

THIS MATERIAL CONCERNS THE ACTIVITIES OF “FOREIGN AGENTS”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF “FOREIGN AGENTS” IN RUSSIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Since the invasion of Ukraine, the “foreign agent” legislation is one example of the further tightening of restrictive discriminatory legislation of Putin’s regime in attempts to restrain, silence and criminalise opposition and dissenting views from the public sphere and discourse. Starting from the multidisciplinary approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study investigates the construction of media discourse on “foreign agents” by two state-affiliated outlets (Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Komsomolskaya Pravda) and one independent, alternative (Meduza) during three subsequent time frames from February 2022 to March 2024. The dominant discourse in state-owned and affiliated media signifies compliance and governmental alignment aimed at delegitimisation, stigmatisation and exclusion of “foreign agents”. Meduza challenges the dominant discourse and aims to (re)define the prevailing narratives, expose injustice, and contest the current socio-political conjuncture, ultimately urging for civic engagement and change. The paper concludes by reflecting on the dual use of language in authoritarian contexts as both a mechanism of control and repression and an instrument of resistance and contestation at the same time.

KEYWORDS foreign agent; Russia; media discourse; repression; resistance

Introduction

The invasion in Ukraine in 2022, or the “Special Military Operation” as referred to by government officials, has marked a turning point for Russia both on a foreign and domestic level. This period has been characterised by further government efforts to silence and repress oppositional voices with new strategies to exert control over the media landscape and curb civil rights. One of the key repressive mechanisms is the “foreign agent” label aimed at the marginalisation and delegitimisation of any individuals, groups and organisations that critique the government. The first “foreign agent” law was introduced in 2012 under Putin’s third presidential term, paving the way for new amendments in the following decade. The law allows the state to frame particular organisations and individuals as internal and external threats, thereby justifying repressive actions. The government argued the law was aimed at the protection of the interests, safety, and freedoms of Russian citizens from

foreign influence, therefore ensuring national security (The State Duma 2022). The first legal initiatives persecuted non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that allegedly participated or carried out political activities and received “foreign funding”. Successive to the war, the legislation on “foreign agents” continues to expand and also target media, organisations, independent journalists, and citizens, entailing harsher prosecution and restrictions, as well as increased administrative and criminal liability (OVD-Info 2024b). The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the Russian “foreign agent” law as unconstitutional, arbitrary, and violative of fundamental human rights (freedom of expression and association) both in 2022 and 2024 (ISHR 2022; ECHR 2024). Moreover, an alarming trend of mirroring “foreign agent” legislation can be traced throughout former countries of the Soviet bloc, expanding to Kazakhstan (Transparency International 2023), Kyrgyzstan, Georgia (RSF 2024), as well as raising concerns on the EU level with Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (ISHR 2025; Nikolov 2024) drafting or adopting similar legislation, utilising the Russian “foreign agent” law as the culprit.

The existing body of literature in this field of research is mainly focused on how non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists, and human rights defenders adapt and continue their work under the “foreign agent” law (e.g. Daucé 2015; Tysiachniouk et al. 2018; Skokova et al. 2018). There is a lack, however, of scholarly attention into the role of media in the discursive construction of the category of the “foreign agent”.

Starting from the multidisciplinary approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study addresses this gap by investigating how two state-affiliated/owned outlets (Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Komsomolskaya Pravda) and one independent, alternative outlet (Meduza) discursively (re-)construct this category of the “foreign agent”, during three subsequent time frames between February 2022 and March 2024. Through the CDA lens we examine how language and discourse affects, influences, and constructs the social identity of the “foreign agent”, as well as how power relations and mechanisms of exclusion/expansion are (re)produced in discourse.

We start this paper by situating it within relevant historical, political, and social realities. We draw out the political regime in Russia under Putin’s power, its ideological underpinnings, repression, the “foreign agent” law itself, and finish by focusing on the state of the media landscape. Followed by the methodological section in which the analytical choices, case selection and the application of CDA are explained. The findings illustrate the “foreign agent” construction in the news outlets and outlines the shifts in discourse. The concluding discussions reflect on the dual use of language as both a mechanism of control and repression and an instrument of resistance and contestation in authoritarian contexts.

Literature Review and Background

Putin’s Regime and Ideology

Contemporary Russia has been under Vladimir Putin’s power since 2000, exceeding 25 years in power (21 years as president, 4 years as prime minister). His rise to power in the early 2000s was characterised by democratic sentiment, cooperation with the West, the fight against corruption, and the need to uphold the constitutional rights of citizens (Lipman 2009). These premises of his early presidency were further revealed to be a mere façade. Putin’s first terms involved mechanisms of control and manipulation, but were marked by limited repression, individually targeted attacks, intimidation, tactics of fright, silence and forced cooperation (Applebaum 2013). The third presidential term of Putin (2012) can be determined as the marker for the new authoritative direction of Putin’s power

and governance. His return to presidency in 2012 happened during a turbulent time of mass protests against election violations. The political instability led to the crackdown on civil society: political persecution of protestors and introduction of repressive legal initiatives (e.g. “foreign agent” law) (Amnesty International 2013; Open Democracy 2016). Since his third presidential term, particularly since the onset of the “Special Military Operation”, Russia can be characterised by increasing consolidation of power, the dissemination of nationalist and conservative ideology, the rise of systematic repression and suppression of dissent, control over civil society and the media landscape.

Putin’s regime has been described as authoritarian or totalitarian state, personalist regime, sovereign democracy, dictatorship (among the many), reflecting the complexity of the Russian power dynamics. “Putinism” as a conservative, populist, personalist autocracy is based on traditional values, rejection of change, rejection of liberal values, and is aimed at sustaining stability and legitimising the political conjuncture (Fish 2017). Epstein (2022) characterises Putin’s regime as schizophrenic fascism with fundamental contradictions at its core, promoting moral and racial superiority, imperialistic ideas, alongside cynicism and corruption. Key aspects include negation of democracy, liberty, and freedom as core values, in combination with intense scrutiny towards loyalty and patriotism, vigilance towards enemies of the state and traitors. Putin’s regime can be characterised as a hybrid of fear and spin dictatorship heavily relying on stability and popularity (Gurieva and Treisman 2022). Since the onset of the invasion, Putin employs principles of fear dictatorship and rule through repression: the utilisation of mass demonstrative prosecution, the crackdown on civil society, the elimination of independent and alternative media (Gurieva and Treisman 2022; Treisman 2022). In combination, Putin wields elements of spin such as the manipulation of information and complex propaganda tactics, allowing to control the informational space. Among the defining features it is crucial to emphasise the importance of sustaining stability for the regime. This orchestrated stability is achieved through three key elements: reinforcement of legitimacy among citizens, erasure, and exclusion of opposition, alongside with co-optation of dominating power groups (Savelyeva and Rogov 2023).

Repression

The years leading up to the full-scale invasion are marked as a period of limited repression, taking a steep turn in 2022 to a period of unprecedented expansion of repression violating the ability to exercise fundamental human rights (Re:Russia 2023). The political repression after the full-scale invasion is mainly based on anti-war cases, cases based on disagreements with the governmental regime and its policies, alongside with cases against incitement of hatred, and public calls for terrorist activities, among others (Memorial 2023). The government’s response focused on suppression of civil society that advocated for human rights, social justice, and change. The 2023 Freedom House report highlights the discrepancy between constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech, expression, assembly, and the breach of these rights, which have intensified since the onset of the invasion. The official governmental position denies repression or political persecution in contemporary Russia, referring to legal restrictions as “sanitary measures” (Interfax 2024). To challenge power structures and the regime, citizens must be informed and aware of the injustices and human rights violations (Anderson, Regan, and Ostergard 2002). Similarly, Gurieva and Treisman stress that resistance to autocratisation depends on the active resistance of the informed citizens “with the capacity to monitor, organise, and fight back” (2022, 100). Technological advancements have enabled Putin’s repressive apparatus to gain control over the digital informational spaces. Successive of the invasion, oppositional movements and

opinions manifested through the digital space, triggering the intensified government surveillance, systemic censorship, and prosecution (OVD-Info 2024a). Additionally, the Russian government is effectively attempting to block VPN services, which are used to bypass pervasive digital censorship (JX Fund 2024).

The “Foreign Agent” Law

The focus in this research falls on the discursive construction of foreign agents in the media landscape as one of the repressive mechanisms against dissent, affecting independent media, journalism, and civil society. Before moving on to explain the discursive construction, we outline the “foreign agent” law and the expansion of the legislation. The law was first introduced in 2012 and targeted NGO’s, expanding over the years to include media outlets, unregistered public organisations/associations, as well as individuals/citizens, leading to significant social, political, and legal implications in their operation, public perception, credibility, and additional scrutiny (OVD-Info 2024b). The unified register of “foreign agents”, introduced shortly after the invasion as a new legal measure, entailed harsher restrictions, punishment, and an expansion of its legal scope. The new formulation of the law allows anyone who receives “foreign funding” or is under “foreign influence” involved in political or social activities (The State Duma 2022) to potentially be denounced as a “foreign agent”. The legal articulation, however, signifies blurred meaning, parameters, and categories of “foreign influence” and “foreign funding”. New amendments require foreign agents to follow tedious rules on registration (including the obligation of self-registration in the registry in the case of meeting the legal criteria), excessive reporting, flagging of all produced and disseminated materials with a long disclaimer: “This material (information) has been produced, disseminated, and/or directed by a foreign agent (full name), or pertains to the activities of a foreign agent (full name).” (Pavlova 2022; see more OVD-Info 2024b). Foreign agents are subjected to administrative and criminal liability for non-compliance with the law. Furthermore, since the creation of the unified register, the restrictions applied to foreign agents continue to expand. These restrictions include prohibitions on participating in electoral campaigns and holding public office (OVD-Info 2024b). Moreover, they face harsher financial restrictions: lack of subsidies from the government, alongside new amendments prohibiting advertisements on “foreign agent” materials that cut off one of the most crucial financial channels. Foreign agents are also prohibited from organising public rallies, events and restricted from engaging in any educational activities.

To justify the Russian “foreign agent” law, the government claims to emulate the United States’ Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), which serves as the precedent. Despite some similarities in language and legal form between them, implications and execution of the legislation differ, where Russia has been found to utilise the law to suppress dissent and silence oppositional voices (Orlova 2019; Rebo 2022). The broad, vague language and formulation of “foreign agent” laws pose risks of politicised enforcement and weaponisation of “transparency” (see more Robinson 2019). The Russian “foreign agent” law has shown to mainly target civil society: sectors of NGO’s, activists, politicians, academics, journalists, and citizens not only for their anti-war positions or disagreement with the government, but any positions that are deemed unacceptable (e.g. LGBTQ+, feminism, ecological issues). Despite the expansion of control and restrictions, the legal initiatives were argued to be non-discriminatory and aimed at transparency (The State Duma 2022). Furthermore, as of 2022 Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe and ceased to be a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2022), allowing it to ignore and reject

any decisions or recommendations of international organisations and continue executing repressive measures against civil society.

After outlining the legal parameters of “foreign agent” legislation fitting within Putin’s repressive machine, it is also important to focus on the social identity of “foreign agents”, how they are represented and constructed in the media landscape. The construction of social and national identities and framing of the “other” in discourse have been studied by scholars like Said (1978), De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999), and Ivie (2003) in context of terrorism, orientalism, racism, and xenophobia. They illustrate how language can perpetuate power imbalances, enforce stigmatisation, exclusion, and marginalisation of those labelled as the “other” through rhetorical devices and discourse. Examining the discursive construction of foreign agents as the “other” in the media landscape within authoritarian contexts will provide an understanding of how language is used to construct the identity and shape perceptions about them.

Russian Media Landscape

Media (among other institutions) plays an important role in maintaining the status-quo and manufacturing consent throughout society, contributing to the formation of hegemony (Gramsci 1971). The hegemonic order is established by the dissemination and normalisation of ideas, beliefs, and values of the dominant social group, perpetuated within the dominant discourse. Specifically, during times of uncertainty and crisis, control over political discourse and disseminated information becomes a crucial focus of autocrats in attempts to control the public and maintain power (Guriev and Treisman, 2022). The current media landscape has increasingly come under control, regulation, and censorship under Putin’s presidency (Skillen 2016; RSF 2024), illustrating tightening control and influence over disseminated rhetoric and narratives especially after the start of the invasion, nearly eliminating independent media and journalism. The media landscape is dominated by state-owned or state-affiliated media, abiding by the state’s media governance and regulation (Kuzichkin and Hanley 2021). The constructed and disseminated narratives are produced by special agencies of the government or Presidential Administration under stringent control.

After the onset of the invasion in 2022, independent media have been increasingly under attack, forced to operate under legal and practical restrictions, direct or self-censorship, and threat of punishment due to non-compliance. The independent media sector suffered significant shock after the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, accelerating a mass exodus of media and journalism professionals. According to estimates, approximately 1500-1800 professionals were forced into exile (JX Fund 2023), following the expansion of repression and prosecution. The heterogeneous and complex sector has been forced to adopt new strategies and survival tactics under systemic state pressure, faced with new precarious socio-political realities. Although the sector has suffered major challenges (financial, security, logistical), independent media in exile continue to reach an estimated 6-9% of the adult population living in Russia, although the actual reach could be 10 to 20% greater than the estimates (JX Fund 2023).

Most independent media including Meduza, TV Rain, Novaya Gazeta (Europe), Mediazona, iStories, The Insider, The Moscow Times (among others) have been shut down in Russia, denounced as “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations” and forced into exile (RSF 2024). Exceptionally, Meduza originated as a Russian media in exile, has been established and based in Latvia since 2014. It has been referenced as the largest and one of the most important independent Russian media outlets “providing trustworthy, fact-based journalism” (Fritt Ord 2022) and can be compared to “internationally renowned

publications like the *Financial Times* or the *New Yorker*” in terms of audience reach (JX Fund 2023). Independent media (like many others) have adopted a multitude of survival tactics to bypass the Kremlin’s efforts to silence independent media and control the informational space: a diversification of distribution channels (online publications, social media accounts, podcasts), the creation of mirror servers (additional servers containing copies of the original website), and successful crowdfunding campaigns (that comprise the only financial means of survival).

Evidence suggests the closure of the Russian media landscape to any opposing views. Media pluralism and freedom of expression in the context of Russian realities practically become illusory concepts, limited by direct or indirect mechanisms of control, censorship, blockage, and surveillance. Despite these conditions, independent media and media in exile play a crucial role in challenging Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, as well as report, raise awareness and bring visibility about Russian realities, serving “as one of the few remaining sources of uncensored information for domestic audiences” (Wiik and Johansson 2025), as well as provide a foundation for Western reporting on Russia (JX Fund 2024).

Research Design

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) reveals how language can construct, perpetuate, represent, and reflect social inequalities, ideological underpinnings, power relations and social identities/groups. CDA is a crucial tool for understanding and uncovering how language and discourse shape and are shaped by social and political realities, illustrating the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structures (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). It aims to critique the existing power structures that perpetuate inequality, reveal and advocate for those who are subjected to linguistic and discursive forms of domination, potentially leading to the spread of critical awareness among the public (Fairclough 1995).

To be able to explore and draw conclusions on the construction of the “foreign agent” and capture various discursive practices, we analysed three news/media outlets: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (government-owned official Russian daily newspaper), *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (daily tabloid newspaper, covering politics and society), and *Meduza* (independent news website). *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* is the official source of the government and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* has government affiliations, implying the portrayal and reproduction of the governmental rhetoric, acting as agenda setters. Both *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* declare to be the leaders in audience reach among socio-political and daily newspapers in Russia, reaching 22,3 million monthly readers and 6 million daily readers on the online websites respectively¹ (RG Media 2023; Mazenko 2023; *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* n.d). *Meduza* operates as an oppositional online media platform from Latvia, targeting Russian audiences within the country, diasporas in exile, and English-speaking audiences. Prior to the “foreign agent” and subsequently “undesirable organisation” status, as of 2021 *Meduza* attracted 12-18 million unique users monthly (over 70% within Russia), making it the most widespread independent outlet. As of 2024, *Meduza* assesses its audience to be approximately 10 million, with 7 million readers living in Russia, 3 million abroad, in addition to approximately 450 thousand English-speaking readers (*Meduza*, 2024).

Three time frames were chosen in consideration with temporal variation to capture the potential shifts in discourse during a three-year time span. Starting from the first weeks of the full-scale invasion (22/02/2022 – 15/03/2022), followed by a similar timespan surrounding the 1-year (15/02/2023 – 15/03/2023) and 2-year (15/02/2024-15/03/2024) marks of war. These time frames were chosen for analysis as they signify important moments in contemporary Russian and global history linked with the start of the invasion and

TABLE 1
Case selection by outlet and time frame

	22.02.2022–15.03.2022	15.02.2023–15.03.2023	15.02.2024–15.03.2024
Komsomolskaya Pravda	2	8	21
Rossiyskaya Gazeta	11	17	18
Meduza	15	7	32

continuation of war. As a complex public issue this needs to be examined throughout a longer time span to understand and unfold the emergence, construction, and evolution in discourse (Carvahlo 2008). The search for data took place online, either through Google Advanced Search or through the website archive directly. The data for Rossiyskaya Gazeta was collected through the newspaper archive through an advanced search based on dates and keywords. Google Advanced Search was utilised with the relevant parameters for Meduza and Komsomolskaya Pravda, due to the absence of archival search. The key word search consisted of 4 words/phrases in Russian: иноагент/ иноагентом [abbreviation for foreign agent], иностранный агент/ иностранным агентом [foreign agent]. After the process of filtering out the initial data (articles that only included the mention or reference of someone as a “foreign agent” with the disclaimer either in text or at the end of the articles were excluded), the final corpus consisted of 131 articles.

The research was based on the three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis proposed by Fairclough (1989, 1995), consisting of textual, discursive, social dimensions. At the textual level, we focused on the linguistic features, the rhetorical strategies, and the use of vocabulary and language. Moving on to the analysis of discourse practices and patterns of media outlets, that allowed us to investigate how ideological underpinnings and social practices are shaped by language, paying attention to the way the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. Finally, we examined the broader context and interpretation: how the social structures influence and shape discourse, embedded within the historical, social, and political context and how the ideology and power relations are reinforced. The key analytical points we present in the analysis are 1) discursive strategies and patterns, 2) framing power, and 3) mechanisms of exclusion and exposure/expansion. We examined lexical choices, narratives and framing techniques employed in the discourse to identify discursive strategies and patterns (1). We also investigated how discourse reproduces social inequalities and sustains power structures, by examining who holds influence and framing power over public discourse (2). Analysing those elements allowed us to draw conclusions on the use of mechanisms of exclusion and exposure/expansion (3), illustrating how discourse can act as a tool of both repression and resistance. All quotations and excerpts used as examples from the articles are demarcated by the published date and news outlet abbreviation.²

Findings

To illustrate the findings of this research, we start by drawing out the similarities and differences in discourse between the two state-owned/affiliated media outlets, before delving into each in depth. We continue with the outline of the discourse in the alternative media outlet – Meduza. We conclude with discussing the general shifts in discourses over the years in the three outlets.

The discursive patterns and strategies of Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Komsomolskaya Pravda both have similar elements in terms of their ideological stance and perspective on

the “foreign agent”: the framing and portrayal of them as enemies, threats, and traitors for their anti-governmental and anti-war positions. Both outlets reinforce traditionalistic and nationalistic ideologies and are directed at their marginalisation and stigmatisation. Both outlets practically exclude “foreign agents” from the discourse, selectively choosing actors that could be presented as scapegoats and the malevolent “other”. The focus on nationalism and patriotism, as a discursive pattern, was prevalent but deployed differently in both outlets. In the case of Rossiyskaya Gazeta, the nationalistic and patriotic sentiment is visible though the framing of the “foreign agents” and their activities as threat to national security, sovereignty, the social order and even the existence of Russia, further contributing to the justification and legitimisation of repression against them. In Komsomolskaya Pravda, the emphasis falls on patriotism through the framing of “foreign agents” and their views as anti-patriotic and inherently hostile against Russia, aimed at building a stronger sense of national identity and negative, hostile feelings towards those who “go against the nation” and betray their Motherland.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta

Within Rossiyskaya Gazeta the framing power and shaping of discourse is given to politicians, government officials, trusted experts and those deemed credible by the regime. Their key strategies are the use of official language and authoritative sources aimed at the justification of the current power structures, as well as the depletion of agency and credibility of “foreign agents”. Rossiyskaya Gazeta illustrates a more articulated discursive pattern of delegitimisation and discreditation through their repeated portrayal as enemies, threat to the nation, and “puppets” of the collective West with subversive aims to destroy the Russian social order. “Foreign agents” in the outlet are framed as extremists and terrorists, anti-patriots, Nazi’s: *“The official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the words of Nazi Veronica Belotserkovskaya”* (RG, 14.03.2023). Their aims, as articulated in discourse, are geared towards a destabilisation and destruction of the Russian society: *“They have a common goal - to at least destroy our country”* (RG, 28.02.2024). “Foreign agents” are accused of interference in internal affairs, dissemination of fake/destructive information, and undermining trust in institutions and specifically media: *“...they [foreign agents] are doing everything to destabilise the situation in the country - spreading fake news about our army, popularising the West’s position on any issues, trying to undermine citizens’ trust in official sources of information in the Russian Federation, our media”* (RG, 15.02.2024). The outlet articulates the concept in the context of criminal liability and subversive actions taken against the government, emphasising the criminal and threatening nature of their existence. The introduced laws, legal initiatives and repression are justified through the need to *“counter such hidden foreign interference in the internal political affairs of the state”* (RG, 15.02.2024), aimed at *“ensuring the security and protection of the sovereignty of our country”* (RG, 28.02.2024), and as a *“consistent effort to limit funding for entities operating on the territory of the Russian Federation in the interests of unfriendly states.”* (RG, 06.03.24). Rossiyskaya Gazeta openly and deliberately reinforces the status quo by justifying and legitimising the existing power relations and ideological stances, at the same time delegitimising the West (as a collective term) with their liberal, democratic values:

“[They attempt to] destroy our traditional values and impose on us their pseudo-values, which would corrode our people from within, those attitudes that they are already aggressively instilling in their countries and which directly lead to degradation and degeneration, since they contradict the very nature of man” (RG, 01.03.2022).

The juxtaposition of ideologies is clearly articulated throughout many articles leading to the discursive pattern of ideological tensions. Foreign agents are used as scapegoats and presented as agents of the West, who are deploying subversive plans curated by the Western World aimed at the destruction of Russia, fitting in the broader discourse of ideological war: *"Such figures [foreign agents], the politician continued, are already in the pay of Washington, Brussels, London, and some are in the pay of the Ukrainian regime. And they have one goal - to destroy our country"* (RG, 27.02.24). The agenda setting is illustrated in the outlet by the constant repetition of quotes and narratives, framing and othering, that shapes the dominant discourse through mechanisms of exclusion.

Komsomolskaya Pravda

Komsomolskaya Pravda mainly and predominantly focuses on celebrities and artists (singers, actors, producers, comedians) that were denounced as "foreign agents". The actors who are given framing power are predominantly artists that have a strong patriotic stance and are nationally loved and renowned. Foreign agents are labelled and framed as *"enemy"*, *"traitor"*, *"Russophobe"*, *"swindler"*, using those labels interchangeably and synonymously with "foreign agent", clearly depicting negative connotations. One of the key discursive strategies found in the outlet was sensationalism through the deliberate choice of appealing to the emotions of readers (namely negative) through sensational and hyperbolic content. In this outlet, "foreign agents" are diminished through the use of derogatory and insulting language, such as *"unteachable and incurable"*, *"cheap clowns with the intelligence of a minor student at a correctional school"* (KP, 21.02.2024), *"in their heads there is 'disorder and confusion'"* (KP, 11.03.2024). Komsomolskaya Pravda consistently deploys ad hominem attacks, fallacious attacks appealing to the character of the person. "Foreign agents" are delegitimised on financial and moral grounds, employing narratives of financial and moral debt to their country. Narratives of financial decline, impoverishment and lack of financial liability gain more prominence over the years: *"Artur Smolyaninov,³ who escaped from Russia, found himself in debt"* (KP, 21.02.2023), *"Escaped Russian cinema stars are begging and looking for work: Tutoring, poetry reading – ready for anything"* (KP, 11.03.2024), *"Actors Nazarov*, Bely* and Smolyaninov* who betrayed Russia are ready to work 'for food' and in amateur performances"* (KP, 12.03.2024). This illustrates the stripping away of the professional identity and highlights the lack of credibility. Constant articulation of "foreign agents" through their betrayal and amorality is deployed throughout the outlet, highlighting the severity of their actions: *"Actor Ivan Okhlobystin said that he considers Semyon Slepakov*'s departure from Russia a betrayal."* (KP, 04.03.2024), *"Ivan Okhlobystin said that godson Artur Smolyaninov* died in his eyes. The reason was that Smolyaninov* turned away from Russia"* (KP, 04.03.2024). Another prominent strategy utilised by Komsomolskaya Pravda is affiliation: in many articles, "foreign agents" are presented in a conjuncture, with multiple names and entities labelled as such to further group and stigmatise them by association, creating links and biases based on the logic of association for the audiences to identify them as the "enemy" or the "other". The analysis of the news outlet suggests the construction of "foreign agent" discourse based on mechanisms of exclusion.

Meduza

The framing power throughout the discourse in Meduza is predominantly given to "foreign agents" providing them with a platform to speak out and amplify their voices due to the exclusion from the mainstream/ governmental media and their misrepresentation.

The discursive patterns salient in Meduza are aimed at the critique of the dominant governmental narrative surrounding the “foreign agent”, critically redefining the prevailing image perpetuated by the pro-governmental media. Here, they are framed as repressed or arbitrarily labelled as such for their anti-war position and critique of the government: “... we understand why we are actually detained, tried, arrested, sentenced, killed. In fact, we are punished for allowing ourselves to criticise the government. In today’s Russia, this is absolutely forbidden.” (M, 26.02.2024). Every Friday, new denounced “agents” are added to the unified registry which Meduza consistently covers and reports on. While mentioning the names of the newly denounced “agents”, Meduza reveals and contests the reasons for the denouncement clearly demarcating their disagreement: “**According to the Ministry of Justice**, the people included in the register disseminated ‘false information about decisions made by public authorities of the Russian Federation ...’” or “The department writes that he **allegedly** disseminated ‘false information’ ...” (M, 15.03.2024). The news outlet systematically documents the developments of “foreign agent” labelling and related criminal prosecutions: “Mikhail Benyash has been deprived of his lawyer status for three years. Benyash was previously declared a ‘foreign agent’” (M, 17.02.2023), “The Investigative Committee has requested the arrest in absentia of economist Konstantin Sonin and politician Leonid Gozman” (M, 15.02.2024). By covering the accounts of prosecution, Meduza constructs and archives counter-narratives capturing the alternative accounts of history, fostering an alternative interpretation of reality from marginalised groups erased from the official narratives. The independent outlet presents a platform for journalists, politicians, activists, lawyers, artists (among others) to present their point of view through commentary and interviews, allowing to regain agency, articulate innocence, and the arbitrary character of allegations: “We believe that we have not violated anything, we do not see any traces of violations” referring to the words of editor in chief of suspended radio station “Ekho Moscow”. The discrepancy between the alleged crimes and the severity of punishments also comes under question, described by RBC’s editor in chief as “inexplicably excessive in terms of the proportionality of the scale of the violation and the punishment that followed it” (M, 09.03.23). Meduza consistently reports on administrative and criminal cases and covers court hearings, often publishing speeches and last words of persecuted individuals, such as the following words from the head of the human rights organisation Memorial: “I did not commit a crime... I am being tried for a newspaper article in which I called the political regime established in Russia totalitarian and fascist.” (M, 26.02.2024). Most court hearings within the current system happen “behind closed doors” with restricted access to press, lacking transparency and accountability. By publishing excerpts and reports from court hearings, updating and reporting on the registry of foreign agents and their further prosecution, Meduza exposes the impunity and breaches of the government and the criminal justice system, constructing the government as arbitrary, repressive, and violative.

Meduza reveals the systematic and consistent efforts of the government to censor independent media and eradicate any non-governmentally controlled narratives and language. Meduza reports on the crackdown on independent media since the onset of war: “Roskomnadzor demanded that 10 media outlets remove ‘false information’ about the war with Ukraine. It banned calling the war a war” (M, 26.02.2022), “Since the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, Russian authorities have tried (quite successfully) to censor the media, demanding that the war not be called a war, an invasion or an attack” (M, 05.03.2022). This discursive construction illustrates the efforts the government will go to meticulously control the information and disseminated narratives that is allowed in the media landscape. Meduza critiques the government’s institutionalised censorship, crackdown on independent media and freedom of speech, while illustrating how truthful reporting and alternative information is

increasingly criminalised within the current regime: *"But, unfortunately, our authorities do not like it when people work efficiently and tell the truth. And they especially don't like it when people work like that and tell the truth that a lot of people watch and read them"* (M, 03.03.2022), as articulated by editor in chief of TV Rain after the government's efforts to suspend the media. Meduza consistently reveals the prosecution that "foreign agents" face for reporting and covering information that the government tries to conceal: *"The editors of Mediazona stated that the publication was blocked 'because we honestly cover what is happening in Ukraine and call the invasion an invasion, and the war a war'"* (M, 06.03.2022). Meduza, among other media, remains highly consistent in contesting the imposed narratives and resisting the dominant discourse through truthful reporting and deploying counter-narratives about the Russian realities and the waged war.

Another prominent strategy is cultural resistance with the aim to expose the absurdity of the Russian government and their contradicting policies. As an example, a "foreign agent" singer presents her new song about the status of "foreign agents" with the lyrics: *"We will teach you, b*tch, to love your motherland"* (M, 09.03.2023) with a clear reference to ideological indoctrination and the imposition of patriotic feelings by the Russian government. Another important example, the ending of a poem written and read by Iliya Yashin in court, where he was facing charges for breaking the "foreign agent" law, undermining the legitimacy of the law:

*"... There are simply no rational boundaries
If you are a foreign agent"* (M, 28.02.2024).

The last strategies refer to solidarity and unity building, including calls to action to fight against the impunity of the government: *"Rain' [TV Rain] becomes not even a media, but a part of the fact that we are all together ... 'Rain' gives this feeling of unity."* (M, 01.03.2022). The calls for solidarity and change are cultivated and enforced throughout the outlet's coverage, advocating for social change and the contestation of the regime: *"We remember Alexei' call^a – 'Don't give up.' I'll add on my own behalf: don't lose heart, don't lose optimism. After all, the truth is on our side"* (M, 26.02.2024). Meduza continues to report and cover the violations of rights, repression, injustices exerted by the government, despite intensified pressure and prosecution. Meduza consistently deploys discursive strategies aimed at the exposure and expansion of existing "foreign agent" discourse, critically redefining and reconstructing governmental and mainstream rhetoric, using language as a tool of resistance and change, emphasising the importance of independent journalism and civic engagement.

Shifts in Discourse

We set out to examine the potential shifts in discourse within three timeframes, with the goal of understanding how the development of discourse evolves in the context of political instability and ongoing war with Ukraine. The pro-governmental media illustrate a trend of harshening rhetoric over the years aimed at the delegitimisation, demoralisation and dehumanisation of "foreign agents". During the first discursive momentum, the category is not yet clearly articulated in both state affiliated media outlets, with little coverage and articles on the topic. Approaching the 1-year mark of the "Special Military Operation," the social identity becomes more and more articulated, apparent and salient in the landscape. This aspect is illustrated by the use of harsher rhetoric and narrative and increasing numbers of articles regarding legal initiatives including the repetition of particular messages, quotes and excerpts from government officials and authoritative sources. Toward the 2-year mark

of the war, the “foreign agent” is articulated in the context of the broader conflict between Russia and the West with both internal (foreign agent) and external (the West) threats. The rhetoric around foreign agents becomes more unapologetic and severe over the years, allowing the government to legitimise the executed repressive mechanisms against them.

Meduza, on the other hand, starts articulating the “foreign agent” in terms of political oppression and the breach of rights from the first discursive momentum, continuing to shed light on Russian realities that are silenced and excluded from dominant discourse. The alternative outlet consistently challenges the institutions and governmental regime that executes control and repressive mechanisms against dissent. The discourse provides explanations, understandings, and interpretations of the autocratic reality from the viewpoint of those impacted by the legislation and repressed by the regime. Meduza continues to consistently report on the injustices and find adaptive strategies to continue their work with consistent effort, despite the increasing limitations, restrictions, censorship and soaring legal prosecution.

Discussions

In this discussion, we outline the negotiation of “foreign agent” identity that is prevalent in the media discourse, illustrating the different strategies of both state affiliated and owned media outlets with regards to the overarching aim to delegitimise “foreign agents”. We further focus on the broader implications of the normalisation of repression and future evolution of repressive mechanisms, as well as the constitution of the social cognition of citizens. This brings us to highlight the critical importance of alternative and independent journalism in fostering awareness and challenging the established regime.

The label of “foreign agent”, claimed to be non-discriminatory in legal and practical terms, in reality has illustrated contradicting findings between the legal definitions and the negotiation of this social identity in media discourse. The analysis suggests the curated and controlled production of texts and execution of power in discourse by the government and established institutions, signifying the legitimisation and justification of the current status-quo: the governmental regime and their policies. In the context of a limited access to alternative information and independent media, this is indicative of the social cognition, worldviews, public perceptions and understanding of reality by Russian citizens that are exposed to the dominant, controlled, and curated media. In the prevalent discourse, foreign agents become associated with any political dissent, anti-war stances, or critique of the existing regime, leading to the creation of distrust, vigilance, and constant awareness of the looming threat.

State affiliated and owned media have both executed different strategies/styles and focus on varying audiences, indicating the complexity of control and production of narratives throughout the media landscape. Komsomolskaya Pravda aims to create negative perceptions of “foreign agents” by derogatory language, dehumanisation, ridicule, and sensationalism. They minimise legal topics and focus on the characteristics and personalities of the presented foreign agents. Whereas Rossiyskaya Gazeta attempts to sustain an image of credibility and legitimacy, putting the emphasis on authority and expertise, relying on official governmental rhetoric. It presents the foreign agents and their activities as a threat to the social order, the value-belief system, and the existence of Russia. Komsomolskaya Pravda is aimed at the emotional level, whereas Rossiyskaya Gazeta deploys a more rational approach.

The increasing repression and political persecution show a growing dynamic since the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine (Reznikova and Korostelev 2024). This

expansion can be traced throughout the stronger articulation of foreign agents in discourse over the years in the dominant discourse. This is highly suggestive of the continuation of restrictions, control, and repression in the future, due to the accelerative nature of repression (Davenport and Appel 2022) and the intensification in response to perceived threats and dissent (Davenport 2007). The legitimisation of the current repression and legislative initiatives, creates and establishes a consensus among the public. Due to the lack of alternative and opposing media and views, the current regime and power structures become normalised, embedded in society and everyday interaction, constituting the social cognition of citizens. Due to propaganda tactics and limited access to independent and alternative media, Russian citizens are exposed to and consume the governmental narratives that construct the foreign agents as enemies, traitors, internal threats, and Western puppets, shaping the public perception. This further contributes to stigmatising and marginalising the group, while also discrediting and delegitimising the external enemy (the West). These efforts to undermine the “collective West”, contribute to the distrust of Russian citizens towards “Western” institutions, organisations that criticise the established social order and bring attention to human rights violations. The dominant discourse diminishes the existence of human rights breaches and repression in Russia in addition to creating negative stigmas and representations, leading to the normalisation and legitimisation of measures carried out against “foreign agents” as necessary. As articulated by Anderson, Regan and Ostergard (2002), awareness of repression among the population is crucial to challenge the power structures, effectively mobilise and demand social change. Similarly, Guriev and Treisman (2022) attribute the process of democratisation to the active resistance of the informed public. The discursive construction prevalent in the governmentally owned and affiliated media is emblematic of schizophrenic fascism (Epstien 2022) with the core aspects of the negation and ridicule of democratic liberal values, an emphasis on patriotism and national identity, combined with vigilance towards betrayal and threat. The main established worldviews and social cognitions become unchallenged and presented as the only possible reality, establishing the hegemonic order. The further increase of repression and legislation might not raise any contestation, questions, or challenges among the public due to the already established consensus that is legitimised and perpetuated through discourse.

The increasing control over the media: regulated production and distribution of texts and limitation of access to alternative independent media, is indicative of an effort of informational isolation of the Russian media landscape from any uncontrolled, non-aligning narratives. Furthermore, pro-governmental media as an institution are consistently legitimised and framed as the only source of official, credible information and truth existing in the media landscape. This contributes to distrust and vigilance among citizens towards independent media and journalism that already face significant challenges. The potential explanation could be the goal to achieve an image of illusory stability, that Putin holds in high regard (Savelyeva and Rogov, 2023), and to maintain, and legitimise the existing social structures and institutions, manufacturing consent among the citizens.

As findings indicated, Meduza as an alternative media outlet reveals the dominating and oppressive power structures, in attempts to reshape the understanding of social reality and foster critical awareness, ultimately advocating for social change and action. The independent media outlet amplifies the voices of “foreign agents”, presenting the possibility to understand different perspectives and critically engage with texts and contexts that challenge the dominant social, political, and ideological order established and reinforced through discourse. Meduza reveals and articulates the deliberate and systematic attempts of the government to ostracise, oppress, exclude, and eliminate any opposing views and

narratives through the construction of “foreign agents” in the media discourse. The outlet exposes the Kremlin’s coordinated and systematic attack on fundamental human rights in attempts to eradicate civil society and dissent. They reveal that the “foreign agent” status becomes synonymous with any dissent or critique and serves as the gateway for further arbitrary criminal prosecution and discursive delegitimisation. The implications of these findings emphasise the value and necessity of independent media and journalism in the context of fostering a critical perception of reality that is reflected and shaped by exposure to a variety of views. Beyond cultivating critical awareness, independent journalism in context of authoritarian governance can be used as a tool of resistance, promoting solidarity, civic engagement, and justice. Meduza documents the injustices, constructs, and preserves alternative memories, provides information for broad audiences contributing to the formation of the informed public. Despite the exile and pervasive censorship, Meduza maintains substantial reach among Russians within the country, diasporas and Russian in exile, international (English-speaking) audiences, as well serves as an important source of information for Western reporting on Russia. Meduza, as an independent media directly targeted by the government repression, reclaims discursive agency, (re)framing the “foreign agent” status as a tool of state oppression, exposing its absurdity, arbitrariness, and politicised enforcement. Despite the piling labels, charges, and attacks, Meduza continues to report and counter Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, offering unique and uncensored insights about Putin’s autocratic regime, functioning as a vehicle of resistance to the weaponisation of language and discourse.

The shift in discourse over the years is emblematic of a broader ideological discourse. The discursive construction of “foreign agents” is situated in the global ideological juxtaposition, put forward in the dominating discourse in Russia. “Foreign agents” are presented as internal threats in conjuncture with the external threat of the West with its democratic and liberal values that contradict established and normalised traditional and nationalistic values of Russia. The threat narrative becomes more articulated and salient with the continuation of war, reflecting the growing global political and ideological tensions and contingency of the construction, stretching out to be an example for other autocratic regimes. The emphasis on national identity, more concise and visible ideology, as well as the creation of the enemy (in this context – “foreign agents”) can be viewed as a response to political and social instability and prolongation of war. The shift in discourse to a stronger articulation of ideological messages can be contextualised within the attempt of Russia to establish itself as a super power in the political arena, posing a threat on a global scale.

The spreading wave of autocratisation has been gaining prominence, thereby illustrating the global diffusion of autocratic practices of legal repression and media control. Once primarily associated with autocratic regimes, these practices are becoming increasingly normalised within democratic contexts. These tendencies of control and suppression through legal mimicry and media manipulation sweep across democratic regimes emulating the “Russian style foreign agent” laws across Europe and elsewhere. This is further accelerated by the efforts of the Trump administration to trample freedom of speech, independent media, and undermine the criminal justice system in the United States. It is important to understand that the “foreign agent” and “influence” laws extend further than being just a domestic tool of legal repression in Russia and have now transcended into transnational efforts of autocratic control. Now more than ever, we must be critical of “foreign agent” and “foreign influence” laws that often mask behind claims of transparency and protection, while attempting to stifle dissent, eradicate civil society, and destroy freedom of speech. Recognising this broader trajectory underscores the global stakes of Russia’s autocratic resilience and the urgency of transnational resistance.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors(s).

NOTES

1. Needed to note that due to the media ownership model, control over media landscape and information manipulation, the real numbers of audience reach may differ.
2. Komsomolskaya Pravda – [KP]; Rossiyskaya Gazeta – [RG]; Meduza – [M]
3. The mention of foreign agent's names/organisations in the media must be accompanied with a disclaimer in the text: “* Recognised as a foreign agent”.
4. Referring to the words of the (late) opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

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