Seeing Red: Trump, Putin, and Messages about Ukraine in the U.S. 2024 Election

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Abstract

The 2024 U.S. Presidential election shows a convergence in narratives between Republican candidate Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in calling for the United States to withdraw military support for Ukraine. While the two leaders have different motivations for this messaging, the result could likely be a significant reduction of U.S. military aid to Ukraine if Trump is elected. This makes Election 2024 the most significant U.S. election for Russia in modern history as it seeks a significant boost in its illegal occupation of Ukraine by cutting U.S. aid via Trump's victory. This paper highlights that while Trump and Putin share different goals and strategic narratives – American isolationism vs. Russian global dominance – both leaders broadcast messages to end U.S. military support to Ukraine. This raises the question of how to distinguish Russian propaganda from U.S. campaign messaging, finding that the most promising way to analyze this could be through conspiracy theories such as Democrats causing the assassination attempt on Trump in July 2024. This paper posits that it is critical to understand the convergence and divergence between Russian strategic narratives and Trump campaign narratives. This also allows us to both distinguish and anticipate Russian propaganda flow into U.S. news. This paper expands on an analysis of Russian and Republican strategic narratives discussed the recent book, *Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News* (Oates and Ramsay 2024).

Introduction

The stakes for Russia in the 2024 U.S. Presidential election are the highest they have been in modern history. While the U.S. Congress and the Biden/Harris administration have strongly supported U.S. military aid for Ukraine to fight the Russian invasion, Republican contender Donald Trump and many in his party have made it clear they do not support Ukraine and NATO. Trump's pick for vice president, Senator J.D. Vance, led a failed bid to block $60 billion in aid for Ukraine and has been outspoken in his opposition to military funding there.[1] If Trump is elected, it will significantly raise the chances of cuts in U.S. military aid and Ukraine's defeat as

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/15/world/europe/ukraine-jd-vance.html

Democratic contender Kamala Harris is likely to continue U.S. support of Ukraine and opposition to Russia.

At the same time, the convergence of strategic narratives between Trump and the Kremlin have created historic opportunities for Russia's ongoing global propaganda war. Through the 2020 election, the Stop the Steal conspiracy, and the Capitol insurrection, Russians found myriad ways to promote the end of American democracy and the rise of Russia (Oates and Ramsay). Despite knowledge of the risk and resourceful work by analysts and journalists in tracking down Russian propaganda in the United States, the problem of foreign disinformation continues to this day and will play a pivotal role in Russia's current war in Ukraine. This intertwines Russia's political agenda with the U.S. domestic agenda in an unprecedented way in Election 2024, significantly raising the stakes for Russian information warfare.

Yet, how can we tell what elements of the news are echoing Russian propaganda and which are free speech from U.S. candidates who oppose U.S. aid to Ukraine and NATO? This paper argues that we should focus on the *messages* rather than the specific *messengers*: If the Russian president and U.S. candidates for public office are making similar arguments, how can we tell which messages are "Russian" and which are "American" and why does it matter? This paper posits that this matters because the American people have a right to know if their news echoes foreign propaganda. In particular, it is particularly important to consider which narratives are used by Putin and Trump – and how they both diverge and converge.

Understanding Russian Strategic Narratives: What Does Russia Want?
Put most directly, Russia seeks an end to the global liberal order because it does not have the ability or desire to have a leading role in the current world order dominated by the United States.[2] Within that global ambition, Russia routinely deploys strategic narratives, which are employed by countries to construct and project their preferred image and destiny on the world stage (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017).

Strategic narratives are an evolution from the concept of framing. The key difference in the more established concept of framing and narrative is that framing operates within an organized view of reality and essentially accepted fact-based journalism. A classic definition of framing is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993, p. 52). On the other hand, a narrative is more about a story that may or may not be grounded in facts. While a frame highlights the organization of material, a narrative resonates with a particular way of looking at the world (Halverson et al. 2011). A narrative is wider than a story, which Halverson et al. define as "a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted

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[2] For example, see from Hutchings et al. forthcoming 2024.

for rhetorical/ideological purposes" (page 13) while a narrative is "a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form" (page 14).

It can be argued that the power of a narrative often transcends language or logic; it becomes so resonant and embedded within societies, texts, and the minds of citizens that it can act as an inoculation against inconvenient truths. It allows people to navigate complex and often frightening realities. This can be positive, for example in rallying a population to action to overcome a war or an epidemic through acts that operate against self-interests such as sending their children to fight, rationing, accepting a new vaccine, etc. It also helps us to understand why some messages, while not logical or perhaps not even based in facts, are nonetheless compelling and powerful because they resonate with a desired worldview. For example, this helps to explain Trump's broad appeal, in that he is very effective at amplifying popular narratives including a return to an American past of White dominance. But popular narratives also can become a very powerful tool that mitigates against democracy because they can create a disconnect between information and governance, making it very difficult for citizens to be reasonably informed.

Russian Strategic Narratives
An earlier review of Putin's statements in the year prior to the 2022 Ukrainian invasion suggest four key strategic narratives that Russia wishes to project: Russia is a resurgent great nation, the West is an existential threat to Russia, Russia supports Russians no matter where they live, and democracy is a flawed and failing system (Oates and Steiner 2018, Steiner and Oates 2019, Oates and Ramsay 2024). All four of these narratives provide a justification for Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, particularly given that many ethnic Russians live in Eastern Ukraine and that Russian officials have long falsely claimed that the 2013-4 Euromaidan revolution that ousted a Russia-backed president in Ukraine was engineered by U.S. forces.[3]

Russian foreign policy became a significantly more urgent topic globally after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A review of ongoing Russian public statements show that Russia had signaled these military aims in its projection of strategic narratives (Oates and Ramsay; Oates 2023). This demonstrates that identifying and tracking strategic narratives can signal important military movements, particularly on the part of authoritarian regimes that closely align state messages with state actions.

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[3] Russia first invaded Eastern Ukraine and illegally seized Crimea in 2014, so the war in Ukraine has been ongoing for 10 years. It is important to acknowledge that the invasion of Ukraine was not new, but the widescale invasion of the entire country by Russia in February 2022 was a significant escalation of the conflict.

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Narratives about American Support for the War in Ukraine

This paper will focus on the conflict in Ukraine and Russian narratives, given this is a critical issue for global stability with links to the 2024 U.S. election. The war in Gaza came to dominate headlines in late 2023 and 2024 and also reflects a partisan split, with more Republicans supporting Israel.[4] However, this conflict does not act as a direct proxy for Russian strategic aims. In addition, while Republican messages tend to be pro-Israeli, Trump himself has given much more mixed signals on Israeli support[5] than he has with his more consistent support for withdrawal of U.S. support for Ukraine.

Unlike in the more contested U.S. political sphere, strategic messaging clearly emanates directly from Putin and his circle of elites in Russia, disseminated domestically through Russian mass media and internationally through outlets such as RT and Sputnik. There is also a constellation of Western outlets that are either directly proxies of the Kremlin or are friendly to Russian messaging (Kelley May 29, 2024). However, not all Kremlin propaganda is echoed by international outlets. Also, some messaging is much more effective than others.

For example, in the year before the 2022 invasion, Putin chose to focus on his historical reasons for Russia to widen its invasion of Ukraine. Earlier work analyzed Putin's 7,000-word article "On the Historical Unity Between Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021 as well as 19 additional documents posted on the Russian presidential website in the following year (Oates 2023, Oates and Ramsay). The analysis shows how Putin's narrative about Ukrainian propaganda shifted from mid-2021 onwards to add elements to the four ongoing strategic narratives noted above. Putin additionally claimed there was the need to "liberate" Ukrainians from "neo-Nazi" elements in Ukraine, that the Ukrainian nation is really Russian, and that Ukraine is a puppet state of the West. Throughout these documents runs the claim that Ukraine is the conduit through which NATO will expand and further threaten the existence of Russia. Putin consistently points to any democratic movements in Ukraine as dangerous, particularly given that Western democracy is corrupt and failing.

Putin's lengthy "historical unity" article focused mostly on the idea that Ukraine and Russia are one people (a notion that would be strongly contested by Ukrainian historians), although it also repeatedly raised the idea of Nazis and Nazism in Ukraine. The article did not focus specifically on NATO, with only one direct mention, but there were 16 references that fit the strategic narrative that the West is out to destroy Russia (often with reference to how Ukraine is being manipulated by the United States to establish an American military front along the Russian border) and 17 references to Russophobia, the unfair and unreasoning hatred of Russians (Oates and Ramsay p. 149).

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[4] https://www.pewresearch.org/2024/03/21/views-of-the-u-s-role-in-the-israel-hamas-war/
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/25/trump-presidency-israel-gaza-middle-east-crisis

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Putin's article was both something old – paranoia against Western military incursions and Russophobia have been consistent parts of Russian strategic narrative for years – along with the newer element of the 'Nazi' threat in Ukraine. However, Putin focused more on the specific threat of NATO to Russia in an additional 19 documents posted on the Russian Presidential website between July 13, 2021, and August 17, 2022, which ranged from Putin's annual press conference to reports on phone calls with U.S. President Joe Biden (Oates and Ramsay, p. 150).

Earlier analysis demonstrated that some Russian narratives find little resonance in the West, even with amplification through social media or Russia-friendly news sites (Oates and Ramsay). For example, the notion that Ukraine is controlled by neo-Nazis has never been a part of Western mainstream news coverage of Ukraine. However, criticism of NATO as well as a more isolationist view of U.S. foreign policy dovetail with Russian strategic narratives

Trump's Narrative
Attacks on NATO and the idea that the United States should pull back from a leading role in ensuring democracy worldwide is a key link between rhetoric by Putin and Trump. However, it is often challenging to translate Trump's rhetoric into specific policy intentions (Oates and Moe 2016). While he is relatively consistent on support for actions sought by his supporters, such as appointing conservative judges to the Supreme Court, cutting taxes, and defunding government agencies, he is less predictable on his foreign policy aims. The one major exception is China, which Trump routinely labels as an enemy of the United States. However, during his time as President (2017-2021), Trump attacked NATO and threatened to withdraw the United States from the defensive alliance in Europe, praised authoritarian leaders such as Putin, and was the first U.S. president to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un.

But does Trump deploy strategic narrative in the same way as Putin – or indeed, the same way as other American politicians? Skonieczny (2018) argues that Trump has "more effectively evoked feelings of a certain type of 'we-ness' and connected better with the audience by conveying an emotional expression of lack of desire for repair of something broken that sparked widespread resonance with many Americans" (p. 62). Skonieczny notes that this ability is not limited to those on the U.S. Right as "there were parallels in the use of political narratives" between Trump and his Left opponent Bernie Sander. For the analysis, Skonieczny analyzed how these two politicians on opposite sides of the political spectrum constructed their oppositional narratives to the unsuccessful Trans-Pacific Partnership proposed by President Barack Obama.

While both politicians emphasized the "we against them" paradigm, who was "we" and who was "them" differed for each. Skonieczny found that Trump defined the struggle as pitting the workers against powerful corporations and foreign financial interests (p. 68), while Sanders framed it as a battle of the workers and common people against "billionaires" (p. 67). Trump

argued for a future of American economic independence and freedom from elite oversight, while Sanders promoted a vision of becoming free from establishment politics to provide healthcare for all, education, dignity, respect, and government by the people. Thus, while some of the actors and ideas were similar (such as pitting the "people" against varying "elites"), the ultimate vision and goals for the country was very different. Yet, at times these narratives dovetailed and both of these U.S. candidates for president strongly contested Obama's view of the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2016. This underlines the idea that narratives may share some commonalities, yet spring from distinctive ideologies and ultimately have very different goals.

Populism such as that employed by Trump and Sanders often relies on the "distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite" (Nordensvard and Ketola, p. 862). Evocative narratives do not depict reality; rather, "narratives suggest, through linguistic patterns, what reality ought to be" (Nordensvard and Ketola, p. 864). This formed a key part of the findings for sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who spent five years with Louisiana Tea Party supporters to find that strong support for rightwing views was rooted in a "deep story" that many Americans "believed described their lives":

In that story, hardworking citizens were struggling to get by while being bilked in taxes by a grasping federal government. They were told to feel sorry for the parade of claimants who were cutting in line for the American Dream and scorned as "white trash" and "rednecks" if they did not. (quoted in Polletta and Callahan, p. 392)

As Polletta and Callahan note, this "was a story[6] that traded in feelings more than confirmable facts" (p. 392) yet it resonated deeply with the people that Hochschild studied. This is not surprising given the understanding that for individuals the interpretation of facts can matter much more than actual reality or even beliefs (Brunner 1990, cited in Dunlop et al., p. 193). Polletta and Callahan note that supporters of the narrative that citizens are being cheated by immigrants and/or minorities often reference stories that do not involve them personally, but that they hear about from other like-minded individuals, encounter on social media, or are amplified by websites or news outlets that share this conviction of being bilked in some way: "this suggests that the deep story may have been lodged not in the *directly* lived experience, but in the shared stories of the group" (p. 400, emphasis in original). In other words, people can crystallize their beliefs and then accept or reject information that supports those set beliefs, rather than the very different concept of the informed citizen in which one would use information to formulate attitudes, beliefs, or actions.

Trump, Putin, and Ukraine
The messaging from Trump and Putin over NATO and Ukraine clearly intersects (see Table 1), but as with Sanders and Trump on trade policy in 2016, the foreign policy goals of the two

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[6] Polletta and Callahan use "story" interchangeably with "narrative."

leaders differ significantly. Even Trump's harshest critics would struggle to find evidence that he seeks Russian world dominance and the destruction of the Western world. In addition, it's important to note that Putin does not subscribe to the *same* overarching conspiracy narrative as Trump that the common people are being duped by a secretive group of dictatorial elites, i.e. the "deep state." Putin's rhetoric does not pit the people against the leader; rather, it resonates more closely with the traditional pre-Soviet notion of the "good Tsar" that suggests that only an all-powerful leader can control the people. Sometimes this all-powerful leader must weed out "bad" elites, which also feeds into the idea that elites can be corrupt and corrosive. However, this differs from the notion of the "good people" vs. the "bad elites"/"deep state."

An Associated Press report from November 2023 outlined Trump's planned policies for a second term, which include mass firing of federal civil servants to dismantle what Trump characterizes as the "deep state," widespread deportation of people without legal documentation to reside in the United States, reimposition of the travel ban from seven Muslim-majority countries, ending birthright citizenship, passing a bill to establish two gender identities, raising tariffs on foreign goods, and eliminating the U.S. Department of Education.[7] Most relevant to Russia's concerns, Trump pledges that he will have "settled the war" between Russia and Ukraine even before he would be inaugurated to stop the "endless flow of American treasure to Ukraine."[8] He continues to question the value of NATO.

Trump's long nomination speech at the Republic National Convention in mid-July 2024 also outlined some of his policies, although the rambling address often diverged into recollections and anecdotes that were not related to policy.[9] What is notable is how little Trump talked about Russia in his speech that spanned almost 90 minutes: Russia is mentioned just nine times. He noted that the war between Russia and Ukraine would "never have happened" if he had been president (he does not acknowledge that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was ongoing throughout his administration). He also claims that Russia was "emboldened" by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan to invade Ukraine. Yet, the speech also takes a Hawklike turn, warning that "Russia has nuclear submarines and warships 60 miles away … In Cuba." He does not mention Putin at all in the speech.

A review of U.S. news coverage from July 1 to August 12, 2024, for this paper shows that the most common reference mentioning both Trump and Russia in the news are echoes of the scandal arising from Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 elections, i.e. Russiagate (see Table 2). For Russiagate, there were mentions of how Trump used material from the 2016 Clinton email leak, which was identified as a Russian operation. These references including reporting on

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[7]https://apnews.com/article/trump-policies-agenda-election-2024-second-term-d656d8f08629a8da14a65c4075545e0f

[8]https://apnews.com/article/trump-policies-agenda-election-2024-second-term-d656d8f08629a8da14a65c4075545e0f

[9] The transcript is available here: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/19/us/politics/trump-rnc-speech-transcript.html

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sentencing issues for Trump ally Roger Stone and a donation of $150,000 that a Trump charity received from an organization run by a Russian in 2015. There also was coverage of Trump's attempts to sue over the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Russiagate. A new story tangentially related to Russiagate also surfaced during this time period, with claims that there were suspicions about an alleged payment of $10 million by Egypt to Trump around the time of the election, which was discussed as not being pursued while the Russian allegations of undue influence were investigated.

[Table 2 about here.]

While Russiagate mentions dominated in the news– and Trump has complained it has unfairly overshadowed coverage of him for years – the news covered Trump's plans for Ukraine, albeit to a lesser degree. While Trump continued to assert that he could arrange for an end to the conflict, he was vague on details. This leads to suspicions on the part of Ukraine, particularly given Trump's often expressed admiration for Putin, that Trump would push for Ukraine to cede territory to Russia. While this is not acceptable to Ukraine, there was other coverage that showed Trump as more mixed in his support for Russia. In particular, it was reported that Trump and Ukrainian President Voldymyr Zelenskyy spoke on the phone on July 20, with Zelenskyy reporting on X that he and Trump "had agreed to 'discuss at a personal meeting what steps can make peace fair and truly lasting'."[10] Despite Trump's consistent praise for Putin over the years, an Associated Press report noted that "Trump's public comments have sometimes criticized and at other times backed U.S. support for Ukraine's defenses."[11]

Still, Trump is a far better bet for Russia in the 2024 elections than Harris. During his administration, Trump was able to oppose, but not stop, continued support for NATO and Ukraine in Congress. Harris, who was running an abridged campaign as she replaced Biden for the Democratic nomination in late July, is expected to continue strong support for Ukraine. This is at the time of writing this paper a supposition as there was far more focus on Israel and domestic policy than the ongoing war in Ukraine.

There was other news coverage that linked Trump and Russia during this time, notably coverage of his comments about the prisoner exchange with Russia on August 1 that included the release of Americans. Prior to the exchange, Trump had said he could get Americans held unjustly in

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[10] Associated Press, reported in an article headlined Blinken addresses possibility of U.S. ending aid to Kyiv if Trump prevails, reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2024. Retrieved from Nexis Uni on August 14, 2024.

[11] Associated Press, reported in an article headlined Blinken addresses possibility of U.S. ending aid to Kyiv if Trump prevails, reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2024. Retrieved from Nexis Uni on August 14, 2024.

Russia released because of his friendship with Putin. After the release, he questioned the details of the deal with Russia.[12]

Perhaps the most interesting convergence between Trump's messaging and Russian propaganda was that Russia supported Trump's claims that the Democrats had created a hateful environment that led to his shooting on July 13th. This is the most obvious convergence between Trump's statement and Russian propaganda found in the sample of news coverage. Russia Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that the assassination attempt "is a reflection of American democracy brought to a suicidal state by liberalism" (Kelly July 15, 2024). This supports early work, especially that of Starbird (2017), that suggests that connections to conspiracy theories are one of the central drivers of disinformation, which is particularly useful for propaganda that undermines American democracy. If Russia can join in conspiracy narratives of the "deep state" and a circle of hidden, all-powerful elites who are manipulating U.S. citizens, this has a powerful reach. At the same time, it directly supports the Russian propaganda aim to promote the strategic narrative that democracy is flawed and failing.

Partisan Support for Ukraine
As with many key issues in the United States, it's important to consider the partisan nature of support for Ukraine. In a survey from the Pew Research Center that was conducted in early July 2024, 48 percent of Americans said it was the responsibility of the United States to help Ukraine.[13] However, 63 percent of those who either identified as Democrat or leaned Democrat held this view, while only 36 percent of those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican supported U.S. aid to Ukraine. This tallies with a partisan view of Russia as a threat: The same survey found that 45 percent of Democrats/Lean Democrat saw Russia's invasion as a "major threat" to the United States, while only 26 precent of those who were Republicans/Lean Republican held the same view.

These survey findings demonstrate that attitudes of U.S. support for Ukraine fall along party lines, which is not surprising in that public opinion on key issues is strongly linked to partisan identification in the United States. But what is intriguing about this attitude is that it seems driven by Trump rather than knowledge or conviction about the war itself: Most Americans know very little about Russia or Ukraine. In other words, it is logical to suppose that Trump supporters don't favor funding Ukraine, because Trump supporters share his conviction on "Russophobia" that the Democrats weaponized Russia as an enemy solely to attack Trump. This is in contrast to the current conflict in Gaza, in which many Americans feel strongly enough to engage in mass protest. In other words, the war in Ukraine can easily fall into Trump messaging

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[12] Wilkinson, Tracy. August 4, 2024. The Nation: The politics of an election-year prisoner swap: How the race could be affected by White House highlighting Harris' role in the U.S. exchange with Russia. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from Nexis Uni August 14, 2024.
[13] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/07/29/war-in-ukraine-wide-partisan-differences-on-u-s-responsibility-and-support/

that he alone can solve this crisis, with a lack of acknowledgment about how Russia has invaded a peaceful neighboring country, much less a discussion about the right to self-determination and the history of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe.

Framing and Narrative Detection

As we outline in our recent book (Oates and Ramsay), it can be difficult to tell the difference between Trump/Republican and Russian messaging. The Trump campaigns and presidency have been intertwined with Russian interests in a way unprecedented in American history. In 2016, Russian operatives boosted the Trump's presidential campaign, notably by coordinating the release of hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee to attack Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. The Mueller Report (2019) identified "numerous links" (p. 1) between the Russian government and the 2016 Trump campaign, although the report concluded that the investigation "did not establish" that the Trump campaign "conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities" (p. 2).

Discussions of Russian interference in the 2016 campaign became a prominent part of the political discourse during Trump's administration and he often expressed his conviction that the Democrats were using Russia to undermine the legitimacy of his presidency. Trump has countered this criticism with overt friendliness to Putin, including by meeting with him and publicly praising him. Trump extended his support for Russia and criticism of Ukraine by attempting to force Ukraine to announce an investigation into President Joe Biden and to assert that Ukraine rather than Russia had been behind interference in the 2016 U.S. elections. The investigation into Trump's first impeachment in 2019 found that Trump threatened to withhold military aid to Ukraine if it did not comply and obstructed the Congressional inquiry by ordering his administration officials to ignore subpoenas for documents and testimony.

Once Trump had established the idea that Russia was being used by Democrats to criticize his rule, it is clear why Trump supporters also became more pro-Russian even if they didn't care about Russian affairs or even really know anything about them. Russia became a player in one of Trump's key narratives that the Democrats were determined to attack and destroy him. The details of Russian interference and the various investigations, Congressional reports, journalistic investigations, etc., make it enormously difficult for the average citizen to follow the specifics of the issue. Trump reduced the complications of the case to the notion of "Russophobia," that Democrats were manufacturing an outsize fear of Russia and Russia's actions in order to attack him.

Comparing Trump and Putin Narratives on Ukraine

When comparing narratives relating to U.S. military support for Ukraine, Trump makes a consistent argument for putting America's interest first. This can be seen as illogical, in the sense that it is not clear how America will maintain a position of global dominance without a global

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military strategy and intervention, particularly given that Trump supports a Realist view of international affairs. Trump mostly makes this argument on economic grounds that is simplified to an attractive statement for his base: Why send American money to help people in foreign countries? This ignores the fact that much of this money is actually spent on U.S. military production. This is supported by his "great man" argument in that he claims that given his business acumen, he can be much more successful at negotiating with foreign leaders than typical political leaders. Finally, Trump has been consistent in his praise for Putin. This paper has not attempted to address any *motivation* for Trump's messaging about Russia, but rather focus on the *content* of the messaging.

Trump's narrative demonstrates a relatively consistent logic for Trump's specific messages about Ukraine: particularly his disdain for NATO and that Trump can play a leading role in a 'peace' treaty that Ukrainians oppose, Americans should not waste their money on foreign squabbles, and Putin is a good strong leader. All of these messages support the Russian goals for ending U.S. aid to Ukraine, but the Russian strategic narratives are completely different from those of Trump.

Unsurprisingly, Russian messaging about Ukraine is broader and more complex than that of Trump, given that the Ukraine war is not a dominant part of Trump's campaign messaging. Specific Russian narratives about America funding the Ukrainian military fall into longstanding Russian strategic narratives (Oates and Ramsay), notably that the West (especially via NATO) is out to destroy Russia, Russia is a resurgent great nation, and Russia protects Russians no matter where they live. Underlying this is the notion that democracy is a dangerous and flawed system that should have no place in the world.

Thus, Russia's key message about Ukraine falls under the West is out to Destroy Russia narrative, with complaints about so-called NATO 'encroachment' and that American funding creates a proxy Western attack on Russia via the Ukrainian military to wipe Russia off the face of the Earth. It is important to point out the illogic of this, particularly in the face of millions of Ukrainians who have been killed, tortured, injured, displaced, or had their homes destroyed in the Russian invasion. In addition, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine significantly increased European support for NATO and motivated both Finland and Sweden to join, leaving Russia with a much longer border with NATO. Ukraine's chances of joining NATO increased dramatically with Russia's 2022 invasion.

Other specific messaging from Russia also echoes key, long-standing Russian narratives, including that democracy is flawed and failing and that Russia protects Russians no matter where they live. However, Russia also consistently attempts to push narratives such as that Ukraine has no right to exist as well as the notion that Ukraine is run by neo-Nazis. These particular messages do not find resonance in Trump's campaign or indeed in the broader media coverage of Ukraine

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(Oates and Ramsay). Thus, the strongest convergence between Trump and Putin are attacks on NATO, the need for a peace treaty, and the demand for America to stop funding the war in Ukraine. On other points – such as blaming Ukraine for meddling in the U.S. elections, neo-Nazis, the arguments about the origin of the Ukrainian people – there is little resonance between Trump and Russian messaging.

Yet, Trump's rhetoric on Ukraine has useful overlaps for Russian strategic narratives. In particular, Trump does not acknowledge either the role of NATO in preventing threats to democracy in Europe from the Cold War onwards nor the right of Ukraine as a sovereign nation. Both of these principles are important if one accepts the democratic world order (which Putin does not). An analysis of their comments shows that both Trump and Putin embrace political realism,[14] the concept that the behavior of nations can be understood as a constant competition for dominance rather than the kind of cooperation found in the view of international relations embraced by theories of liberalism or idealism.

The allegiance of Trump voters and his supporters in Congress to Trump's world view gives authoritarian leaders, particularly Putin, an unprecedented opportunity to promote Russian goals. The main goal for 2024 is to get Trump elected so that aid to Ukraine may stop (while Trump is somewhat unpredictable, this is much more promising for Russian goals than a Democratic president). Russian efforts are supported by a general lack of knowledge about the region on the part of the U.S. public, a dislike in spending on foreign affairs on the Right, and a rejection of military spending on the far Left.[15] Russia can use Trump's popularity to advance its own agenda of defeating Ukraine. But how will this play out in election 2024? How can voters tell the difference between Trump pushing for a "peace treaty" that rewards Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine and Russia seeking its own ends through foreign propaganda?

The analysis of news coverage shows that Trump is not entirely consistent in his support for Russia and his criticism of Ukraine, although his praise for Putin has been steady over many years. In his nomination speech, Trump barely mentioned Russia. This could be explained in various ways. First, and most obviously, most Americans are much more interested in domestic politics. If they are interested in foreign politics and policy, the war in Gaza has become a much more prominent issue than the war in Ukraine. Second, it's understandable that Trump, who has complained that the media constantly link him to Russia through Russiagate, would not be keen to bring Russia back into the discussion. Third, it would appear that while Trump has affection for Putin, his support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems more tepid. He is consistent in criticizing NATO and the cost of American support for democracy worldwide, but this does not translate automatically into a strongly pro-Russian stance. Trump has probably rightly judged

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[14] A useful definition and discussion of realism can be found here: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/

[15] Voters on the far-Left are unlikely to vote for Trump, but it should be mentioned that there is opposition to funding for Ukraine's military on the Left in the United States. The nature of this and its effect on Election 2024 is beyond the scope of this paper.

that his constituents were not keen to hear about Russia or become mired in Russiagate discussions.

By looking at Table 1, it is clear that Trump and Putin often broadcast similar messages, although there are some important differences. Trump criticizes NATO primarily for its cost to the U.S. while Putin warns it is a key weapon in the West's quest to destroy Russia. Both argue that the United States should not spend money on foreign intervention, although in Trump's case this is more about saving money than isolationism (overlooking the fact that much of the U.S. military spending on Ukraine is spent on U.S. weapons production). Both Putin and Trump favor a peace treaty in Ukraine, although neither chooses to define exactly what that would mean for Ukraine (in the case of Russia, it would mean that Ukraine would cede significant territory). Trump is more likely to praise Putin than Russia itself, while Putin more modestly praises his own country rather than himself. However, it is clear that Putin, as the famous comment from France leader Charles De Gaulle shows in saying "L'etat, c'est moi," sees himself as the only person in real authority in Russia. Trump also consistently asserts that he can change policy through his personality – and that any attempt to deny him that right means the election is not valid.

Beyond these convergences, there are important divergences in the messaging. Trump has claimed that it was Ukraine, rather than Russia, that meddled in the 2016 U.S. elections. This is not a point pushed by Russia, which enjoys a reputation for successful overseas influence operations in the knowledge of its significant interference in the U.S. 2016 elections. Russian messaging about Ukraine also is distinctive from both Trump and general discussions of Ukraine in the United States (Oates and Ramsay) in particular with Putin's propaganda that claims that the Ukrainians do not exist as a people and that neo-Nazis are dominating Ukraine. In addition, Russian arguments that Ukraine is just a proxy war engineered by the United States and that democracy as well as self-determination of nations is an existential threat to Russia are not shared by Trump. Nor does Trump make claims that ethnic Russians need protection within Ukraine, which has been argued by Putin.

Beyond Trump: Other U.S. Voices Calling to End Support for Ukraine
The Ukrainian media outlet Texty published an analysis in June 2024 of U.S. politicians and other prominent voices that echoed Russian attitudes about Ukraine, particularly the desire to stop funding the Ukrainian military (Texty, June 6, 2024). Between November 2023 and April 2024, Texty analyzed "statements and publications from influential public figures and organizations in the United States." The publication analyzed thousands of articles, social media posts (mostly on X), videos, and podcasts in which Ukraine was mentioned. The study focused on politicians, including members of Congress, journalists, influencers, media organizations, think tanks, and civic activists. The study found what it defined as anti-Ukraine statements across the political spectrum, from Trump supporters to communists.

Texty's analysis identified 387 individuals and 76 organizations that used arguments that they said often mirrored Kremlin messaging about Ukraine, including 116 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. More than half of the 387 individuals were characterized as rightwing (primarily the Trump wing of the Republican party), while about one in eight were characterized as leftwing in the U.S. political spectrum (mostly anti-war activists and left-leaning parties).[16]

While Texty did find statements from media outlets, journalists, and experts who echoed Kremlin talking points, they did not always find evidence to identify them with a clear left or right bias. While Texty's list included 100 "journalists"[17] and 30 media outlets, only one media outlet was considered "mainstream." Texty identified 50 individuals who "collaborated with Russian media and government-funded initiatives during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine." Texty noted that some of the individuals now live in Russia or in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. Influencers also played a role, although they were much more mixed in their political orientations, according to the Texty analysis.

Texty found a wide range of arguments that people used for ending support to Ukraine that echoed Russian propaganda. They noted that "most of the people in our study do not have direct, proven ties to the Russian government or propagandists. However, the arguments they use to urge authorities to distance themselves from Ukraine echo key messages of Russian propaganda aimed at depriving Ukrainians of the ability to defend themselves with Western weapons and funds." This speaks to the point of this paper, that this is not a forensic study of pathways between Putin and Trump (money, influence, favors, etc.); rather, it is an analysis of the similarity in their messaging.

The Texty analysis included a report of some of the most common claims by Americans seeking to withdraw support from Ukraine, which were:

- The 2014 Revolution of Dignity was a coup supported by the U.S. government, ultimately leading to the Russia-Ukraine war.
- Russia attacked Ukraine because of NATO's eastward expansion.
- The U.S. should not help Ukraine to avoid provoking World War III.
- The Russia-Ukraine war is a local conflict that should not be globalized by supporting Ukraine and that the U.S. has no business in.

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[16]While it is important to note that there is opposition to support for Ukraine on the Left, it is not reviewed in this paper, largely because it does not resonate with the Democratic support of Ukraine.

[17]This also raises the point of who can be called a journalist, i.e. American tradition suggests that those who call themselves "journalists" adhere to standards of professionalism such as objectivity, balance, and transparency but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

- The Russia-Ukraine war is a battle of traditional Christian values against a decaying West.
- Nazism is tolerated in Ukraine.
- American aid is being embezzled because Ukraine is entirely corrupt.
- Ukraine cannot defeat Russia and will lose on the battlefield, so there is no point in helping it.
- The U.S. should spend money on solving its citizens' problems rather than saving Ukrainians.

These arguments are broader than those most prominently promoted by Trump and Putin (see Table 1) and run the gamut from debunked conspiracy theory (Nazis in Ukraine) to more mainstream arguments about limiting U.S. involvement in overseas conflicts.

Texty's report generated an angry response from many of those listed in the report as having espoused pro-Russian/anti-Ukrainian views. The list of reactions, compiled by the journalists' organization in Ukraine,[18] noted that Vance appealed to a House committee to block support for Texty from U.S. funding (Texty receives funding via U.S. aid agencies). Elon Musk urged that Texty be included on a list of terrorist organizations.[19] Ron Paul Institute Director Daniel McAdams said that Texty had "hate lists" and "kill lists" of "patriotic Americans." [20]

Both the analysis and the reactions highlight challenges in identifying the convergence between Russian propaganda and American news. While some of the individuals and organizations on the Texty list do echo Russian talking points, it's difficult in most cases to identify a clear motivation to promote Russian propaganda. In addition, there is a significant difference in echoing a known Russian conspiracy (such as Ukraine is awash in neo-Nazis) and arguing that foreign intervention is a bad idea. At the same time, it's useful and important to point out when statements from prominent Americans–out of their own convictions or ignorance rather than overt support for Russian interests–echo Russian propaganda. This is why it is critical to identify and highlight specific Russian narratives, conspiracy theories, and talking points so that one can determine which ones are echoed by U.S. politicians – even by coincidence.

One of the most interesting findings in the Texty study is the anger on the part of many who were quoted as making anti-Ukraine and/or pro-Russian statements, to the point that Musk suggested that those at Texty were terrorists. While part of this may have been anger at being labelled in general and specifically being criticized by a foreign group, the strong reaction

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[18] https://zmina.ua/en/statements-en/media-movement-statement-on-pressure-and-threats-against-journalists-of-texty-org-ua/

[19] Musk (@elonmusk) replied to a tweet from U.S. Representative Jim Banks that House Republicans had moved to defund Texty by posting "It's a good first stop. They should be added to the list of sanctioned terrorist organizations." See Appendix A for screenshot of tweet.

[20] https://ronpaulinstitute.org/us-backed-ukrainian-publication-releases-new-enemies-list-including-donald-trump-ron-paul-ron-paul-institute-hundreds-more/

suggests that generally prominent individuals do not want to be seen as supporting Russia, which points the long-standing dislike and distrust of Russia in the United States.

Predictions for 2024: What to Expect
The convergence between Trump and Putin on key talking points about U.S. aid to Ukraine and a possible 'peace' treaty that cedes land unfairly seized to Russia, will continue into the 2024 general election. These talking points are far less important to Trump than they are to Putin, although Trump's focus on 'American First' and his affection for Putin should lead him to continue to support Russia's propaganda goals. Both Putin and Trump consistently attack NATO. Where Russian propaganda may be most obvious is where the two diverge. Notably, Trump does not frame his argument about stopping aid to Ukraine around the idea that there are neo-Nazis in Ukraine or that the Ukrainian people and the Russian people are really one.

It is possible to see convergence most clearly when both Trump and Russia espouse conspiratorial views. In this case, both Trump and Russia voiced the conspiracy that the Democrats created an atmosphere of hatred that led to the assassination attempt. This shares a certain perverse illogic in that both Trump and Russia have demonstrated significant hatred against specific groups (Trump most notably against LGBTQI+, immigrants, Muslims, Hispanic people, and Black people, Putin particularly against gay people and ethnic minorities such as Chechens). It also resonates with the type of conspiracy theory against the Left that connects to a broad constellation of anti-Democratic conspiracy theories that embrace Pizzagate, QAnon, and the "deep state." When specific narratives chime with long-standing rightwing conspiratorial views of the world, they are more enduring and powerful (Starbird).

As a result, it is most useful to look for conspiracy theories, such as the notion that the Democrats somehow engineered the assassination attempt either directly or indirectl. In considering what types of Russian propaganda might become powerful or influential in the 2024 elections, it is important to identify stories and narratives aimed at the U.S. market (through RT, Sputnik, websites controlled by the Russian government that pose as news, social media accounts controlled by Russian agents, etc.) that resonate with the conspiracies that appeal to Trump voters. As Trump also commonly promotes conspiracy theories that align with the notion of the "deep state" allegedly run by a Democratic cabal, there are times when Russian propaganda pushes his messaging and vice versa.

This raises the question of while there is a convergence of narratives between Trump and Putin, how have Democrats developed an alternative narrative? Historically, Republicans have been seen as more capable of creating compelling narratives for political power, notably Ronald Reagan with his glowing image of America in his "morning in America" campaign and George Bush with his powerful "War on Terror" narrative (Entman 2003). Yet, Obama was particularly skilled at evocative communication, winning the 2008 Democratic nomination as a political

newcomer who effectively used compelling rhetoric and social media to build an image of new, socially conscious America. Where is the Democratic narrative that supports Ukrainian interests and calls out Russia for the invasion? While Biden and Democrats in Congress consistently call out Russia and praise Ukraine, it is hard to define a way in which U.S. citizens feel emotionally connected to this struggle. On the other hand, for Trump supporters, Russia (and by extension Russian interests and Trump) is unfairly attacked by the Democrats so their interests are much more likely to align with Russia.

While the study of strategic narratives is compelling, it's important to consider how they are affected by world events. For example, a study of Biden's narratives became fairly irrelevant for the 2024 elections because he dropped out of the race. Harris has had little time to develop compelling narratives, although the public sphere has seized upon and generated whimsical memes that have injected humor and energy into the race. Arguably, Harris could garner her most success by remaining vague and non-specific, allowing voters to project their wishes and desires onto her presidency. Putin, however, is the world leader who was (at the time of writing this paper) facing one of his most significant communication challenges of his long reign, as Ukraine troops poured over the Russian border for the first attack on Russian soil since World War II. Labeling them as "terrorists," Putin has not appeared to find new narratives that ise to this challenge. In other words, you can only talk yourself out of certain realities – as much as some part of the audience is led by conspiratorial thinking – to a certain point.

It is becoming increasingly apparently that you cannot counter a compelling narrative – even if it is largely false – by attacking it with facts or even traditional arguments about liberty and justice. On the one hand, it is important to identify Russian propaganda goals, so that they are not presented to the U.S. public as "news." As noted in Oates and Ramsay, this is particularly important in terms of NATO, in which journalists often fail to recognize that historical context and reiterate that the right for Ukraine national self-determination is not up for negotiation. On the other hand, the Democrats need to find an effective counter-narrative that constructs a more compelling "we" against "them" (as does Russia and Trump) to engage voters and the audience in countering Russian and Republican attitudes about Ukraine. While arguably difficult to counter compelling propaganda with facts, it is possible to find ways to mobilize the U.S. voters around ideals. Obama managed to do this, despite being both a relatively inexperienced party outsider and facing traditional racial prejudice, passing landmark health care legislation among other policy achievements.

It's important to mention the challenges for politicians, journalists, and voters alike in parsing the messaging in the 2024 U.S. election. It is difficult for politicians who are running against Trump and Republicans who echo Trump to find a compelling counter-narrative that does not also distort the truth. Trump has the narrative advantage in that he is willing to avoid or even contradict facts to give his constituency what it wants – retribution for being "bilked" by the

federal government, pushed aside by favored minorities and immigrants, and despised as "white trash." The Democrats often offer, essentially, nothing new – just the hard and often disappointing attempt to balance the interests of the people with the capabilities of democratic governance. Attempts at logical refutation of the Trumpian dialogue – that the U.S. government provides the safety net, services, retirement, and health care that citizens rely on – often cannot compete with the illogical, incorrect, but alluring notion of making things 'great' again. A return to an imagined glorious past is always more powerful than a promise of an uncertain future, as Putin also knows. At the time of this writing, it would appear that many Democrats were using Harris' unprecedented campaign to project a more hopeful vision of the U.S. future that seemed to directly counter the darker, more apocalyptic messages from Trump.

At the same time, Trump continues to present a significant challenge to mainstream journalists, although he was an enormous boon to rightwing media such as Fox News (Oates and Ramsay). While journalists initially failed to cover Trump or his supporters seriously in 2016 (O'Hare 2020), they also struggled with the Trump's administration allegiance to a narrative over facts. This started with the Trump administration's demonstrably false assertion that Trump's inauguration had attracted larger crowds than Obama's inauguration and set the scene for a White House that knowingly spread falsehoods. While politicians who lie are not a new phenomenon, the scale and scope of Trump's falsehoods were unprecedented. This grew in contention during COVID, as the Trump White House chose to deny science on the virus, and culminated in Trump's conspiracy theory that the U.S. election system was rigged against him. Trump also was the first U.S. President to label the press as the enemy of the people.

How can journalists provide coverage of facts rather than beliefs, when a sizable portion of the audience prefer beliefs to facts? How do journalists contextualize statements by world leaders when they know the statements to be either questionable or downright lies (such as NATO 'forced' Russia to invade a peaceful neighboring country)? In domestic politics, journalists did eventually learn to contextualize Trump's claims, particularly by turning off cameras during his false claims of a stolen election in November 2020. Yet, enough people believed the conspiracy to participate in the January 6, 2021, insurrection. The problem with foreign news is even more challenging, not least because it's easier to push disinformation onto a population that has little knowledge or engagement with foreign affairs. To a Trump supporter, Putin might seem to share some important characteristics with their beloved U.S. president and candidate: overt prejudice against minorities, talk of pride in a nation, impatience with the petty issue of civil rights, a return to an imagined glorious past that favors White men. Americans might well not be aware of the complete dearth of civil society and justice in Russia, not to mention the horrific human rights abuses of the Russian troops on Ukrainian citizens.

Journalists can do a better job of informing citizens about world events, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in three key ways. First, the audience needs a range of well-informed

experts who can speak to the situation through expertise and deep knowledge of the situation (this has been lacking, see Chapter 6 of Oates and Ramsay). For example, it's important to remind the audience that the former Soviet Union carried out a repressive military occupation of Eastern Europe from the end of World War II until 1989. In addition, it's important to know specific Russian talking points and challenge them. While it's acceptable that many American citizens would legitimately question the value or morality of supporting a foreign war, repeating without challenge that the defensive military alliance of NATO 'forced' Russia to invade is not good journalism. Finally, journalists can do a service to the public to point out where Republican narrative on Russia dovetails with Putin's key propaganda goals. The public might not care, but they should make an informed choice. Knowing that Trump often supports Russian views as a way of attacking Democrats – who impeached Trump based in large part on his attempt to claim Russia did not interfere in his election as president – is a useful and illuminating filter through which to view Trump's claims about Russia and Ukraine.

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Table 1: Trump vs. Russian Narratives
(Yellow highlights for overlapping narratives)

Trump on Ukraine	Trump narrative	Russia on Ukraine	Russian narrative
NATO is bad	America first	NATO is an existential threat to Russia	The West is out to destroy Russia.
There should be a peace treaty in Ukraine in which Ukraine gives up territory	Stop sending money abroad/Trump as great world leader	There should be a peace treaty in Ukraine in which Ukraine gives up territory	Ukraine has no right to exist.
Americans should not waste their money on foreign wars	Isolationalist/America First	Americans should not fund Ukrainian defense	The West is out to destroy Russia
Putin is a strong leader and strong leaders are good	Support for Putin and Russia	Russia is a resurgent great nation that deserves a dominant place in the world	Russia as resurgent great nation
Ukraine was who meddled in U.S. elections, not Russia	Support for Putin and Russia	Ukrainians do not exist as a people; they really should be part of the greater Russian nation	Ukraine has no right to exist.
		There are neo-Nazis in Ukraine	Ukraine is awash in neo-Nazis
		The West is using Ukraine as a proxy to expand NATO and wipe Russia off the face of the Earth	The West is Out to destroy Russia
		Democracy and self-determination of nations is an existential threat to Russia	Democracy is flawed and failing
		Russians in Ukraine need saving	Russian protects all Russians

Table 2

Most Common Mentions of Trump and Russia in 75 U.S. News Articles

July 1 through August 12, 2024

Topic	Description	Number of stories
Russiagate	Relating to the accusations, inquiries, and convictions of people charged with working with Russians in Trump's 2016 election campaign	25
Vance	Choice of J.D. Vance as Trump's running mate. Vance is more consistently against U.S. support for Ukraine than Trump	7
Hostage release	Covered both Trump's claims prior to the release that he could use his friendship with Putin to expedite release and then criticism of Biden after release	6
Russia's support of Trump	Mentions of Russia's preference for Trump as U.S. leader	6
Critique of Trump by Biden	Biden says Trump has bad policy on Russia	5
Trump's opposition to Ukraine	Trump's criticism of Ukraine, including pushing for a peace treaty that Ukraine does not want	4
Trump's support of Ukraine	Includes coverage of Trump's phone call with Ukrainian president	3
No invasion under Trump	Trump's claim that the Russians didn't invade Ukraine while he was president (note: the war was ongoing during his administration)	2

Source: Author's research. The author searched Nexis Uni with the search terms "Trump" and "Russia" to identify relevant articles in newspaper articles originating from the U.S. from July 1 to August 12, 2024. An initial search returned 134 articles, but after filtering out duplicates (the most updated version of a story was used), non-news content such as editorials and letters to the editor, and content in Spanish, the analysis covered 75 articles. The most common articles were from *The New York Times* (25), *The Hill* (22), *USA Today* (8), the Associated Press (5), with a handful from several other regional and city newspaper. Nexis Uni does not archive two prominent U.S. newspapers, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. However, given this was a brief qualitative survey of the news over a period of six weeks, an inclusion of more outlets was not considered necessary to demonstrate the key news stories involving Trump and Russia over the time period.

Appendix A
Screenshot of Elon Musk Tweet

Yaroslav Azhnyuk / Ярослав Ажнюк @YaroslavAzhnyuk · Jun 13   •••
Replying to @YaroslavAzhnyuk
On June 13, **Elon Musk**, who was also mentioned in **Texty**'s research, tweeted calling for **Texty** to be listed as a terrorist group.

Really, Elon? The guy advocating for free speech, trying to create "TruthGPT" on top of the X platform, maximizing "the actual truth"?

6/X

> **Jim Banks** ✔ @Jim_Banks · 8h   •••
> BREAKING: House Republicans have just moved to DEFUND the Ukrainian NGO that created a "watch list" that consisted of conservative lawmakers and private American citizens!
>
> America First!
>
> 💬 656   ⇄ 1.6K   ♡ 8.5K   ᐧᖧ 694K   🔖 ⬆️
>
> **Elon Musk** ✔ ✖ @elonmusk · 8h   •••
> It's a good first step. They should be added to the list of sanctioned terrorist organizations.
>
> 💬 170   ⇄ 494   ♡ 3.9K   ᐧᖧ 104K   🔖 ⬆️

💬 8   ⇄ 46   ♡ 196   ᐧᖧ 6.3K   🔖 ⬆️