Echoes Across the Airwaves

How Kremlin narratives about Ukraine spread (or don't) on U.S. political podcasts

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In recent years, political podcasting has boomed in the United States, with new series emerging across the political spectrum.[i] Due to the medium's decentralized nature, it is difficult to grasp the total audience for these shows, but recent polling data has found that nearly 1 in 4 Americans look to podcasting for their news,[ii] almost 9 out of 10 expect the information they receive there to be mostly accurate, and 8 out of 10 view it as equally or more trustworthy than news they receive from other sources.[iii] Despite this audience growth and implicit trust in news content shared across the medium, podcasting remains a largely underexplored space, where content can be highly opinionated and politicized, anyone can claim expertise and become a podcast host, content moderation practices are largely absent, and the spread of contested claims — particularly about elections — is common across some series.[iv] As a result, this new media ecosystem represents a seemingly fertile area for Russian propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine to reach audiences in the United States. Despite this expectation, we found the endorsement of pro-Kremlin narratives to be a rare event. When these types of narratives circulated, they primarily did so because they resonated with domestic culture war concerns in the United States, rather than out of sympathy for Russia's cause in Ukraine.

To explore whether and how Kremlin narratives spread across popular U.S. podcasts, we transcribed 1,885 episodes focused on Ukraine-related topics that aired during the first year of the conflict (between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023) and remained online as of March 2023.[v] These podcast series represent some of the most popular U.S. political podcasts and draw on the perspectives of pundits from across the political spectrum. We then searched transcripts for keywords tied to four prominent propaganda narratives. These include the claims that: (1) Ukraine is filled with Nazis; (2) the United States and Ukraine are maintaining or have supported the development of bioweapons facilities in Ukraine; (3) the United States was responsible for the explosion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline; and (4) the Bucha massacre was a

false flag operation.[vi] Two coders reviewed each reference to inform the subsequent analysis detailed below.

https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/HnNVE/1/

Figure 1 plots the frequency of reference to Ukraine-focused topics across popular political podcasting over time, denoting key moments related to these narratives throughout the first year of the war. Throughout this period, many podcasters discussed Ukraine, often with reference to these pro-Kremlin narratives. However, we found a wide range of diversity and nuance in these references, with only a handful of episodes giving credence to Russian claims. While some podcasts were deleted either weeks or months after they were posted, including some that explicitly endorsed or refuted these narratives, across nearly 2,000 episodes, we found that between 4%-7% of all episodes that remained online either tacitly or explicitly endorsed the state-backed propaganda narratives about Russia's war in Ukraine.[vii] The rest either directly refuted these claims, cast doubt on their veracity, or mentioned them without adding additional context.

This was true across the political spectrum of podcasts — a somewhat surprising finding given that some of the loudest voices in both conservative media and politics have promoted or at least entertained pro-Russian narratives.[viii] While there were exceptions among some notable podcasters, we found that the conservative podcast universe was far more aligned with the pro-Ukraine, center-right of the party than the far-right flank. This is consistent with recent research that showed that GOP members of Congress on X, formerly Twitter, were more likely to support Ukraine than oppose it.[ix]

Most conservative podcasters, like most GOP politicians, did not endorse — and in some cases loudly refuted — narratives used by the Kremlin to justify its invasion, cast doubt on atrocities committed by Russian troops, and shift blame to the United States. This suggests that Republican voters' dwindling support for Ukraine[x] is based more on economics or partisan politics than a belief that Russia's cause is just — a reality reflected, perhaps, in the shift in Russia's propaganda strategy over the past year from a defense of Russia's actions to a focus on the costs incurred by the West.[xi]

Consistent with prior research, we also found that Russian narratives about the conflict in Ukraine seemed to resonate most when they echoed existing sentiments or grievances and in moments of uncertainty.[xii] Importantly, the spread of Russian narratives on popular political podcasts within the United States is not evidence of coordination. Russia shares certain narrative goals with both conservative pundits (for example, promoting the idea that President Biden is incompetent) and liberal ones (that Washington is warmongering and hypocritical). Each of these is at play in Kremlin narratives around the war in Ukraine.

CASE STUDIES

From an in-depth, qualitative review of episode transcripts, we found that Russian narratives seem to resonate with U.S. audiences when they find common cause with domestic concerns, exploit ambiguities, and/or obfuscate highly technical topics. There is a mutation process that occurs with narratives over time, whereby elements of Russian talking points are incorporated into existing domestic conversations, the context evolves, and then the recontextualized narrative is recycled back into Russian propaganda.[xiii] This feedback loop makes it difficult at times to determine whether some podcasters are endorsing "Russian" narratives or the amalgamized version that is divorced from its original meaning and intent.

One example is how U.S. podcasters incorporated existing partisan frameworks to discuss Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that Russia's invasion was justified based on the need to "denazify" Ukraine.[xiv] Very few podcasts implicitly or explicitly endorsed the idea of Nazism as a casus belli. However, the claim reverberated when paired with the ideas that a) the mainstream media and government are hiding obvious evidence of Nazi influence to push their agenda, and b) the left is hypocritical in its use of the term and its concern about the risk of neo-Nazi ideology.

Nazis in Ukraine

While Ukraine's struggles with containing the far-right nationalist fringe amongst its rank and file have received ample coverage in Western media,[xv] the handful of U.S. political podcasters in our dataset that highlighted the issue tended to focus on allegations that the media and political elites were ignoring the story. This thread was present in podcasts on both the far-left and far-right of the political spectrum, where mistrust of "mainstream" sources is pervasive. As evidence of this alleged whitewashing by the media, certain podcasters pointed to the

supposed lack of critical coverage of the Azov Battalion as evidence that the media "have propagandized to the beat of the West's war drums rather than inform the public."[xvi] These takes were generally presented without nuance, parroting Putin's narrative that Ukraine is a "snake pit of Nazis."[xvii]

Other podcasts highlighted the purported hypocrisy behind liberals calling Donald Trump supporters Nazis and fascists, while simultaneously ignoring (or even supporting) the presence of Nazis and fascists in Ukraine. On Megyn Kelly's podcast, for example, guest Bryan Dean Wright called President Joe Biden's assertion[xviii] that white supremacy is the greatest terrorism threat to the United States "absurd" because, he alleged, "Joe Biden is funding neo-Nazis in Ukraine — he's funding white supremacy."[xix] Similarly, Emily Jashinsky, host of the Federalist Radio Hour, argued, "They will shut down your credit card in the West if you are part of a trucker convoy, but if you are a Nazi in Ukraine then you are a hero."[xx] In both cases, the mention of Nazis in Ukraine was less of an outright endorsement of Russia's narrative than a means to advance a separate, partisan argument. Both shows, in fact, expressed support, or at least some admiration, for Ukraine's resistance.

Other podcasts on the right, including those that more explicitly rejected the notion that Nazism is pervasive in Ukraine, suggested that the argument may have been used by the Russians because it has been so overused in the West. "We've spent the last 10 years running around calling each other Nazis," one guest on Sebastian Gorka's podcast argued, "which may have convinced Putin that this [language] works."[xxi]

In most cases, the podcasters that promoted the idea that Nazis are prevalent in Ukraine did so to advance other, typically politically motivated narratives. The few podcasters that unreservedly endorsed the Kremlin's Nazi narrative spanned the political spectrum, though some of the most vocal, like Jimmy Dore, are ostensibly associated with the progressive left. More commonly, though, hosts of all political stripes and their guests stridently rejected Putin's argument that the invasion was necessary to "denazify" Ukraine, calling it a "lie,"[xxii] "propaganda,"[xxiii] and "a ridiculous Russian talking point."[xxiv] This was true of both of Biden's supporters and harsh critics, including conservative podcaster and Fox News host Mark Levin, who refuted the Nazi narrative in at least a half-dozen different podcasts.

Bioweapons

Like Kremlin narratives about the proliferation of Nazis in Ukraine, the lurid, conspiratorial claim that Kyiv has been building a biological weapons capability with Washington's assistance seems to have resonated in part because it connected to a domestic culture war topic — in this case, debates about the origins of COVID-19. "People will cast their minds back to the beginning of the pandemic, when the likes of me were talking about this BSL for bioweapons, bio research facility in Wuhan. And the level of just flat-out denial that we heard at the time, that this thing was even something to be concerned about," said Raheem Kassam on the Clay Travis and Buck Sexton Show.[xxv] To support this claim, U.S. podcasters frequently cited Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland's March 2022 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during which she affirmed that Ukraine has "biological research facilities."[xxvi] Often this content had a skeptical, conspiratorial bent. Said Jack Posobiec on his show, Human Events, "The question was, 'Does Ukraine have chemical or biological weapons?' Notice how she sidesteps this, and she doesn't say yes or no, she says Ukraine has — and she's being very careful with her words — 'biological research facilities.'"[xxvii]

This carried through to skepticism of pushback on the conspiracy theory. "Whenever you see fact-checkers, clown show fact-checkers, get involved in a debate, it should say to you immediately — because they have zero, zero credibility — it should say to you immediately that the Biden administration is hiding something, is using the fact-checkers to suppress the story on social media because they don't want it out there," argued Dan Bongino on his show. "Therefore, fact-checkers should have the opposite effect on you — I'm not joking. When you see fact-checkers on a story, it probably means it's extra true."[xxviii]

Others, though, pushed back on the conspiracy narrative. "So here is what is not in Ukraine," said conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro on his popular podcast, The Ben Shapiro Show, "American-backed biolabs that are deliberately developing bioweapons. That is the Russian accusation."[xxix]

Nord Stream 2 explosion

In moments of genuine uncertainty, pundits speculate. That creates an opening for the Kremlin to seed its preferred version of events. Importantly, Moscow doesn't have to convince anyone of its view, but simply clear a much lower bar: that pundits air Moscow's narrative as a possibility worth considering. This was the case around the Nord Stream 2 pipeline explosion, where many took a "question more" approach. In doing so, they frequently aired the "CIA did it"

theory as a legitimate possibility. Podcast hosts and guests often leaned on a Substack post written by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, as well as Biden's threat to "bring an end to" the pipeline should Russia invade Ukraine, as evidence.[xxx] Hersh, unsurprisingly, was also a fixture in Russian state media coverage of the bombing, including appearances by Hersh on RT[xxxi] and Sputnik radio[xxxii] broadcasts. Hersh's claims were met with pushback from some quarters. "I don't think there's any reason to believe that we did it," said a guest on the Glenn Beck Show, which refuted Hersh's theory in three separate episodes.[xxxiii]

Within their coverage of the episode, popular political podcasters frequently dinged the mainstream media for failing to cover the conspiracy theory. It is "an enormous bombshell," argued Bongino, "and yet outside of you, me, and a couple others it's been largely ... media silence on it."[xxxiv] "The West[ern] security state knows they can get the corporate media to say anything they tell them to say. Even they must sometimes marvel at how easy it is," said Briahna Joy Gray, cohost of the podcast *Rising*, reading out a tweet from Glenn Greenwald.[xxxv] Relatedly, several podcasters said that official denials made them more likely to believe the alternative theories. "Never believe anything until it's been officially denied," argued Posobiec on Human Events Daily.[xxxvi] Said Bongino, "When a fact-checker declares immediately something's a conspiracy theory... I know in fact... that it's almost absolutely true."[xxxvii] This reflects a deep skepticism of institutions. Some of this content intersected with partisan critiques of Biden's age and mental fitness. "Obviously, the deep state is running things..." said a Biden impersonator, parodying the president on the Jimmy Dore Show, "there's no way this old coot has his hand on the tiller."[xxxviii]

War crimes in Bucha

Unlike other Russian propaganda narratives, the Bucha false flag narrative — that Ukrainian forces, not Russian soldiers, were responsible for violence committed against civilians in Bucha — did not resonate across the podcasting ecosystem and was, for the most part, regularly refuted by hosts across the political spectrum. Conservative pundit Sean Hannity, for example, called what happened at Bucha a "horrible evil in our time" where the Russians "just indiscriminately slaughtered everybody — men, women, and children — they did not care."[xxxix] And Ben Rhodes and Tommy Vietor, who both worked in the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, shared a clip of Maria Avdeeva, a researcher in Ukraine, stating that the Russian battalion responsible for "killing civilians, children, and raping women in Bucha" received

medals from Putin "for what they have done" and that propaganda is being used "to create the support for new war crimes."[xl] While there may be many reasons for its failure to find fertile ground amongst podcasters, one possible explanation is that the narrative lacked a clear bridge to a domestic culture war topic, conspiracy theories, or other partisan talking points. Particularly given the vast evidence pointing to Russia's culpability, it is also possible that being on the wrong side of a war crime was just too risky a position to take, even for provocateurs.

When discussing the violence in Bucha, some podcasters instead engaged in more academic debates about whether what happened in Bucha met the definition of genocide, but they still were mostly aligned in condemning the violence. Just one host, Tim Pool, seemed to question Ukraine's motivations. In an episode that aired on March 14, 2022, as the massacre unfolded and the full extent of Russia's war crimes in Bucha had yet to become evident, he speculated as to whether Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy would lie about Putin's willingness to kill civilians in order to draw out foreign assistance: "We know the president of Ukraine has lied about radiation, and I get it the president of Ukraine is desperately in need of foreign intervention. How would you go about getting it? Oh no, Russia has killed a bunch of civilians, now you have to intervene."[xli] After images of the massacre widely circulated online, Pool did not allude to a false flag operation by Ukraine again, but instead criticized X's (then Twitter's) policies toward a user who had accused Ukraine's National Police of committing "crimes against humanity in Bucha" and added "fog of war, my friends. Choose which side you want to believe, because in the end, if you're looking for hard evidence, it will be hard to come by," despite an abundance of visual proof.[xlii] Outside of Pool, whose YouTube channel has 1.34 million subscribers, Russia's Bucha narrative did not appear to resonate with prominent U.S. political podcasters.

Recommendations

These findings highlight the complex ways that Russian propaganda interacts with domestic political discourse. Overlap between Kremlin narratives about the conflict in Ukraine and those circulating on popular political podcasts in the United States is not evidence of coordination. It is more likely the case that the Kremlin simply shares an interest with certain domestic partisans in painting Biden as feckless, and with anti-Western thinkers in fueling distrust in institutions, including authoritative media. Addressing these issues will require

making progress on the much broader challenge of decreasing affective polarization. This is especially the case because it is likely that when conspiratorial narratives thrive, they tend to increase negative feelings across partisan divisions.

Our findings also highlight several avenues for limiting the diffusion of Kremlin propaganda. We found that in moments of uncertainty — such as after the Nord Stream pipeline explosion — Russian propaganda has resonated, at least to a degree, within U.S. political discourse, particularly when it feeds into broader distrust in domestic institutions. For government messengers across the political spectrum, these findings highlight the importance of being as transparent and clear as possible in the face of uncertainty in order to undercut the ability of conspiratorial actors to exploit ambiguity. Projecting a high degree of certainty can also backfire, however, making it critical to strike a balance or even publicly embrace the unknown. Future research could explore how different forms of government messaging about contested or politicized topics are leveraged (or not) by conspiracy theorists.

Additionally, although it is important to focus on prominent voices who perpetuate these Russian narratives, it is also useful for pundits, public figures, and researchers to pay attention to the overarching dynamics of the information environment — particularly, as in this case, when those prominent voices are outliers. Amplifying opinionmakers who push back against Russian propaganda, even when there is a partisan narrative that they could lean on in pursuit of other domestic-driven concerns, may help to avoid perpetuating a polarization cycle whereby outlier voices are perceived to be the dominant perspective, further exacerbating polarization in public discourse. Future research could test this proposition.

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[ii] Mason Walker, "Nearly a quarter of Americans get news from podcasts," Pew Research Center, February 15, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/02/15/nearly-a-quarter-of-americans-get-news-from-podcasts/.

[iii] Elisa Shearer et al., "Podcasts as a Source of News and Information, Pew Research Center, April 18, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2023/04/18/podcasts-as-a-source-of-news-and-information/.

[iv] Valerie Wirtschafter, "Audible reckoning: How top political podcasters spread unsubstantiated and false claims," The Brookings Institution, February 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/essay/audible-reckoning-how-top-political-podcasters-spread-unsubstantiated-and-false-claims/.

[v] The database of podcast episodes draws on a systematic sample of series pulled monthly from Apple's Top 100 lists and Apple's algorithmic recommendations for users who like these popular shows. This sample is designed to be agnostic to the partisan leaning of a series by instead focusing on shows that have a broad audience and/or are recommended by Apple's algorithm. Despite this agnostic approach, the sample does include more series that lean conservative; however, this is due to their regular appearances in Top 100 lists as opposed to cherry-picked sampling. To identify Ukraine-focused episodes, we searched the Popular Political Podcast Database with date filters between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023, and that included the term "Ukraine" in the description or episode title: https://politicalpodcastproject.shinyapps.io/dataset/. We transcribed episodes using OpenAI's Whisper. See Alec Radford et al., "Robust Speech Recognition via Large-Scale Weak Supervision," arXiv preprint arXiv:2212.04356, December 6, 2022, https://arxiv.org/abs/2212.04356. Based on previous explorations of this topic, we know several episodes have now been deleted from podcasters' feeds.

[vi] For the Nordstream narrative, we searched for the terms: nordstream|nord stream|seymour hersh|sabotage|russian involvement|nato sabotage|anglo-saxon provocation|globalist elite|false flag|swedish security police|international energy agency|submarine cables. For the Bioweapons narrative, we searched for the terms: biolab|bioagent|biological weapon|bioweapon|laborator|toxin. For the Bucha narrative, we searched for the terms: bucha|yablonska|genocide|massacre|nebenzia|mass murder|summary executions|torture|unhcr|icc|234th regiment|gorodilov|yablunska. For the Nazi narrative, we searched for the terms: nazi|denazi|de-nazi|azov battalion|azov|national militia|right sector|reichskommissariat|erich koch. These terms were identified based on keywords gleaned from the Alliance for Securing Democracy's Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard.

[vii] Notably, Charlie Kirk, the host of the Charlie Kirk Show, now restricts his RSS feed to his most recent 100 episodes. In the immediate aftermath of both incidents, Kirk was a prominent spreader of both the Bioweapons narrative and the Nord Stream narrative, but due to our post hoc data collection, his episodes are largely absent from our corpus.

[viii] Stuart A. Thompson, "How Russian Media Uses Fox News to Make Its Case, *The New York Times*, April 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/technology/russia-media-fox-news.html

[ix] Joseph Bodnar, Congressional Messaging on the War in Ukraine: GOP's Loud Divisions, Democrats' Quiet Unity," The German Marshall Fund, https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/congressional-messaging-on-the-war-in-ukraine-gops-loud-divisions-democrats-quiet-unity/.

[x] Andy Cerda, "More than four-in-ten Republicans now say the U.S. is providing too much aid to Ukraine," Pew Research Center, June 15, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/15/more-than-four-in-ten-republicans-now-say-the-us-is-providing-too-much-aid-to-ukraine/; William A. Galson, "Republicans are turning against aid to Ukraine," The Brookings Institution, August 8, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/republicans-are-turning-against-aid-to-ukraine/#:~:text=Support%20for%20aid%20to%20Ukraine%20has%20narrowed%20as%20well%20as%20shrunk&text=Sixty%2Dtwo%20percent%20of%20Democrats,moderates%20and%2031%25%20of%20conservatives.

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[xii] Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3, (June 2017): 323-333, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1750698017701615; Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as A Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no.1 (July 2013): 25-43, https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930; Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (March 2019): 3-35, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

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