated with leading Armenian and international non-governmental organizations and foundations. He is also a TV host and analyst for Boon TV. Currently he is conducting research on Russian state propaganda narratives, public perceptions of security issues in Armenia, and lectures on liberal democracy in various civic education programs.

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## **Impressum**

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