"For God, for Tsar and for the Nation: Authenticity in the Russian Imperial Movement's Propaganda"

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine how extremist organizations manage to present themselves as credible actors in the eyes of potential supporters on social media. This paper will address this question by exploring the role of authenticity in strategic narratives, which is believed to help these groups achieve this purpose. Apart from introducing this new theoretical concept, the paper will also apply it to a new case study of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) – the first far-right organization to be designated as terrorist by the U.S. and Canada. By conducting discourse analysis of the group's social media propaganda on the Russian network VKontakte, the paper will show how the RIM makes its strategic narratives authentic and, as a consequence, creates an image of a credible and trustworthy actor and thus manages to reach out to its target audience.

I. Introduction

In recent years, concern, and the attention of scholars, has begun to shift from jihadists to the extreme far-right. This is not surprising, as according to statistics for 2020, in the U.S. alone, 67% of all domestic terror attacks were conducted by right-wing extremists.[1] The same tendency can be observed elsewhere in the West: recently, the world has witnessed a number of devastating terrorist attacks conducted by supporters of white supremacist, Nazi, and racist groups – from Anders Breivik's heinous crime in 2011 to the tragedy in Charlottesville in 2017.[2]

Researchers have already established that such factors as economic frustration, anti-migrant feelings, desire to return to status quo especially what concerns "traditional values" which is closely connected with a desire to maintain masculinity/femininity, resentment toward the development of political correctness and globalization.[3] It has also been established that web interactions play a very important role in spreading and enhancing these ideas, creating ideology and forming the community.[4] Specifically, researchers emphasize the bonding role that the Internet and social media play – it is one of the easiest and fastest ways to spread beliefs and facilitate communication between existing members and to recruit new ones[5] and even mobilize them for attacks.[6] More importantly, members of far-right forums and groups are found to use the Internet and social media to reinforce their beliefs, establish a strong feeling of emotional connection between each other, and even create a particular subculture with

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its own symbols and cues that further enhance identity.[7] Similarly to research on Islamist terrorism, re-creating and changing the identity of members and their perception of the world is considered key to an understanding of the dynamics happening among the members of such groups.[8]

Despite this deeper insight that we are now able to get into the real and virtual lives of right-wing extremists, there is an issue that received considerably less attention. Namely, quite often the idea of a terrorist recruitment and persuasion on the Internet is presented like this: a person goes on the Internet, comes across a post by a certain organization, becomes interested and then gradually becomes more and more involved in its activities – first online and then often offline.[9]

This idea lacks one important aspect: the Internet is densely populated with various actors – from government, mainstream media, activists, academics and even rival extremist groups etc. So, before bringing a person in its eco-chamber, an extremist group needs to make sure that among all these potential influencers, it is its message, that their potential supporters are going to notice and most importantly - believe. In this sense, extreme right-wing groups are a particular interesting case, as a lot of them tend to spread ideas that often have a conspiratorial character and quite are hard to believe for a personal with a rational mindset.[10] While, of course, some people may already have extreme views when they come across far-right content, it nevertheless does not explain how far-right organizations manage to present themselves as credible source of information for them and encourage people to believe them. This article is going to argue that one of the ways how they do it is by signaling authenticity through their messages.

This article contributes to the field of terrorism studies and communication studies by further exploring narrative techniques that extreme far-right groups use to attract their potential supporters' attention and win their trust. By employing discourse analysis, the article is focusing on the overlooked case of Russian far-right groups, specifically – the Russian Imperial Movement, that has become the first international far-right organization that alongside with its leaders received status of Specially Designated Global Terrorist, in such a way also contributing to our knowledge of regional peculiarities of extreme far-right groups' online activities. Finally, the article aims to contribute to the field of international relations by showing how the effect of strategic narratives can be strengthened. When strategic narratives are perceived as authentic by the audience, i.e. resonating with their identities and concerns, the organization that uses them is perceived as genuine and more credible, and thus its message is more easily believed.

The article will proceed as follows. The next section will present the literature review on the ways how far-right use the Internet and social media for making propaganda effective and reaching out to their potential supporters. Section III will present the case-study and explain the reason behind choosing it. Section IV will discuss the connection between authenticity and strategic narratives and explain how it can help us in the analysis of extremist propaganda. Section V will present the methodology. Section VI will present the results, section VII will discuss them and section VIII will conclude.

II. Literature Review: Extreme Far Right and the Internet

Research on extremist and terrorist online behavior shows that groups indeed attempt to use specific techniques to discredit rival actors and divert possible supporters' trust.

For example, it is argued that in information-dependent societies terrorist/extremist groups may attempt to conduct so-called "offensive information warfare" i.e. launch direct cyberattacks on Internet-dependent financial institutions and e-commerce ventures with the use of stolen data. Such attacks if successful discredit government's ability to effectively protect the public's online activities and, therefore, leads to the decrease in people's trust.[11] This technique, however, has more to do with specific disruptive cyber operations than with information warfare as such. When it comes to the "battle of narrative" though, far-right groups seem to develop a certain toolkit that helps them achieve their propaganda goals.

Thus like many other radical communities, the far-right tends to employ the mechanism of "othering," i.e. building and altering members' identities based on the creation of an in-group ("us," "white superior race," "protectors of European race," etc.) versus out-group ("them," e.g. "Muslims," "liberals," "race traitors," etc.). Often "othering" is coupled with the narrative of threat, crises and anti-globalization rhetoric – "the other" is presented as the reason for a crisis both in a country or in the world in general – i.e. "Muslims are raping our women", "Jews are stealing our money", "immigrants are stealing our jobs" etc.[12] The in-group is often presented through religious affiliation (e.g. Christianity and pseudo-Christian cults) or national identity[13], where the in-group is portrayed as the only actor who "sees" what is really happening and the government is often portrayed as corrupt, weak and unwilling to save the nation from the "threat".[14] It is argued that this active use of the narrative of imperilment eventually prepares the audience not only to support the far-right groups but also more readily accept violence.[15]

These ideas are also accompanied by various conspiracy narratives as the crisis is presented as deliberate attack plotted by the "other" rather than any kind of natural development.[16] At the same time, the far-right also challenges "mainstream media" by engaging in criticism of specific stories they publish with a purpose to demonstrate how allegedly biased it is and position itself as alternative (and "truthful") news provider.[17]

It has also been proven that terrorist organizations tend to employ their unique visual themes – which concerns both the narratives (that have just been discussed above) and stylistic peculiarities to signal their distinct identity to their potential supporters.[18] In order to do that the far-right is using elements of social media marketing and branding in its propaganda to make it more attractive and "cool," which is important when it comes to recruiting younger members.[19] Such instruments as memes and jokes, symbolic images, thematic songs, and e-commerce (e.g. online shops selling branded T-shirts and other merchandise that has a symbolic meaning and facilitates a more vivid expression of members' identities).[20] The far-right also tend to use more aggressive online instruments such as trolling where they verbally and harass individuals and organizations that they consider enemies to their cause.[21] The use of social media marketing techniques helps the far-right to increase their reach and allows their narratives to penetrate more mainstream social space – young people see their content, like it, share it and eventually contribute to its further spread.[22]

While the use of different techniques explains the dynamics between the far-right and other actors on the Internet (the "cooler" the content, the better your chance to attract attention), the question of narratives and trust building is less straightforward as there are still questions that need further consideration. Namely, while it has been

shown what kinds of narratives and techniques the far-right use to discredit mainstream actors, it is yet no clear how they manage to present themselves as trustworthy and credible to their audiences – especially, granted their reliance on conspiracy theories and often unverified information. With the use of the Russian case-study, this article attempts to answer this question.

III. The Case-Study: Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)

When it comes to the far-right organizations' activities, Russia is not exceptional, but it is nevertheless a somewhat unique case. On the one hand, as in other European countries, some violent extreme right-wing movements in Russia were involved in a series of attacks on national minorities, which further deepens socio-economic and ethnic problems within the country. Interestingly, however, far-right agenda is deeply engrained in the Russian government's policy – with its open hostility toward LGBTs, adherence to "traditional values", anti-abortion rhetoric, and nationalist ideas. Yet, despite this fact, far-right organizations are rather opposed to the government than supportive of it.

In addition, unlike the European far-right, Russian groups enjoy much less freedom of action and expression due to policing measures actively employed by the country's security officials both online and offline, monitoring and censoring the population's behavior and freedom of speech.[23] At the same time, in contrast to other governments in Europe, which are either trying to fight against the far-right or representing them, the Russian government is somewhere in between these positions – halting the activities of the groups that are perceived as a direct threat to the regime's stability but exploiting the ones that are more loyal, with some right-wing politicians, like Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Vitaly Milonov, being members of the State Duma. These politicians, with their extreme and often controversial statements, serve to the benefit of the government, giving it an air of being much more progressive and tolerant in comparison to them, even though they represent the same beliefs. Indeed, the government is also known to be actively supporting the far-right in Europe, supposedly for the purpose of destabilizing the domestic situation there.[24]

One of the organizations that clearly serves this purpose is the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). It represents an interesting case-study for several reasons. One is that in April 2020 the U.S. State Department designated the Saint Petersburg-based Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and its leaders Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev, Denis Valiullovich Gariyev, and Nikolay Nikolayevich Trushchalov Specially Designated Global Terrorists as of Executive Order 13224 for providing training to perpetrators of acts of terrorism that threatens national and international security of the U.S. The designation is meant to prevent RIM and its leaders from receiving funding to carry out that training.[25] This was an unprecedented, perhaps surprising, move as, according to Nathan Sales, the State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator, "This is the first time the United States has ever designated white supremacist terrorists, illustrating how seriously this administration takes the threat."[26]

The State Department's decision was interesting not only because it was the first step in recognizing the far-right as a terrorist threat but also because of the choice of group. The RIM is a relatively obscure white supremacist organization that was created in 2002 in Saint Petersburg, where it also has two training camps. It remained

unknown until the conflict in Ukraine.[27] At that time, some of its members went to fight in Donbass as part of so-called Imperial Legion, and the organization was also providing training for those wishing to take part in the conflict in their "Partisan" training center.[28] However, its activity did come to an end with the end of the war in Ukraine: according to its members, since the conflict began, the number of people who undertook the training with RIM tripled.[29] There is evidence apart from regular men just willing to improve their combat and survival skills, RIM's "Partisan" became a training ground for more dangerous elements: many of Partisan's "cadets" (trainees) hold neo-Nazi and white supremacist views.[30] Moreover, two of the former Partisan's graduates Viktor Melin and Anton Thulin were responsible for a year-long series of bomb attacks on migrant asylum centers in Gothenburg, Sweden.[31] It is believed that their time at "Partisan" played a significant role in their radicalization.[32]

It is important to emphasize that RIM is not a proxi of the Russian government, yet according to scholars, it does not make them less deserving attention as a potential instrument of Russian government's policy of supporting right-wing groups abroad.[33] The group is believed to have strong links to violent right-wing movements in Europe and America, (e.g. U.S.-based Traditionalist Worker's Party, Germany's National Democratic Party) providing them not only with friendly connections but with tangible material support.[34] As mentioned, members of these groups undergo training on the RIM's premises, exchange delegations and participate in events, held by RIM. With this well-developed network of right-wing connections, RIM is believed to be "tolerated" by the Russian government and indirectly used to destabilize the situation in Europe.[35]

Ideologically, the RIM is a monarchist Orthodox movement, which is actively opposed not only to liberal forces domestically and internationally but also to the Russian government. It is openly nationalist, racist, anti-LGBT, and anti-feminist. Recently, it has become particularly active and vocal on the Internet, where it has accumulated several thousand followers. At the moment, the group has two accounts on Russia's most popular social network VKontakte: one for RIM itself and one for its training center "Partisan". RIM's account had almost 18,000 followers at the time of writing this article and "Partisan" account had 33 000 followers. Counter-Extremist project presented these numbers as significant.[36] This is particularly interesting since the group has a relatively narrow agenda - monarchist ideas are not particularly popular in Russia as only 8% of Russian people would want monarchy restored, according to one poll.[37] It is also important to note that according to the information on the RIM's Vkontakte web-page, the group's online presence has decreased after designating them as terrorist (their accounts on international platforms as Facebook and YouTube were suspended), meaning that they may have had a stronger presence.

IV. Theoretical Framework: Authenticity in Strategic Narratives

Recently, the attention of international relations and terrorism scholars turned to the field of strategic communications, with an attempt to understand and explain the

dynamics of actors' relations and mutual influence and persuasion.[38] It is believed that strategic narratives are a useful concept that helps researchers explain how actors manage to convince their audiences about something. According to Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, strategic narratives "are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want. The point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others."[39] In this sense, strategic narratives represent a means of soft power[40] that enables an actor using it to shape audiences' perceptions and attitudes and eventually achieve political goals more effectively.

Research shows that strategic narratives can be used around a variety of issues such as the relations between inter-governmental organizations,[41] states achieving specific foreign policy goals,[42] and the shaping of public attitudes domestically.[43] Most importantly, research shows that non-state actors can also employ strategic narratives to communicate their ideologies and shape the identities of their members.[44] This means that the present concept can potentially be helpful in understanding the activities of terrorist/extremist organizations, specifically their messaging and propaganda.

Strategic narratives are believed to differ in intensity, and persuasion power; they all have their peculiarities in the process of their formation, projection, and reception.[45] Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, in their discussion of strategic narratives, which serves as an original basis for this model, emphasize that there are different types of strategic narratives: system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. System narratives are "about the nature of the structure of international affairs."[46] Identity narratives are "about the identities of actors in international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation."[47] Issue narratives are "strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place."[48] The combination of these narratives can be used by governments and non-governmental actors to make sense of their reality, shape perceptions, and communicate with their audiences and when there is discrepancy between issue, identity, and system narratives, it may cause them to feel contradiction and distrust.[49]

Brands also use narratives to construct their advertisements and reach out to their customers, attract their attention, make their potential customers feel emotionally connected with them, and thus enhance their belief in the advertising.[50] The similarity in the tools in international relations and marketing have already encouraged some researchers to develop a hybrid approach. Specifically, researchers argue that terrorist/extremist groups' propaganda and communications can be approached and analyzed through the lenses of marketing and branding,[51] and those organizations themselves tend to employ marketing techniques to construct a more effective message for their audiences.[52]

Similar to the question of strategic narratives in international relations, the same issue pertains to brands: what narratives are brands using that can increase their potential for success and make their message (advertising) more convincing? This question is particularly important in the current reality, where the nature of consumption has changed dramatically, putting in focus not only the functional value of a brand's products but their symbolic value. This means that more and more customers choose brands to express themselves, and to reflect on their lived experiences, interests,

and beliefs.[53] It is therefore not enough for brands to simply "do their job well", but to convince potential customers that this particular brand indeed represents their interests and cares about them.

Researchers have suggested that authenticity of narratives can be an answer to this challenge.[54] Authenticity itself is a complicated concept. Researchers give various definitions of it and associate different characteristics with it (e.g. sticking to the brand's roots, being natural, demonstrating love for what the brand does, etc.).[55] What most scholars agree on is that, in principle, all of these various characteristics of authenticity serve one purpose – for the brand to be perceived as something genuine, original, and truthful.[56] The idea of being truthful also means that a brand moves away from a pure desire to gain commercial benefit and rather emphasizes its role of making its customers happy and serving their interests.[57] Authenticity also helps consumers construct and express their identity, "to tell their life stories," differentiate themselves from others, and render their uniqueness.[58] Brands that are able to meet these desires are able to attract the attention and win the trust of their consumers, build their emotional attachment, and turn them into devoted supporters.[59]

This article, therefore, is going to implement the idea of authenticity into the analysis of extremist organizations' strategic communications. With the case study of the RIM, the article will demonstrate how authenticity in narratives helps the group establish trust with its audience and encourages them to believe its message, regardless of whether or not it is really true.

As mentioned, there are different views on what exactly authenticity means and what characteristics it possesses. This article will combine several models of brand authenticity and develop characteristics that can be used for assessing an organization's performance. Specifically, the article relies on the model used by Gilmore and Pine,[60] Chhabra,[61] and Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer and Heinrich,[62] as well as the discussion of various strategies of a brand's positioning connected to authenticity developed by Richard Rosembaum-Elliott and his colleagues.[63] Therefore, authenticity can be constructed by projecting:

1. Naturalness – reference to the target audience's "indigenous" characteristics (e.g., "true Muslim," "true Russian");
2. Originality – being unique and different from others;
3. Exceptionality – being "chosen" by a supreme force for a special mission;
4. Continuity – reliance on traditions and nostalgia (e.g., "British Empire's glorious past");
5. Influence – an ability to motivate other actions for actions and have impact on current events.

Importantly, Visconti, in his analysis, emphasizes that it is not a requirement for a brand to use all these narratives; it can employ them selectively and adjust them to the requirements of a market, situation, or audiences.[64] Another important point to note is that authenticity is not a separate narrative such as, for example, issue, identity, or system. Rather, it represents a tool that can strengthen the main narratives.

V. Methodology

For this analysis, the RIM's account on VKontakte was chosen. The author decided to focus on this account even though it has less followers as it better represents the group's ideological stance, as opposed to "Partisan"'s account which has more to do with promoting the center. VKontakte is Russia's most popular social network, with around 500,000,000 accounts.[65] What is particularly important is that this network has a *laissez-faire* approach to content moderation; unlike Twitter or Facebook, the owners of this platform do not monitor the presence of extremist/terrorist accounts and do not delete content that can be classified as such. This has made this network particularly popular not only among jihadists but also Western extreme far-right groups.[66] While the RIM posts in Russian, the network is available in other European languages as well. There were 16,876 followers of the group's VKontakte account as of the April 8, 2021.

For the analysis, posts from the time period of January 9, 2014 (the year in which the conflict in Ukraine started, which made the movement visible and vocal) until April 8, 2021 were collected; the overall sample size is 24,049 posts. The posts were transferred into text files and coded and analyzed with the use of NVivo software. For this research, discourse analysis was used. Discourse analysis is a particularly useful tool to analyze how identity and social meanings are constructed and how an actor makes sense of the world and themselves.[67] In this sense, it is understood as a "set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images and stories,"[68] and as an "institutionalized use of language."[69] Specifically, it will show how the movement uses language to make narratives "authentic."

The overall analytical process was split into several stages, as recommended by Charlotte Burck.[70] Firstly, all VKontakte posts by the RIM will be read and pieces of text relevant to the research question were selected. Then, text samples were examined and coded. The coding was done by the author of this article alone. The posts were coded based on the idea of whether they represent a narrative of originality, naturalness, influence, continuity, and exceptionality. Themes were then identified to assess the content of each narrative, which was done based on the main ideas of each piece of text. The prevalence of each theme was identified based on the frequency of its appearance across data. To ensure that coding is conducted accurately and objectively, the author used data triangulation, comparing findings from this analysis to interviews with group's member's available online as well as her own interview with the group's leader. In addition, data from group's video materials were analyzed in addition to written posts to ensure the consistency of the group's narratives. The codebook was then developed to record and explain each code used and ensure the rigorousness of the process.

Specific language used to construct the narratives was also analyzed. After that, the text was reexamined and to identify possible variability and inconsistency in meanings. Finally, implications were drawn on what each discourse achieved and how each of the discourses helped make strategic narratives authentic.

VI. Results

1. Naturalness

It refers to an idea that the organization is in compliance with characteristics and ideas that are "natural" for its target audience. In the case of the RIM, this is going

to be Russian people or, to be more precise, "true Russian people." The idea of "truthfulness" or "naturalness" is very visible throughout all the years of the organization's account's existence. The RIM often refers to an idea of what constitutes a "real" Russian person. This narrative consists of several discourses: religion, the reestablishment of monarchy and a threat.

One of the strongest discourses here is the religious discourse. The RIM sees a connection between being Orthodox and being Russian. Approximately 40% of the group's social media posts contain religious references – either in direct connection with nationality or as a more general discussion of various religious topics, for example, how to celebrate religious holidays or the description of lives and miracles performed by Orthodox saints, or sharing spiritual experiences of the group's members. The group especially emphasizes that Russian people are Christian people: "Almost all of our 1000 year old history is connected with Orthodox belief and the Church and that … we are value not simply [to] Rus[71] but 'Holy Rus.'"[72] The group argues that a lot of Russian people have forgotten their religion or are indifferent to many cases of religious desecration, and are being punished by God for that. In this narrative, the RIM itself is presented as a small, devoted minority whose members are trying to live a pure life and serve God. For example: "All our strength and bravery come from our personal loyalty to Jesus Christ. Every time we use our guns we hope and believe that it pleases our Lord and do our job with prayer".[73] The group often addresses the followers of its account or other members as "brothers and sisters" or "brothers and sisters in Christ," emphasizing in such a way a deep spiritual connection between them.

The key part of the group's ideology – the necessity to reestablish the monarchy – is also presented as not simply desirable but as something "natural" or inherent for Russia. There is a strong connection between religious discourse and monarchy, as the power of the Tsar (Russian emperor) is given him by God. The group believes, therefore, that another reason for Russia having lost its "greatness" is the killing of the Last Tsar, committed by Bolsheviks – this act is called a curse upon Russia, since killing the Holy Ruler is a huge sin: "All the problems that Russia and the Russians are facing now are rooted in the tragedy that happened in the basement of the Ipatyev House" (the place where Nicholas and his family were murdered).[74] Moreover, the Communist regime established afterwards is regarded as "evil" and "cannibalistic" and, once again, alien to the country's tradition and nature: "The result of Bolsheviks' seizure of power was the degradation corruption of the nation's best people and soldering of the previously strong people".[75] The current government is believed to be the successor of that regime and, therefore, unholy rule continues to exist in the country, and thus remains the reason for existing problems: "Current Russo phobic policy of the government is the continuation of this [Bolshevik] terror".[76] In this case, reestablishment of the monarchy would help Russia come back to its "natural" state and tradition, and therefore overcome the existing curse.

The narrative of naturalness is often constructed through the discourse of threat. There are two major threats that the movement sees: a threat to Christianity and a threat to "Russian identity." They are constructed via several other discourses: "the threat from Islam," "the threat from liberalism," and, as has already been mentioned, the "threat from the Russian government." The first discourse contains various references to news items (on most occasions the source is not named, so it is impossible

to check the reliability of the information) talking about crimes and acts of violence committed by Muslim people both in Russia and in the West. Islam is presented through stereotypical ideas of being barbaric, wild, and violent, with examples of rapes, murders, and petty crimes allegedly committed by Muslims: "Girls in Pakistan are being taught how to correctly severe President Macron's head. That's what the white nation would face soon if it doesn't gather its strength".[77]

The group actively exploits the concept of the clash of civilizations, emphasizing the invasive nature of Islam and speculating about the forthcoming take-over the world by Muslims and destruction of the Christian civilization. Furthermore, there is a strong anti-migrant rhetoric, which is connected to an idea that the Russian identity is under threat. Since Christianity and nationality are seen by the RIM as a single entity, migrants (mainly from Central Asia, the main source of immigration into Russia) are believed to be one of the major sources of the destruction of Russians as a people: "Here, in this ugly, anti-Russian state, ethnic criminals are allowed to do anything they want, as our country opened the doors for all foreigners build their places of worship and their criminal gangs feel very comfortable here".[78]

The RIM believes that another threat comes from liberalism, i.e. liberal values such as tolerance, democracy, feminism, gay rights, etc. All this is believed to be alien to "true" Russian people, evil, and even "perverted." The group argues that the West is in the state of decay because of this and now these harmful tendencies are invading Russia, ruining its traditional values (e.g. traditional patriarchal families), and thus the RIM calls upon everyone to resist and combat the threat and prevent these "diseases" from spreading. The RIM is particularly hostile toward gay people: it regularly posts a motto "Moscow is not Sodom, Saint Petersburg is not Gomorra,"[79] calling on supporters for protests and attacks on gays. It uses very offensive language toward gays, with "perverts" being the least offensive word, and even goes so far as to call for direct violence and death to gays, whom they believe pose one of the most serious threats to the country: "In the Bible, sodomy is not called a sin but abomination. If sin is quite a vague notion and often can be pardoned, the only punishment for abomination prescribed by the Lord is death".[80]

The final discourse about the Russian government, in a way, unites the first two: the group argues that not only does the government conduct a hostile and harmful policy that ruins the country, but that it also serves as a puppet of both Muslims and liberals, enabling those "threats" to become stronger so that eventually it will become possible to fully eliminate Russian people. The RIM defines the current policy as "genocide" and accuses the government of treachery and collaboration with hostile forces that aim at the annulling of everything that is "true" Russian: Russian government officials decided to "sell" Russia to the West way before Putin came to power, but his government is better in bringing this task to a logical end".[81]

2. Originality

Originality refers to being unique and different from others. The RIM is very vocal in its expression of this narrative, which it constructs through the idea of a "special

way" of the Russian people. This has various manifestations – from the discussion of unique traits and characteristics of the Russians to the idea that Russia is one of the small numbers of countries that do not need to follow mainstream tendencies (e.g. celebrate Western holidays such as Saint Valentine's Day) as Russia has its own rich history, traditions, and culture that are unique and superior to others. For example: "<…> The day of "Fake Valentine that the West is imposing on us should be called "The day of free sex" as that is what it is truly about. This is not the day of love or even the day of free love but the day of free adultery. The West brought down the notion of love to the notion of unrestrained adultery".[82]

The RIM also emphasizes the unique heritage of Russian people as well as their unique national characteristics. For example, the group dedicates a long post to a discussion of why Russians rarely smile (a popular perception among people outside Russia that Russians are always very serious and gloomy). The group suggests that this characteristic shows the unique nature of the Russian character, which can be summarized as "Russians reject fake smiles typical to Western people. If a Russian smiles at you, you can be confident that this was done sincerely and the person is truly happy to see you and like you."[83]

The group directly refers to the "unique ethnic development of the Russian nation," which it sees in the voluntary "russification" of other ethnic groups. What is meant here is that unlike other European nations that have tried to forcefully assimilate other peoples, ethnic groups living in Russian territories have willingly decided to accept this identity.[84] Thus, unlike others, Russians inherently possess a certain soft power that attracts other ethnic groups and makes them feel connected and belonging to this community.

In another post, the group discusses the term "Rus" (an old way of referring to Russia) and in the form of a story explains its meaning "as a spot full of light."[85] This makes the reader feel proud to be Russian, to feel the nation's might and "charm." Interestingly, while the RIM emphasizes the uniqueness of Russians, it also stresses that they are part of European civilization and that any different views are wrong: "Russian culture has always been European <…> Russia is as much part of Europe as Poland, Hungary, Greece or Western European countries. Please, ladies and gentlemen don't get confused about it."[86]

This is important, as while the ideas of equality and tolerance went a long way, there is still a stereotypical perception both in Russia and elsewhere in the world of a "civilized West" and "barbaric East." As the RIM is often openly racist in its comments, it is important for it to emphasize that Russians belong to the "civilized" part of the world.[87] This represents an interesting inconsistency in the group's message. On the one hand, the RIM sees Russia as part of Europe, but on the other, it very often posts critical and sarcastic comments about Europe. The group often speaks about the "decline" that is happening in all spheres of life in the West and predicts a gloomy future of complete destruction for European civilization due to tolerance, support for gay rights, political correctness, sexual freedom, and the rise of migration.[88] For example: "Europe is dead. Even that rotten, tolerant Europe has been preserving its Christian heritage for a while, but now this came to an end".[89]

Russia in this sense is seen as, on the one hand, one among a small number of countries that still have a chance for "salvation" and "survival" (alongside Hungary or

Poland); on the other hand, according to the RIM, the West is particularly hostile toward Russia for this reason and wants to destroy it in a manner similar to the way it destroyed itself: "<…> I believe that the West won't get Russia. <…> I believe that we'll remain an independent country with our own norms that are thousands years old. However, Russia will never have an easy life. Our richness is way too much of a tidbit for the West".[90]

Another discourse that is used to build the narrative of originality is again the religious references. Here, there are two main ideas being disseminated. The RIM believes that part of the "uniqueness" of the Russian people is rooted in their belief in Orthodox Christianity and thus a "Russian person is a person who recognizes Orthodox Christianity as the base for their identity."[91] The second idea pertains to Orthodox Christianity being the best and truest religion. Believers represent the most morally advanced, pure human beings, who stand above "sinners" who are bogged down in the "dirt" of modern society, such as tolerance of views, gay relationships, feminism, support for abortion, and support for migration. Thus, "true" Christians become singled out from the rest of society as people who manage to remain moral and spiritual despite the rapid spread of those "harmful" beliefs: "Society will only heal when each person comes to Christianity and start serving God by any means that are accessible for him and trying to positively influence the small circle of people around him".[92]

3. Exceptionality

The narrative of exceptionality is similar to originality, yet it has differences. Firstly, it has a more practical and at the same time transcendental aspect. Specifically, it refers to an idea of being "chosen" for some extraordinary deed, and this choice was made by a superior force (God). In the RIM's messaging, this narrative is the only one that is connected to the group itself. The RIM presents itself as the only group of people that see what is currently going on in Russia (the crisis it is in and also various plots by hostile forces – liberals, the government, Europe etc. – to ruin the country) and the only group that is also capable (and chosen) to change the situation. The RIM develops this discourse around its military wing, "the Imperial Legion" – a group of men who underwent military training at the group's facilities and who are known to have been involved in fighting in Ukraine during the conflict of 2014. The soldiers of the Imperial Legion are called "holy warriors" and "patriots," who are protecting Christian values and their "fatherland."[93] The RIM therefore often calls its members "brothers in arms." The group calls on other people to join the Legion and describes it as "the most Orthodox and most mysterious fraternity,"[94] clearly trying to present it as more than just a military unit but as a religious order, similar to European crusaders, with its own code of morality, rituals, and an important Mission -RIM refers to members of it as "Knights of Christ".[95] This idea is further expressed in the fact that the only requirement for this particular narrative has a clear gender orientation – it targets men and is being developed around the idea that men must be warriors, which is their main and most important function – "Join the Imperial Legion if you want to be called a man"[96]. The group emphasizes that a man must be a warrior: "Man must always remain man: a hunter, a warrior, a gladiator, a winner".[97] It

goes even further and argues sometimes that members of the Imperial Legion are the "elite of the Christian world".[98] The whole narrative is constructed around the idea that the fighters of the Legion are somewhat superhumans. They are even explicitly called "superheroes": "Let me tell you a story of an exemplary Legion soldier, a non-comic book, real life superhero".[99] RIM even uses the concept of "martyrs" in relation to soldiers that died fighting alongside the Legion, emphasizing their high moral principles: "Yevgeniy (one of the Legion's fighters" joined a small but beautiful circle of martyr soldiers from all periods of Christian history"[100]. They are also morally superior: "The Imperial guard <…> finishes smoking and is now heading to fight and win. Because he only thing he knows is how to win. And he wins"[101] Another example: "Imperial Legion is a radical Orthodox organization that does not only see the uncompromising service to Christian ideals as its goal but is the embodiment of those ideals."[102] In such a way, the RIM is creating an air of excitement and exclusivity around the idea of belonging to it, and thus making membership look like something that people should deserve and strive for.

4. Continuity

Continuity is closely connected with historical tradition and nostalgia. The RIM, by the nature of its ideology (monarchism), is strongly reliant on this narrative. The principal means of constructing this is reference to the past. This is expressed mainly through frequent discussions of the realities of living in the Russian Empire. The main conclusion to be drawn by reading the group's posts is that the Russian Empire was the most advanced, happiest, richest, most developed and civilized place in the world. The RIM argues that paysans and workers were very wealthy, the government was very supportive and attentive to their needs, and, generally, the level of culture among the general public and development of the economy in the Empire was incomparable to any other European state, and that the same could be said about the level of cohesion and mutual acceptance between different ethnic groups.[103] For example: "Under the rule of Father-Tsar (Nicholas II), Russian people were quite wealthy despite serfdom that was abolished by then. When Bolsheviks came to power they flooded Russia with blood, and the people found themselves not in serfdom but in slavery, when everything that they earned with hard labor was taken from them".[104]

The conclusion that the group is trying to bring its online followers to is that Russia used to be a glorious, great country under the patronage of a person who had divine power and all possible virtues. The "evil" and "bloodthirsty" Communist regime ruined the country and led it to a severe crisis; it destroyed its dignity and honor. Therefore, only coming back to the "roots" – monarchy and the emperor – will change the situation for the better. Here again, the group shows a great awareness of ideas that are ingrained in many Russians' minds: nostalgia for Russia being a "great power" is very strong among the people, and while, as mentioned, the support for monarchy is not particularly prominent, people do remain receptive to ideas of the corrupt government (whether it be Communists or the current government) "ruining Russia" and trying to prevent it from becoming great again. So, the narrative of recreating the "glorious past" is particularly powerful and resonates with a wide range of the population.

5. Influence

Influence is another narrative, which is directed more toward the RIM itself and is used to present it in a particularly attractive light to show its supporters (or potential supporters) that the group is not just talking about the necessity to change things in Russia and in the world, but is capable of doing it. This narrative is also expressed through three main discourses: the RIM's charity work, its actions' effect, and – the most recent one – its designation as a terrorist organization. The first discourse is aimed to show the "good" side of RIM – members present themselves as proper, devoted Christians who are committed to helping their "brothers and sisters." The group regularly posts updates talking about sending help to poor families, sending gifts to children in foster care, fundraising for people with serious diseases or for families of their "brothers in arms" who were killed in military campaigns (for example, in Ukraine).[105] For example: "One of RIM's humanitarian projects is helping poor and large families of Pskov and Novgorod regions. Every month our volunteers deliver food and clothing to northern areas of the Saint Petersburg region <…> If you would like to get involved – get in touch".[106]

The second discourse could be entitled "the power of RIM." Under this umbrella, the group talks about the large effect its activity has on the situation in Russia and in the world. For example, the group talks about its various and versatile international connections with right-wing parties and movements in Europe (Sweden, Hungary, Spain, Italy) and America, emphasizing that the RIM is always a very welcome guest at their conferences and events and that the ideas these groups all share are becoming more and more popular worldwide.[107] Sometimes, group members demonstrate an impressive self-confidence, making claims that they "advised their conservative partners not to let Donald Trump remain in power and succeeded,"[108] or that the Pope "listened to the RIM's negative opinions of gays and became less tolerant toward them".[109] The group also often posts encouraging supporters to go onto streets to protest against various events and initiatives of which they disapprove (e.g. gay marches, some art exhibitions that they find "shameful," premieres of "immoral" films, etc.). While making these announcements, the group attempts to create an impression that something extraordinary and unprecedented is going on by using the term "nabat" (alarm bell) to draw supporters' attention, referring to those events as "crimes" and "acts of blasphemy and religious desecration." By using this language, the group, on the one hand, emphasizes the severity of the "crimes" that are being committed and, at the same time, shows its efficiency in dealing and coping with these crises.

The final discourse is relatively recent and develops around the designation of the group as terrorist by the U.S. and Canada. It has complemented a previously existing discourse of "repressions" against the RIM from the Russian government and other "enemies." The main idea that the group is trying to spread is that its "enemies" are "afraid" and "worried" about its growing influence and support and are thus trying to stop them by any means necessary. In a way, the RIM is even proud of this new "terrorist" status, as it further strengthens the group's argument about plots against the Russian people: since the RIM "presents itself as the only true Russian and Christian organization, attacks on it are portrayed as attacks on all Russian "patriots" and supporters of "true" traditional values".[110]

VII. Discussion

As mentioned, RIM's ideology is quite narrow – monarchist ideas are not particularly popular among Russian people, yet the group managed to build a support base in a relatively short period of time. One of the ways to do that is to signal authenticity in its narratives.

Firstly, the group attempts to project an image of being "true Russians" and representative of indigenous Russian interests. It addresses widely spread concerns and beliefs that have existed among the Russian public for a long time: perception of being marginalized and threatened, mistrust toward the government and the West, suspicion and frustration over migration, the perception that Russia, while being special and unique (the so-called Russian "special way"), lost its greatness and glory, and a desire to regain and reestablish it (narratives of naturalness, originality, and continuity). These perceptions are not something that is typical for the RIM's direct supporters alone. Instead, these ideas can be heard from a relatively large proportion of the Russian population and, therefore, it increases the chances of such ideas being noticed. The RIM uses the narrative of influence to make people move from simply agreeing with these ideas to becoming interested in the organization's activities. Authenticity helps the RIM render the idea that "we know what your concerns are and we know what to do about them." Perceiving the group as authentic makes its audience identify themselves with it and feel trust, which is based not on rational judgment but on a pure emotional perception that the group is genuine. It can be compared with the feeling that some of us might have when we meet a person who is in some way similar to us. People tend to subconsciously like and trust more individuals who remind them of themselves; this feeling does not require further corroboration or action from those individuals, basically causing an "affective" reaction or spontaneous liking.[111]

Importantly, unlike the main narratives of "identity," "system," and "issue" – which are used to express a more or less stable set of actors' beliefs – worldviews, perceptions, self-perceptions, authenticity is used purely as a "hook" in narratives to spark a desired reaction from the audience. This means that they may change should the target audience change or should the group feel that the demands of its audiences are changing. For example, the idea of Russia having its own holidays and memorable dates, and thus not needing European ones, only emerged in the last three years, when the same idea started trending on the web, while previously the RIM was not really saying anything about it. Therefore, the group seems to be in a constant process of monitoring and measuring what concerns the people they are trying to attract, and thus looking to maintain its audiences' perception of them being truthful and representative of their interests.

One final remark should be made on the paradox between the use of misinformation and authenticity. At first sight, there seems to be discrepancy: while a group is meant to be perceived as truthful, it can nonetheless use misinformation in its propaganda. Moreover, marketing literature emphasizes that customers would discern "fakes," i.e. when a brand does not adhere to the values it is promoting or the promises it gives.[112] However, the core to understanding authenticity is perception, which lies in the emotional realm. It is enough for a group to create a *feeling* among its potential

target audience that it cares and genuinely believes in what it says (which is often the case). If this feeling is strong enough, facts will not matter that much: as marketing research shows, paradoxically, an emotionally loaded message usually has a stronger and more profound effect on the audience and is more likely to generate support from them than a message based on facts.[113] This explains why misinformation that is spread by an extremist group is either believed or disregarded while facts disseminated by opponents are resented or ignored.

VIII. Conclusions

The paper showed how the use of authenticity may help extremist groups present itself as more credible even in space where the competition over audiences' trust is high. Interestingly, unlike the previously mentioned literature (e.g. Miller-Idriss) emphasizing the role of "cool" content in terrorist propaganda, RIM's social media strategy does not use this method. Instead, it focuses on the message, choosing to connect with the audiences via demonstrating that they understand their problems and know how they feel. Authenticity helps to signal the audience that the group is "one of them" and thus can be trusted.

The analysis of RIM's propaganda shows that indeed, as Julia Ebner, Spyros Skouras and others argue, the economic problems, concerns over migration, globalization and loss of national identity, societal shifts, where different groups of population seem to change their roles (i.e. women reject their "traditional" roles) serve as a powerful motivation tool for far-right supporters. RIM uses the anti-government and anti-mainstream media rhetoric in propaganda in a similar way as discussed by Holbrook or Figenschou and Ihlebaek, and is aimed to create an impression that Russian people are completely abandoned and lied by the institutions that are meant to protect their interests. This solidifies the narrative of imperilment which Marcks and Pawelz argued to be one of the powerful factors in making audiences more receptive to far-right ideology and more tolerant to violence. RIM's messaging also shows the prominence of the narrative of "the Other" used as a way to polarize audiences and create the image of the enemy as argued by Lumsden and Harmer. Therefore, we can see that the case of RIM in this sense shows that while far-right groups is always perceived as very diverse, globally they are quite similar in their rhetoric and propaganda techniques.

While previous research would argue that far-right groups gain support because people are concerned with the above mentioned problems and become "drawn" to them (which in a way discounts the propagandist effort of organizations), this article shows that these narratives can be used not only to make people angrier or more frustrated but to build emotional connection which would then give the audiences the feeling that this particular organization is trustworthy and genuine. Moreover, similar to observations made by Michael Kimmel in his research on the role of the quest for masculinity and extremism, authenticity narratives have a more personal touch. Namely they do not only appeal to concerns related to their politics or economics but to people's inner, psychological motivations (for example, the narrative of exclusiveness appeals to people's desire to be special, different from others). This finding has a broader implication for the field of terrorism studies namely showing two things. First, unlike the popular argument about the role of rationality in terrorist motivations[114], it shows that emotions

play a very important role in people's decisions to support/join a particular group and these emotions may not necessarily exist prior to the encounter with it as Wiktorowicz and other scholars would argue[115], but rather nurtured and sparked by the group itself.

The paper has also shown how strategic narratives discussed by Miskimmon and his colleagues can be further strengthened with the use of techniques of marketing and branding – structuring and presenting them in a certain way may improve their effectiveness. Authenticity in narratives makes them more believable and personal and therefore, their message resonates the audience in a stronger way.

This research comes with limitations, however they can potentially become a prospect for new research. This article has focused on strategic logic of RIM's propaganda as opposed to audiences' reactions to it. While looking at reactions from the audiences would have given a more accurate idea about RIM's propaganda, nevertheless, previous similar research shows that focusing just on the group's propaganda can give us a better understanding of the overall dynamics between the propagandist and the target audience.[116] Moreover, this question can be further investigated and examined as an independent project by either analysis of users' comments or by interviews. Overall, the RIM represents a new and interesting case study, which offers a significant potential for research both in the area of terrorism studies and international relations. Another potential area for research concerns the theoretical framework itself. The concept of authenticity could be used to analyze other far-right groups' propaganda to see how and if this tool is used by them.

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