

Russian Public-Diplomacy Efforts to Influence Neighbors: Media Messaging Supports Hard-Power Projection in Ukraine and Georgia

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Nations use media to disseminate stories about their culture, history, and values. This study explored Russian public-diplomacy efforts by examining news content exported to its neighbors, Ukraine and Georgia, from February 2021 to July 2021, approximately one year before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We looked at pro-Russia media that targeted Russian-speaking Georgians and Ukrainians showing that Russian public-diplomacy messaging was not so much about Russia, as it was about anti-Western frames. Local pro-Russia media in Ukraine and Georgia repeated these anti-Western frames in their news coverage. These anti-Western frames provide insight into the messaging before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, thus contributing unique insights into public-diplomacy messaging for theorizing soft and hard power.

Keywords: Georgia, public diplomacy, media, Russia, soft and hard power, Ukraine

The last few years have seen a rise in the amount of misinformation and disinformation disseminated across the media and social media. Russia has been named as one of the leading sources of misinformation on topics such as the United States election (Golovchenko, Buntain, Eady, Brown, & Tucker, 2020), COVID-19 (Moy & Gradon, 2020), and many anti-NATO and European Union initiatives (Helmus et al., 2018) with many of these misinformation campaigns targeting Russian speakers across the former Soviet Union (FSU) nations and Europe. The prevalence of Russian misinformation matters because there are nearly a quarter of a billion Russian speakers with 100 million residing outside of Russia's borders. Russian-language media play significant roles in providing news and entertainment content to Russian speakers in the FSU. In many post-Soviet nations, such as Ukraine and Georgia, local Russian speakers turn to Russian-based media for news, political perspectives, and cultural programming (Szostek, 2014, 2020). Even when Russian media are banned or limited, audiences can access media through VPNs. Additionally, Szostek (2018) found that local media can also provide vehicles for Russian influence because partnerships between Russian broadcasters and local Russian-language media disseminate news that portrays Russian power as benign (pp. 322–323).

This article is interested in understanding how Russian-language media disseminated public-diplomacy messages in two FSU nations: Georgia and Ukraine from February 2021 to July 2021, approximately one year before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia projected hard power in Georgia in 2008 with military control over the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia also has controlled Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine since 2014. Georgian and Russian media organizations target Russian speakers in each country to promote a pro-Russia view of local, national, regional, and global events. In Georgia, Russia has been accused of using media, social media, and other assets to spread disinformation. Fake news, falsified facts, and skewed histories can polarize the population by "imposing false perceptions and fear and influencing important processes via manipulation of public opinion. These disinformation campaigns contain messages against NATO, the European Union" (Shaishmelashvili, 2021, para. 8). In Ukraine, before the February 2022 invasion, Russia has repeatedly been accused of deploying "operations to heighten political instability throughout the country" (Heerdt, 2020, para. 16). Szostek (2014) argued that Russia's media exports to Ukraine have polarized the population.

This article begins with a review of the past role of the media in public diplomacy. It examines how understanding news sociology and media framing can help uncover Russia's public diplomacy in its news exports. The second section explains the methods used to analyze six months of media monitoring of over 2,700 media stories from Russian-based media and pro-Russian Georgian and pro-Russian Ukrainian media that serve Russian speakers in each country. The third section reports the results of analysis, and the fourth section discusses how the findings inform our evolving understanding of how media contributes to Russian soft and hard-power public diplomacy in these two FSU countries.

Public Diplomacy: Russian Media Evolves from a Soft-Power Tool to Support Hard Power

Sevin, Metzgar, and Hayden (2019) noted that "media" is one of the most frequently discussed topics in public-diplomacy research, reflecting an interdisciplinary approach. A nation's media have both domestic and international influence. At the domestic level, media tell the stories of the nation and can build national cohesion. They inform people about local, regional, national, and international events, and the frames selected (and reflected) can influence how the story is understood. At the international level, a country's media exports have been viewed as a form of soft power and in some cases, the language of information war (Nye, 2004; Szostek, 2020; Zaharna, 2007).

The Past: News Media as Soft Power

Media outlets usually cover local, regional, or national news. The adage that "all news is local news" has meant that local media generally cover the issues of the day in a community and seek to place a local angle on news from other geographic areas (Kaniss, 1991). This localization has become more difficult because of evolving practices of how news is owned, produced, disseminated, and consumed (Clausen, 2004). Local media now rely on news services, content from vertical integration partners and various information subsidies (Napoli, 2016) to fill the news hole. Because of easy access to the Internet, audiences can now consume media not just from the local community, but they can also be exposed to content generated in other contexts or created for other purposes.

Some content may come in media outlets from other countries and these stories may have a political or public-diplomacy motivation. Indeed, some media organizations specifically target audiences in other nations. Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) noted that international news broadcasting seeks to manage a nation's international environment through mass media assets. Mass media engage foreign publics with news, information, and entertainment that have the potential to build understanding. The United States has funded Radio Free Europe, Radio Marti in Cuba, and the Middle East Broadcasting Network to tell the American story. France created France 24 to showcase French art, culture, history, and role in world events. Russia created Russia Today, a state-controlled international television network, to tell its side of the story. These media channels are one tool in a nation's projection of soft power.

The concept of soft power was first developed in the early 1990s by Joseph Nye (2004, 2008). Nye (2008) defined soft power as the "ability to get the outcomes one wants, or more specifically, the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the desired outcome" (p. 95). In a geopolitical context, a country's power rests in its ability to make others act in accordance with its preferences. This power comes from two

sources: Hard power (military and economic might), and soft power (getting other countries and groups to want to achieve the same outcomes through other means). Soft power is the ability to get the desired outcome through *attraction* rather than through coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies and rests in its ability to influence the preferences of others. This influence is often communicated by that nation's media industry, which may include news and entertainment. Assets such as attractive values, culture, institutions, and policies make a country's foreign policy seem more legitimate and carry moral authority. As Nye (2008) suggested, if a leader represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead. The soft power of a country rests primarily in three resources: Its culture (aspects attractive to others), its political values (what the country lives up to at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when it is seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Various sources help produce soft power, but one of the dominant sources for carrying a nation's soft-power assets is the media. The attractiveness of the culture, values, and institutions of a specific country, according to Nye (2008), enhances the ability of that country to shape the preferences of foreign publics and helps lower the level of negative attitudes toward a country.

Nye's (2004, 2008) conceptualization of soft power is not without critics. Some scholars do not treat soft power and hard power as opposites (Mattern, 2005; Solomon, 2014) and argue that soft power is not always positive messaging. Mattern (2005) instead argues that "attraction is sociolinguistically constructed through representational force, soft power should not be understood in juxtaposition to hard power but as a continuation of it by different means" (p. 583). Mattern (2005) further argues that nations deploy frames in public-diplomacy messaging that "threaten" their target audiences' sense of Self. "Attraction is a sociolinguistic construct that can be deployed to 'threaten' the vulnerabilities in an audience's sense of Self" (Solomon, 2014, p. 725). The threat is not physical (although Russia has taken territory in both Georgia and Ukraine), but the content of the messages puts the target in a vulnerable position. Making the recipients of public-diplomacy messaging feel vulnerable encourages them "to accept the speaker's own particular representation of reality" (Mattern, 2005, p. 602). Such a strategy is called *representational force*, and it means that the nation defines the particular problem (representation) that needs to be fixed by creating frames that evoke the threat to the self (target audience). Refuting this, Mattern (2005) argues that nations are not always using soft power to create support for shared values, culture, and history (showing how attractive their culture and country is) but instead, they are using communication that "verbally fights with them using representational force to leave them as little room as possible to refuse" (p. 610). We treat Mattern's (2005) description of representational force as *the harder side of soft power*. Messages that embody representational force are not the military intervention of hard power, but neither are they the traditional positive attraction that Nye (2004, 2008) and others have described.

If we follow Mattern (2005) and Solomon (2014) in considering soft power as a sociolinguistic construct that makes audiences feel vulnerable, then we need to look at the frames of public-diplomacy messaging. One good source to understand such messaging is news stories originating in Russia and news stories disseminated by local pro-Russian media that target Russian speakers in Georgia and Ukraine. News sociology theorists have identified a hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reece, 1996) to describe the factors that influence news construction. They note that there are at least five influences in news construction: Individuals, news routines, news organizations, extra media (social institutional), and ideology. These factors contribute to how news is produced. We selected news sociology as a theoretical

lens to study if and how Russian media stories, and programs exported to Ukraine and Georgia are amplified by local media that support Russian interests.

Public-diplomacy messaging targets audiences with frames. Media framing is “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a frame that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). When writing about public diplomacy, Entman (2008) noted that framing selects and highlights certain aspects of a situation to promote a particular interpretation. The interpretation generally comes through a frame that encompasses an interrelated definition of the policy problem, an analysis of its causes, a moral evaluation of those involved, and a remedy (Entman, 2004).

Frames provide “context for understanding communication by including and centering on certain topics” (Bowen, 2008, p. 342). Framing is closely related to agenda-setting and is sometimes even considered second-level agenda-setting (Scheufele, 1999). Though this current study is concerned with media messages rather than media effects, it is important to note that the two are linked. Media frames have the potential to shape public perceptions and public agendas and, if nothing else, to provide the language of public discourse (Entman, 2004, 2008). News sociologists note that frames move from macro to micro levels, with national and political ideology providing powerful macro frames that guide public perceptions of events. Ideology, the fifth influence in news construction, is “a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 221). Or in some cases, ideology could also be a dividing force in society. Edelman (1993) argued that ideology is most important and influential in frames of contestable (and untestable) categories: Portraying a political official as a “leader,” framing oppressive action as “protection,” or defining the actions or values of another nation as “threatening.”

Media have generally carried public-diplomacy “attraction” messages celebrating a nation’s culture, history, political system, cuisine, arts, and common values that focus on the more positive aspects of a country (Wang, 2007). Over time, public-diplomacy messaging can achieve outcomes without guns, invasions, or conflict (Nye, 2004, 2008). Positive (or attractive) frames have been the foundation of public-diplomacy messaging but as Mattern (2005) and Solomon (2014) suggest, some public-diplomacy messaging may take a different approach. Instead of creating messages that celebrate cultural similarities, shared values, or history, some public-diplomacy messaging is created to make people feel vulnerable. Such messaging may create new interpretations of what may have first been perceived as soft-power messaging. When this happens, public-diplomacy messaging may “rhetorically force” audiences to accept a construction of reality offered by the message creators. The representational force strategy means that one nation (in this case, Russia) may be defining a constructed “problem” through media frames sent to audiences in other nations (such as Ukraine and Georgia), thus influencing how Russian-speaking citizens of those nations understand their home nation’s relationship with Russia and Russia’s relationships with other nations.

Today: Russian Media Support Hard Power and Divide Target Audiences

Some countries have limited soft-power currency and when their soft power is weak, they may instead focus on the negative aspects of other nations. For example, Van Herpen (2016) expanded on Alexander Lukin’s observation that Russian leaders have realized that their soft power in the FSU states had

diminished significantly (p. 26). Van Herpen (2016) noted that Russia has redefined a soft-power approach around a conspiratorial context proceeding from the assumption that it was the West, led by the United States, which is the enemy of Russia and Russian speakers across the FSU. Russian leaders reduced the "concept of soft power to be an instrument used by the state to influence foreign governments and manipulate public opinion" (Van Herpen, 2016, p. 27).

Russian propaganda exemplifies an approach that dismisses, distorts, distracts, and dismays targets (Snegovaya, 2015). Paul and Mathews (2016) have referred to Russia's media and social media efforts as a firehose of falsehoods. Paul and Mathews (2016), writing for the RAND Corporation, identified features of the firehose of falsehoods as high-volume, multichannel, rapid, continuous, and repetitive. Paul and Mathews (2016) noted, "Russian propagandists do not need to wait to check facts or verify claims; they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favor their themes and objectives" (p. 4). These frames have been used to justify Russian incursions into Georgia and Ukraine and also to justify the continued presence of Russian military in each country (Erlach & Garner, 2021).

Paul and Mathews (2016) and Van Herpen (2016) agree that Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns are carried out through state-controlled and state-supporting media. The Russian government has cracked down on independent media, leaving most functioning media outlets in Russia as mouthpieces of the state (Vinokaur, 2022). Russian media campaigns seek to misinform; deepen the existing divides among populations; undermine democratic processes, norms, and institutions; and even attempt to influence experts (Carter & Carter, 2021). Social media and online news websites allow disinformation to spread even farther (Horne et al., 2023).

The firehose-of-falsehoods model means that Russian media coverage of evolving events can "be remarkably responsive and nimble, often broadcasting the first 'news' of events (and, with similar frequency, the first news of nonevents, or things that have not actually happened)" (Paul & Mathews, 2016, p. 4). This firehose-of-falsehoods approach is relevant to consider because international audiences of Russian-language media are consuming media that is intended to deepen the existing divides among populations and ultimately undermine democratic processes, norms, and institutions in their home nations. Some news programs seek to provide explanations for how and why Russia is acting toward other nations through what Knobel (2020) described as the "aggressive use of media coverage for constant positive spin" (p. 359). There are also messages accusing FSU governments of being influenced by the West. These messages are more representative of Mattern's (2005) view of the harder side of soft power than Nye's (2004, 2008) conception of attraction. Attack messaging against the West is not creating a cultural base for attraction but instead is a form of verbal fighting where the recipients of Russian media messages are being boxed in with a form of "representational force" that threatens their identity. The messages then offer Russian culture, history, economic, and political systems as possible solutions to the representational force that creates potential vulnerability in the minds of audiences.

What does this look like? And how is this happening? We do have some recent insight into how Russian media are functioning as a firehose of falsehoods. Carter and Carter (2021) highlighted the content of Russia Today (RT) noting that its objective is to spread propaganda. Elswah and Howard (2020) interviewed some of the journalists working at the pro-Kremlin media outlet RT, inquiring into the

organizational behavior of the outlet's leaders and journalists. Elswah and Howard (2020) noted that "anything that causes chaos is RT's line" (p. 631) on foreign topics such as BREXIT, NATO, European Union enlargement, and other topics of global interest. Elswah and Howard (2020) provide a valuable lens to understand how government-affiliated (or government-aligned) media willingly disseminate misinformation and disinformation to audiences in other countries. However, their study of RT's organizational behavior leaves many scholars asking, what do these media messages look like and how can these messages help us identify and theorize about new aspects of public diplomacy? Two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the dominant frames disseminated by Russian-based news media and pro-Kremlin local media in Georgia and Ukraine from February to July 2021?

RQ2: What trends in messaging have emerged over the six-month period?

The answers to these overarching questions will provide insight into how Russian media and local Russian-language media in Georgia and Ukraine are framing domestic and world events.

Method

Georgia and Ukraine were chosen for this study because these states and their Russian-speaking populations have long been the primary target of Kremlin's intensifying information warfare efforts, aimed at nurturing political and social destabilization, distrust in the democratic process, and the promotion of anti-Western and pro-Russian attitudes (Van Herpen, 2016). We collected these data before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and seek to keep the analysis on this period rather than linking the data to more recent events.

Ukraine and Georgia are especially attractive targets for the Kremlin because of many Russian speakers in comparison with the general population and their strong ties with Russian history and culture (Iasiello, 2017). Ukrainians watch Russian television channels, which are the primary vehicles of delivering Russian news to Russian speakers who live outside of Russia (Radnitz, 2022). Approximately one-third of Ukrainians speak Russian at home, with most of them in the South and East (Afanasiev, 2022). Many Ukrainians, especially those who are over 40, understand Russian. A report by Detector Media (2016), a media research NGO that has been operating for over 20 years in Ukraine, noted that "despite the introduced limitations, Ukrainian citizens can watch Russian TV-channels at home" (para. 4). In May 2017, Ukrainian President Poroshenko banned Russian-based television channels and news agencies, but Ukrainians have been able to use VPNs to access the banned media.

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) found that almost half of Georgians claim that they watch foreign TV channels, of which most of them mean Russian TV. Kuzel (2017) reported on Russia media consumption across the FSU noting that the "impact of Russian propaganda in Georgian society is still significant" (para. 2). Radnitz (2022) found that 11.6% of Georgians reported that they watch Russian-language television and that the actual viewing numbers may be much higher because the reported figure "is likely to be an undercount, as there may be a stigma associated with making this admission in Georgia" (p. 7).

We selected a total of three media sources in Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia, representing the most popular pro-Russian news sources ($N = 9$). The research team used publicly available data published before 2021 on media ownership to set the sample. The Russia sample for analysis included TV Russia-1 (State owned), TV Russia-Pervy (majority State owned), and Lenta.ru (a privately owned news website linked closely with Kremlin).

The Ukrainian sample was drawn from *TV Nash* (one of the leaders of pro-Russian "Oppositional Bloc"), *Korrespondent* (privately owned by an oligarch with ties to the Kremlin), and *Novoros Inform* (privately owned news agency website).

In Georgia, the sample was drawn from *Sputnik-Georgia* (Mixed private/Russian-owned news agency), *Georgia and the World* (owned by a group with ties to Kremlin), and *Sak Informi* (pro-Russia orientation).

Content Analysis Categories

Six pro-Russian and six anti-Western frames were developed both inductively and deductively based on the literature about Russia's public diplomacy, close reading of Russian messaging coming from Russia, and messaging from local pro-Russian media outlets in Georgia and Ukraine before the study began. We treat five of the six pro-Russian frames as examples of soft power/attraction because they are positive and complementary to the country. The sixth frame, mention of the Russian armed forces as a threat to Western countries, is conceptualized as an example of a harder side of the soft-power message because of the military part of the message. All six of the anti-Western frames are treated as the harder side of soft power because of the attacking and critical nature of the messaging.

The coding team was composed of three senior media professionals who are members of a research institute in the region. Rigorous training of the coders took place to attain an acceptable level of intercoder reliability on all the frames. The resulting combined Krippendorff's alpha was 0.77 across the pro-Russian and anti-Western frames. Each frame is defined below.

The Sociopolitical System of the Former USSR and/or Modern Russia Is Portrayed in a Positive Light

This frame reminds people that the sociopolitical systems of the former USSR and/or modern Russia are better than other systems. These frames may focus on reunification or the creation of a new Russian language focused "European Union."

The Economic System of the Former USSR and/or Modern Russia is Portrayed in a Positive Light

This frame reminds people of the powerful economic system of the former USSR and/or modern Russia. Stories might highlight government economic support programs for women, children, retirees, and former soldiers.

The History of the USSR/Russia Is Portrayed in a Positive Light

Russian-language media consumers are often reminded of Russia's long and proud history, including its historic relations and shared language with the countries in this study. An example is when Russian media focus on the achievements of the former Soviet Union.

The Foreign Policy of USSR/Russia is Portrayed in a Positive Light

Russian-language media consumers are provided with messages about Russian/Soviet foreign policy successes. Stories share examples of Russian foreign policy being legitimate and having moral authority, such as when local media praise the foreign policy of Russia in countering NATO expansion.

Positive View of How Russia and Its Allies are Fighting COVID

This frame features discussion of the Russian vaccine, Sputnik, and the government programs to keep people safe during COVID-19. Sputnik was one of the first vaccines in the fight against COVID-19. An example can be seen in many stories showing how Russia and her allies are fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

Mention of the Russian Armed Forces as a Threat to Western Countries

This hard-power narrative appears regularly. Russian news stories explain that Russia is ready and willing to protect Russian speakers' interests against Western or NATO military incursions in Georgia or Ukraine. Examples of this frame include messages about the combat readiness of the Russian armed forces, the quality of soldiers and officers, and the power of Russia's weapons.

The research team also conceptualized anti-Western frames in the media stories showing the harder side of soft-power messaging.

Criticism of Western Institutions

Stories that present this frame criticize Western institutions, such as those with European or American leadership, including NATO, European Union, and IMF. Institutions could be political, social, economic, political, or military organizations. An example is when Western institutions are portrayed as working against Russian and Russian speakers' interests.

Criticism of the Internal Policies of Ukraine and Georgia

Stories coming from Russia, Georgia, or Ukraine criticize the governments of Georgia and Ukraine for their policies. Policies may be decisions about how to interact with Russia, the West, or other nations. Policies may also have a domestic emphasis, such as national policies about LGBTQ, climate change, monetary, or military policies that could potentially influence relationships with Russia.

Criticism of Western Institutions' Interaction with Russia

This frame critiques how Western institutions, like the European Union, NATO, IMF, and World Bank, are interacting with Russia. NATO expansion and its actions toward Russia are examples of this frame.

Criticism of Pro-Western Policies of the Governments of Georgia and Ukraine

This frame attacks the current (and sometimes past) political leaders of Georgia and Ukraine for enacting policies that favor relations with the West over Russia. For example, some news stories are critical of Georgia for providing support to NATO during the war in Afghanistan.

Criticism of Western Institutions' Interactions with Georgia and Ukraine

This frame criticizes Western institutions for how they are dealing with Georgia and Ukraine. Examples can be found in stories that attack the European Union for its sanctions placed on people and products from regions under Russian military control.

Mention of Western Armed Forces as a Threat to Russia and FSU Countries

This frame reminds Russian speakers that Western militaries are a threat to those living in former Soviet Union countries. Many stories note the presence of Western armies close to or operating in FSU states.

Story Selection for Online News Outlets

The local media coders in Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine selected approximately 150 news stories each month, approximately 50 from each of the three pro-Russian media sources. The goal was to select 12–13 news stories a week, with approximately 50 stories per month, per each of the three sources.

The method of selecting news stories for the content analysis was based on keyword searches through the search engines provided on each news media site. The following keywords were used for story selection: Vladimir Putin, Soviet Union / USSR, Ukraine, Georgia, Baltics / Baltic States, common history /close cultures /peoples, support / protection of the Russian-speaking population, and alternatives to the West.

Story Selection for TV Channels

Television remains a popular source for Russian-speaking audiences in FSU states. Russian talk shows and political events programming are widely watched across the region. When analyzing Sunday TV programs, the coders watched the whole show, which usually included 15–20 separate storylines, and selected 12 or 13 stories that were thematically related to foreign policy or issues concerning Georgia or Ukraine.

Findings

Descriptives

The content analysis coders analyzed over 2,700 stories from Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine over a six-month period beginning February 1, 2021, and ending July 31, 2021. The news stories and television programs were evenly distributed among Russia, Georgia, and Ukrainian media sources selected (approximately 900 from each) for analysis.

Dominant Frames Across Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine

The findings of the content analysis provide the answers for RQ1: What are the dominant frames disseminated by Russian-based news media and pro-Kremlin local media in Georgia and Ukraine? Table 1 reports percentages of the dominant anti-Western and pro-Russian frames (percentage calculated using the total number of news stories each month).

Table 1. Anti-Western and Pro-Russian Frames.

	Russia: Anti-Western frames	Russia: Pro-Russian frames	Ukraine: Anti-Western frames	Ukraine: Pro-Russian frames	Georgia: Anti-Western frames	Georgia: Pro-Russian frames
February	36.5%	15.9%	35.6%	19.9%	27.7%	12.8%
March	48.4%	13%	33.8%	13.2%	34%	8%
April	42.5%	11.4%	39.5%	19.1%	34.9%	15.8%
May	30%	21.3%	34.4%	11.9%	28%	27.3%
June	33.7%	18.7%	43.6%	13.4%	24.7%	10.8%
July	42%	18.5%	44%	19.3%	29.1%	9.3%

We performed correlation tests including the Pearson correlation coefficient (measuring linear correlation between two variables), Spearman's correlation (measuring the strength and direction of monotonic association between two variables), and Kendall's Tau Correlation (measuring ordinal association between two variables). These tests examined if the frames reflected any kind of larger strategy, such as creating parallel messaging that equally produced both pro-Russia frames and anti-Western frames, or if one strategy (pro-Russia or anti-West) dominated the messaging. The tests produced a similar result in terms of measuring correlations between anti-Western and pro-Russian dominant narratives in each case.

In Russia, a strong inverse relationship existed between the anti-Western dominant narratives and pro-Russian dominant narratives (Pearson = -0.733^* , $P = 0.019$; Kendall's Tau = -0.733 ; $P = 0.19$; Spearman = -0.886 , $P = 0.09$), suggesting that the more anti-Western narratives were present in Russian news coverage, the fewer pro-Russian narratives were used. Consistent over time, there seems to be a

dominance of anti-Western messaging in the public-diplomacy messaging exported to Russian speakers in Georgia and Ukraine.

The statistical tests also highlighted a correlation between Russian and Georgian news coverage. There was a strong direct relationship between anti-Western dominant narratives in Russia and Georgia (Pearson = 0.784, $P = 0.033$; Kendall's Tau = 0.6, $P = 0.045$; Spearman = 0.771, $P = 0.036$), and a strong inverse relationship between the pro-Russian dominant narratives in the Russian media sources and the anti-Western one in Georgia (Pearson = -0.820, $P = 0.23$; Kendall's Tau = -0.600, $P = 0.045$; Spearman = -0.714, $P = 0.055$). All these correlations were direct and statistically significant, meaning that pro-Russia soft-power messaging was outnumbered by anti-Western stories. The more anti-Western stories appeared in pro-Russian media, the fewer positive stories about Russia appeared in the local media. The other relationships between the variables were weak and statistically insignificant.

Pro-Russian Frames in Each Country's Russian-Language Media Outlets

Pro-Russian frames appeared in local Russian-language media in each country. Figures 1–3 display the pro-Russian frames created by Russian-based media in our sample.

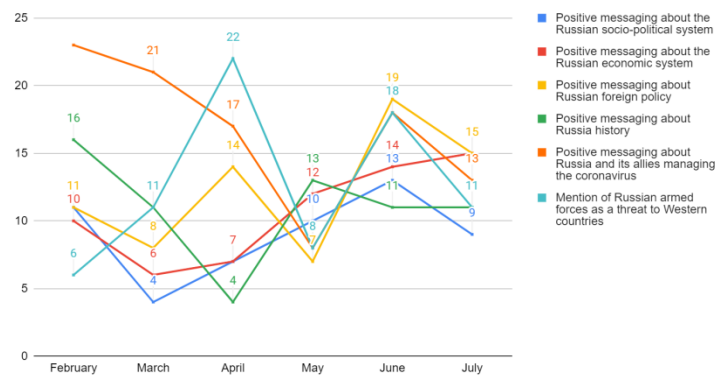


Figure 1. Pro-Russian frames in Russian media from February to July 2021.

In February 2021, Russian media outlets' most popular pro-Russian frame positioned Russia and her allies in a positive light in their fight in the coronavirus pandemic. April and June show spikes. By July 2021, this frame was used less frequently as infections declined. The frame about the Russian armed forces being ready to respond to threats from Western countries peaked in April 2021, when there were growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Other popular frames included the portrayal of Russian (and Soviet) social, political, and economic systems in a positive light and praise for Russian history and its foreign policy. Yet, Figure 2 below shows that in pro-Russian Ukrainian media, there was praise for Russian foreign policy even when Russian soldiers were massing on their border in April 2021.

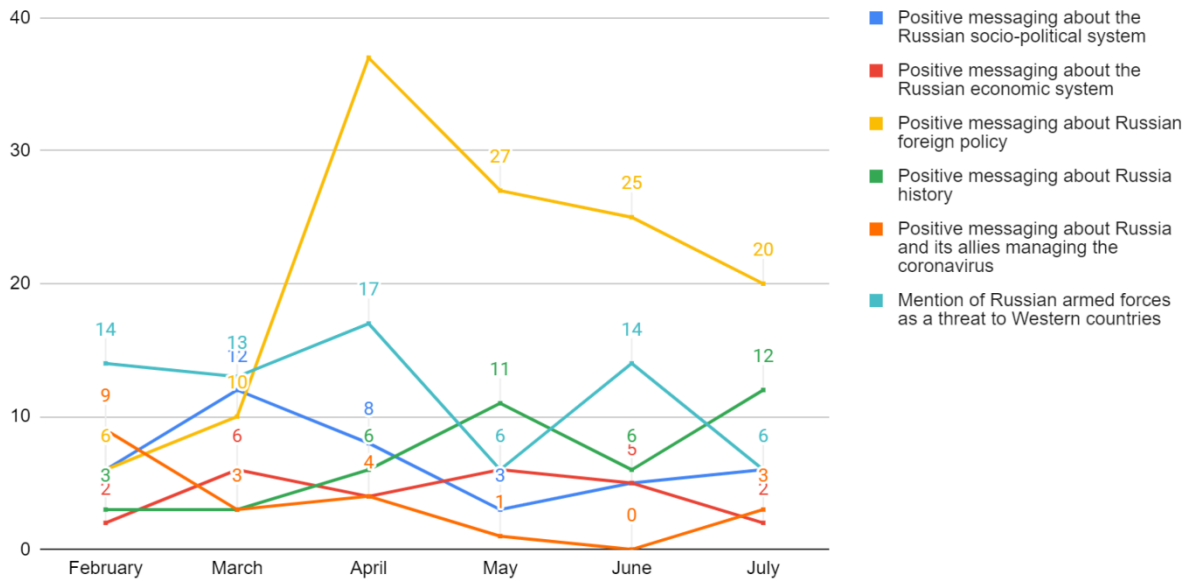


Figure 2. Pro-Russian frames in Ukrainian pro-Kremlin media from February to July 2021.

In Ukraine, the most popular pro-Russian frame was praise of the foreign policy of Russia and her allies. The second most popular frame reassured Russian speakers in Ukraine that Russian military forces are a threat to Western countries should there be any conflict in the country.

In the Russian-language media in Georgia, frames focused on the superiority of the Russian social and political system. The spike in the percentage of stories with pro-Russia frames shown in Figure 3 could be tied to the state of emergency declared by the Georgian government in mid-May 2021. The Georgian government cited the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to restrict freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, as well as property, economic, and labor rights, without declaring a state of emergency until July 15, 2021. This decision was criticized by Russian-language media as a policy to target pro-Russian critics of the Georgian government.

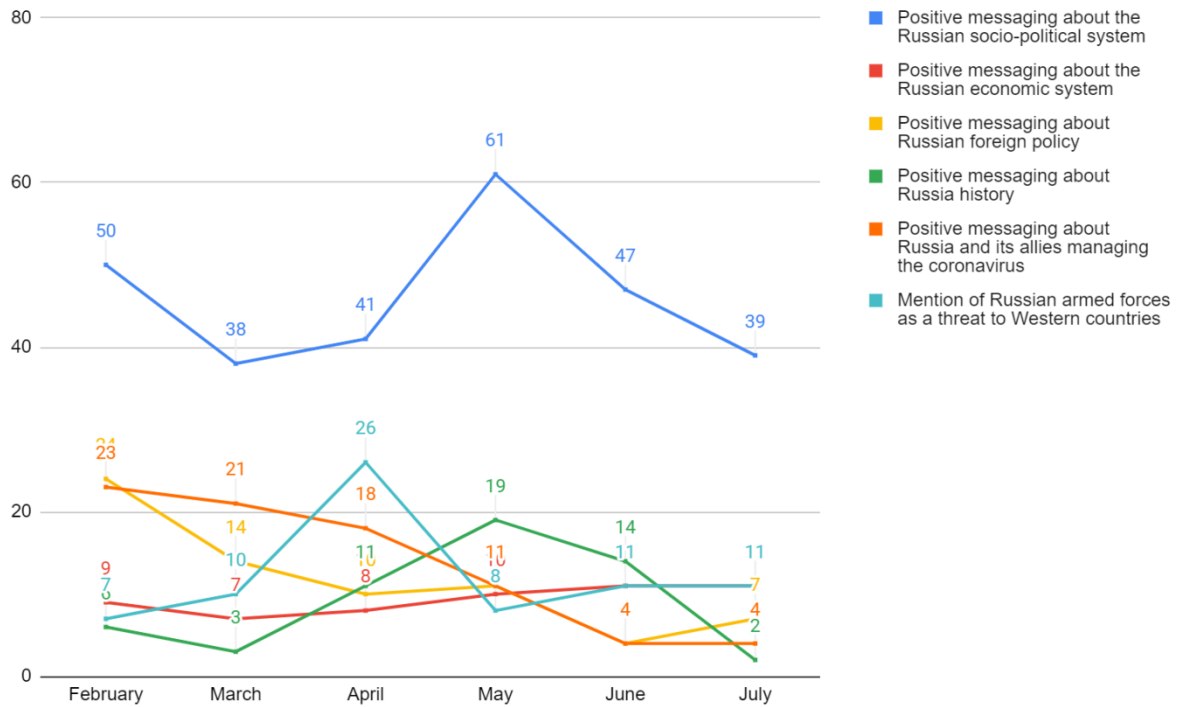


Figure 3. Pro-Russian frames in Georgian pro-Kremlin media from February to July 2021.

Anti-Western Frames in Each Country's Russian-Language Media Outlets

In addition to the pro-Russian messages, public-diplomacy messaging also included the harder side of soft-power messages that attacked the West. Russian messaging at this time generally criticized how Western institutions interacted with Russia. Figure 4 shows the most frequent anti-Western frames in the local pro-Russian media. Note that the percentage of anti-Western frames is nearly twice that of pro-Russian frames in Figure 1. There is significant criticism of the West for how it is interacting with Russia and with Georgian and Ukrainian institutions at this time.

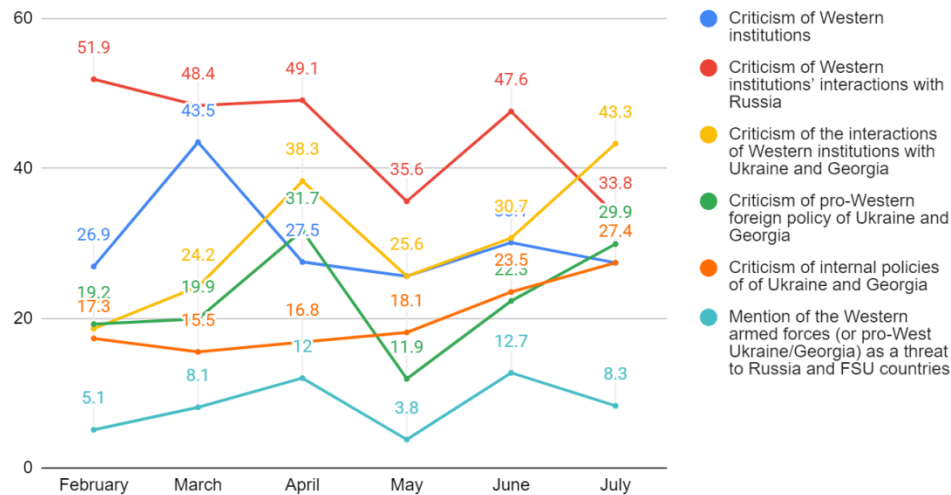


Figure 4. Anti-Western frames, Russian media from February to July 2021.

For example, in May 2021, local pro-Russian media attacked Georgia's Western partners claiming that European nations were interfering in the internal affairs of Georgia. Figure 5 shows that Ukrainian pro-Kremlin media more often criticized Western institutions such as the IMF. The deteriorating socioeconomic situation in Georgia makes this frame highly personalized because many people were struggling economically during COVID-19. Figures 5 and 6 show the frequency of stories over the six-month period that attacked the West. Russian speakers in Georgia were frequently exposed to Russian public-diplomacy messages criticizing Western institutions.

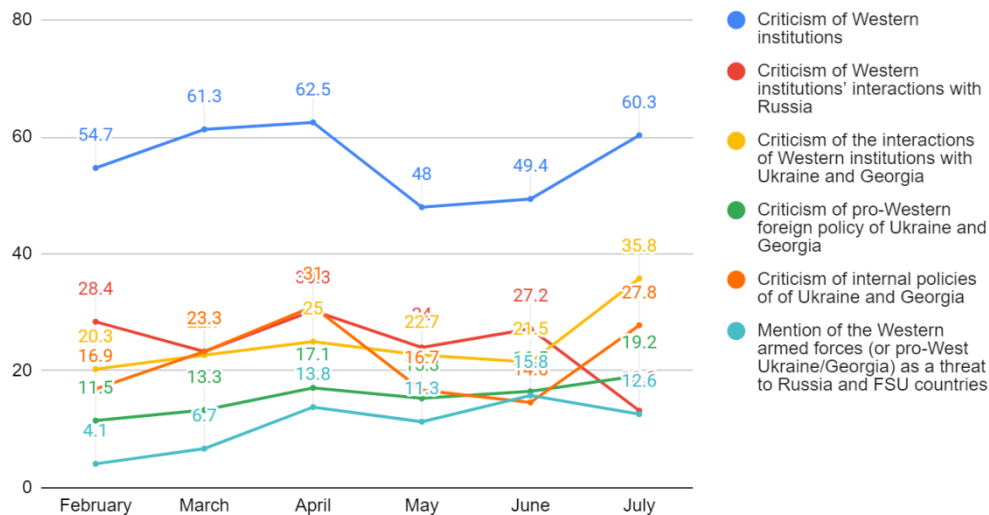


Figure 5. Anti-Western frames, pro-Kremlin Georgian media from February to July 2021.

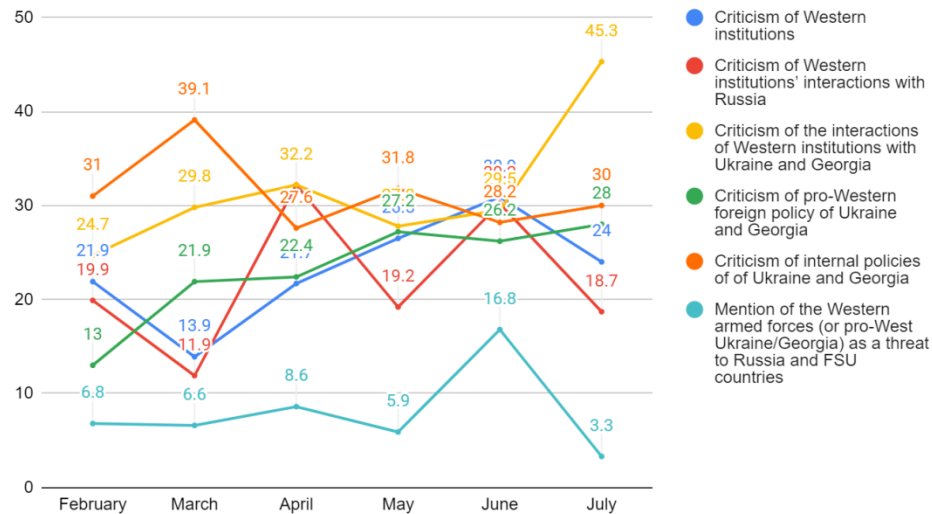


Figure 6. Anti-Western frames, pro-Kremlin Ukrainian media from February to July 2021.

Overall, the answer to RQ1 is that Russian-language media focused more on anti-Western frames than on soft-power attraction frames. Local Russian-language media in Georgia and Ukraine showed a clear agenda of support for the Kremlin. Their news coverage amplified Kremlin messages. There was persistent messaging about the danger of Western institutions and criticism of Georgian and Ukrainian governments' interactions with these institutions.

RQ2 inquired into any trends in messaging that may have emerged over time. Looking at the frames over time, we can identify two trends. First, as Figure 7 shows, there is a detectable synchronization of the theme that Russian armed forces are a threat to Western countries in each country's Russian-language media. The uptick in this frame in April 2021 may have reflected the massing of the Russian forces and military equipment near Russia's border with Ukraine and in Crimea. At the time, it was the largest mobilization of Russian military since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Statistical testing using Pearson's correlation, Spearman's correlation, and Kendall's Tau between the use of the frame that presented Russian armed forces are ready to respond to a threat by the West by each country's media showed a strong direct relationship between Russian media use of this frame and its employment by the Georgian media (Pearson = 0.839, $P = 0.037$; Kendall's Tau = 0.867; $P = 0.015$; Spearman = 0.043, $P = 0.05$). The coefficients between Ukraine and Russia also showed a strong relationship but were not statistically significant.

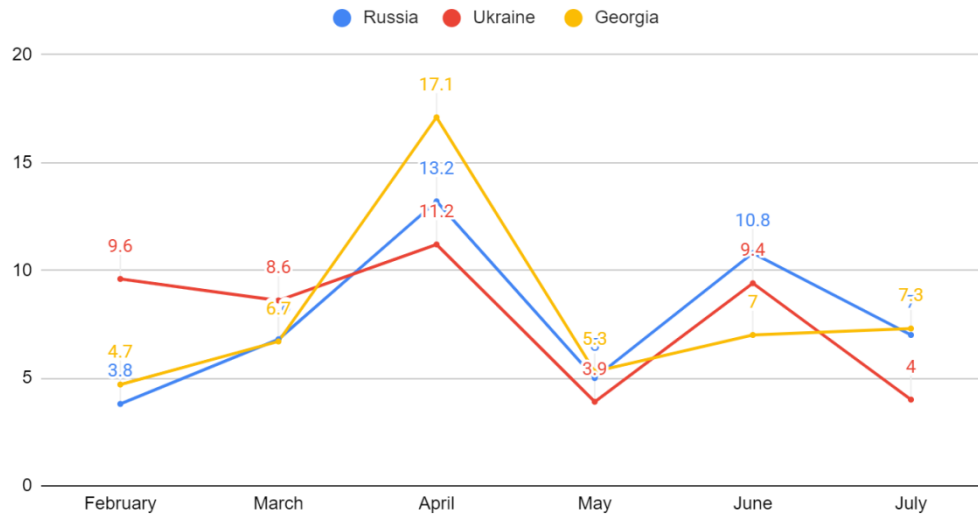


Figure 7. Longitudinal analysis of the frame that Russian armed forces can respond to threats from Western countries from February to July 2021.

A second trend to emerge was that Russian-language media in Ukraine and Georgia published more anti-West messages than the media operating in Russia. But the hard-power anti-Western frames differed depending on the country and the month, probably reflecting world events. Western institutions like NATO, European Union, and IMF interacted with Russia; Ukraine and Georgia emerged as the major targets of anti-Western frames. The frame of how the West interacted with Russia was the dominant theme in Russian-based media. Our data show that criticisms of Western institutions frame were highest in Georgia's Russian-language media, which was more than double the frequency of similar frames in Ukraine. This is an important finding demonstrating the internal power struggle in Georgia between pro-Russian and pro-Western political parties over the last decade.

Russian-language media in Ukraine focused on a similar theme attacking Western institutions. Russian-language media was very negative about Ukraine's interactions with Western institutions at much higher levels than local media operating in Russia or Georgia, suggesting Russian frustration with the Ukrainian government's turn to the West. The implications of these findings for public diplomacy and media studies are discussed below.

Discussion

The findings of the content analysis suggest three major points for answering the research questions. First, there appears to be a shift away from soft-power frames to the harder side of soft-power frames, suggesting a public-diplomacy strategy away from Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of attraction messaging. Second, the harder soft-power approach is built on Russian-based media projecting anti-Western frames as the dominant storyline in Georgia and Ukraine. There are pro-Russian frames in the

news, but they are outnumbered by anti-Western frames. Third, around some events, frames tend to synchronize as local Russian-language media apply similar frames that appear in Russian media.

Public-Diplomacy Messaging Creates Vulnerabilities Rather Than Attraction

The results of this study demonstrated that anti-Western framing occurs more frequently than pro-Russian framing. More anti-Western narratives present in Russian news coverage correlated with fewer pro-Russian narratives. With limited space, editorial decisions about filling a limited news hole seem to be trending toward the negative. It appears that messaging may seek to create a vulnerability or doubt in audiences about their government or their government's relationships with Western nations rather than attracting Russian speakers to Russian cultural values (Mattern, 2005). The Russian-language media studied here, regardless of their country of operation, appear to amplify Russian government communication (International Research & Exchanges Board [IREX], 2014; Lehtisaari & Miazhevich, 2019; Oates, 2016). After the 2012 Russian presidential elections, when Vladimir Putin was once again elected president, the Russian authorities tightened control over the mass media sphere. The Russian government continues to use mass media to shape and solidify public perception. It makes sense that Russian-based media would be following the "party line," but local Russian-language media in Georgia and Ukraine are also promoting and extending the government party line.

Hard-Power Messages Amplified and Increased by Local Georgian and Ukrainian Media

The concept of hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reece, 1996) from news sociology theorists has described influences in news construction: individuals, news routines, news organizations, extra media (social institutional) and ideology. Our findings suggest that local Russian-language media in Georgia and Ukraine are not only repeating similar themes but, in some cases, are increasing the frequency of anti-Western frames in local media coverage. Russian-language media in both Georgia and Ukraine are disseminating both pro-Russian and anti-Western themes that favor Russian perspectives over national Georgian or Ukrainian perspectives (Heerd, 2020). When comparing the two countries, Georgian local media carried more hard-power stories than Ukrainian media, possibly suggesting that Georgia's "turn to the West" may have been more alarming to Russian-language media in that country.

Frames may be because of any or all the sociological influences (Shoemaker & Reece, 1996). Individual journalists and editors may be favoring this approach. Perhaps Russian-language editors and journalists in Georgia and Ukraine may be ideologically or economically motivated to create or select stories that amplify pro-Russian perspectives. Owners of Russian-language media in these countries may require this type of perspective from their news directors. Or maybe it is because Russian-language content is cheap or free. The current approach may reduce the costs of news production, thus creating news routines that favor already packaged news from Russia. Likewise, the news organizations may have close ties to Russian news organizations, political actors, or economic interests. Indeed, some of these stories may be the outcome of "djinsa" (ДЖИНСА), which disguises paid-for content as news. Perhaps vocal media consumers may demand this type of content. Any or all of these four influences may be at play. But it is the fifth influence in news construction, ideology that might shed light on its impact on the creation and sustainment of the frames. While ideology is supposed to be a symbolic mechanism for unifying society, it may be a

dividing force in Georgia and Ukraine. Russian-language speakers in the two countries of this study are consuming media that fits more closely with the ideology of Russia than with their national government (Carter & Carter, 2021).

Synchronization

One of the more interesting findings in this study is that there may be a synchronization of media from Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine when it comes to framing events supporting Paul and Matthews' (2016) assessment of Russian propaganda. Figure 7 shows a pattern over time in how Russian-language media integrated the theme of how Russian armed forces would be able to address threats from Western countries—presumably in Russian-controlled areas of Georgia and Ukraine. This approach is consistent with the same frames appearing again and again throughout the six months. Local Russian media can respond to interpreting events such as COVID, European Union sanctions, and other internal and external events by describing a bifurcated world: The West is dangerous and a threat to you, while Russian systems and policies are superior, strong, and will protect you from the West.

We looked at one event in Georgia and Ukraine to delve into the synchronization finding. Take for example, April 2021, which saw an increase in anti-Western frames by pro-Kremlin mass media outlets in each country. During that period, there was a sharp increase in the use of the frame that Russian/Allies armed forces are ready to respond to threats by Western countries. This increase in anti-Western frames by Russia-based and local pro-Russian media could be potentially connected with escalated tensions between Russia and Ukraine during the time of the study. In Ukraine, there were events in May and June 2021 where Russian forces in Donbas escalated fighting and people on both sides were wounded. The European Union and other Western groups called for a ceasefire. The European Union also called for inquiries into human rights abuses in Russian-held areas of Ukraine.

Whether intentional or unintentional, there has been a shift away from soft-power stories to more critical, harder side of soft-power frames in news stories in Russian-language media. The harder side of the soft-power approach is built on Russian-based media projecting anti-Western frames as the dominant story line in Georgia and Ukraine. Anti-Western frames occur two to three times more frequently than pro-Russian frames, suggesting that the public-diplomacy messages are not creating attraction.

Conclusion

This study presented a six-month analysis of Russian-based and Russian-language media in Georgia and Ukraine from February 2021 to July 2021. During the period when the research team was engaged in data analysis, the world watched as Russian soft power was replaced by hard power in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The war continues, as does our data collection.

We would be remiss not to mention that this study, like all studies, has some limitations. Our sample is not a universe of texts because the sampling method was intended to draw a wide and deep sample pool. We have found that some topics come and go depending on world events, such as COVID. The frames that we discussed in this study seem to be the most enduring topics, but short-lived frames may

also yield interesting findings that, in hindsight, prompt the research team to see trends and foreshadow future events.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the content analysis suggest there has been a shift away from soft-power frames of attraction to frames that create vulnerabilities. Our findings are persistent across countries and across content categories. Russia messaging is less about attraction to Russia and more about attacking the West through anti-Western frames. Our findings suggest that local Russian media in Georgia and Ukraine appear at times to be taking an even stronger anti-West perspective in how they frame their interpretations of world events. The focus on messages critical of the West seems to support Paul and Mathews' (2016) firehose of falsehoods claim that Russian media and their affiliates are enacting high-volume and multichannel communication that is rapid, continuous, and repetitive. Russia views the media as a weapon in its war. Russia has blocked Ukrainian government media in the occupied areas. Furthering the firehose of falsehood, in early 2023, Russia began offering citizens in occupied parts of Ukraine free access to *Russkiy Mir*, or Russian World, composed of "20 existing Russian channels as well as 10 local TV channels produced specifically for those in the occupied areas" (Kosliw, 2023, para. 5). Those who accept these free packages will be exposed to frames that support Russian perspectives, and this exposure may have long-term consequences for how people in these occupied areas view their country and Russia's influence.

Our findings provide insight into Russia's public-diplomacy efforts to influence two FSU neighbors. The content analysis findings suggest that media messaging supports hard-power projection rather than soft power. If we follow Mattern's view of public-diplomacy messaging as a representational force, then Russia is not using soft power to create support for shared values, culture, and history. Pro-Russian media messages are being covered in local Russian-language media, but anti-West frames dominate. Frames about how Western (United States and Europe) institutions are weak, not trustworthy, and have failed or broken systems create a stark picture of what might happen should Georgia or Ukraine "place all of their eggs" in the pro-Western institutional basket. Russian public-diplomacy messaging supports hard power in both Georgia and Ukraine. Not only do the Russian military and local militias control large portions of territory but they are also sending attack messages to Russian speakers in those countries to discredit the West. The Russian army also blocks Ukrainian government channels in these areas, further controlling the information that people have about the invasion (Kosliw, 2023). The harder side of soft-power frames is, as Mattern (2005) noted, a continuation of hard power by different means.

Future research should explore public perceptions of these hard-power messages. Public opinion surveys or focus groups might be able to detect if these hard-power messages are effective. Additionally, longitudinal studies should continue to analyze both pro-Russian and anti-Western frames in local Georgian and Ukrainian media. Our data suggest that they are not only following frames that come from Russia but that they are amplifying these messages to local audiences. We should acknowledge that in 2022, some of the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian outlets have stopped broadcasting direct messaging from Russia and that these changes are not reflected in this current study. The team continues to collect media data and will continue to analyze pro-Kremlin and anti-West messaging in both countries to identify further trends and how war information is being used.

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