

Interview – Anton Shirikov

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, APR 23 2023

This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars

Anton Shirikov is a political scientist who studies propaganda, misinformation, and political polarization. His research uses surveys and experiments to understand what makes citizens more vulnerable to propaganda and authoritarian state media. In other work, he examines polarization, inter-ethnic trust and political elites in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other countries. Anton received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2022. Before academia, he was a journalist and editor in Russian independent media. In recent publications, Shirikov has examined how Ukrainian oligarchs protect their wealth (prize for the Best Article published in 2020–2021 from the American Association for Ukrainian Studies) and how the Russian government and official propaganda responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. His analysis and commentary have recently appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Financial Times*, *USA Today*, on PBS NewsHour, and in other outlets.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Being a journalist in Russia was an interesting and sometimes exciting experience, and I have learned a lot about how Russian politics and business really worked. At the same time, I came into journalism already having a background in academia. Over time, I was increasingly dissatisfied with my day-to-day work, and I felt I wanted to do more systematic research and work on long-term projects. It also didn't help that the Russian government was gradually choking the press, and at some point, it became clear to me that there was no future for me in the Russian media industry. That's why going back to academia and getting more systematic training through a PhD program was a rather obvious solution for me at that time.

Interestingly, when I started my graduate studies in the U.S., I wanted to investigate something very different. I was somewhat burnt out by my work in journalism, and I wanted to study some seemingly bigger questions, such as how the resource curse affected governance in Russia. I tried several research directions, but nothing really clicked. Then, one of my advisors asked: why didn't I think about studying Russian media, given that I had plenty of expertise on the topic? And I've realized that there were many interesting questions in this area. For example, as a journalist, I was often frustrated and puzzled that despite all the important work my colleagues and I did, most Russians still chose to consume state media, which was mostly propaganda. That ultimately became the topic of my dissertation.

Your work highlights propaganda and misinformation in Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe. How influential are information disorders in these countries and regions, but also more broadly throughout the world?

Russia has for decades been a major producer of disinformation, both for domestic consumption and for foreign audiences, especially for neighboring countries such as Ukraine or Central Asian nations. Eastern European countries, as well as Ukraine, in contrast, have much more open and competitive media environments. This is not to say their citizens are immune to Russian propaganda. But in many cases, as plenty of research, and my own work

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shows, people fall for propaganda because they already believe in something similar. You have to tell them something consistent with their worldview if you want them to accept your propaganda. If people in Ukraine or Serbia believe Russian disinformation, it is often because these people are already pro-Russian and take what Russia says at face value. Or if we consider Americans who share fake news coming from Russian trolls, most of these Americans are already prone to anti-government conspiracy theories. This is not to say disinformation is not a problem, but we should not overestimate its influence. The same mechanism works in Russia itself, although what makes things worse is that for Russians, it is harder to find alternative, independent media than it is for Americans or Ukrainians.

Given the war in Ukraine, how would you say Russian media has behaved or changed as a result of the war?

In 2022, the government destroyed or banned almost all independent media outlets that remained. State media, on the other hand, were told to spread non-stop propaganda. On the surface, this looked like a return to the Soviet times when no independent media were allowed, and the government controlled everything. However, this change was actually less drastic. The main independent outlets survived, and new ones even appeared. Most are blocked by the Kremlin, but people can use VPNs, and these independent journalists are also present on YouTube and Telegram. So, anyone in Russia who wants to learn the truth about the war can still do that, although it has become more difficult than a couple of years ago. A bigger problem is that most Russians don't care about independent journalism. They didn't care about it ten years ago or five years ago, and not much changed during the invasion. Some people started looking for alternative information sources, but most did not.

There are many reasons why Russians are so indifferent about independent media. Quite a few Russians are genuine Putin supporters, and they simply don't want to hear critical views. Many others are disengaged from politics, and they don't care enough to seek alternative information sources. Some people might be interested in independent media, but they are not sophisticated news consumers, and they are not sure which outlets they should trust. As a result, independent media was marginalized long before the 2022 invasion.

However, for the remaining independent media, even though they survived, many things changed. It is much harder for them to sell advertisements and get donations from Russians. It is also much more difficult and dangerous to report from within Russia (so most of them moved abroad), and their former government sources are not willing to talk to them. It's difficult to say right now how many of these independent outlets can survive, but some may not. And if the war continues, and Putin's regime stays, we'll be getting less and less information from within Russia, which is a problem.

In your research, you outline how political connections are essential to defensive ownership. Can you describe defensive ownership and what are the roles of these political connections?

In this work, my coauthors and I examine how Ukrainian oligarchs attempted to obscure their ownership. The idea is that if it's unclear whether you own a firm or not, the government or other actors are less likely to take this firm away from you. So obscuring ownership may be one way to protect your business holdings. In the data, we see that many firms cannot be traced to their ultimate owners (oligarchs)—for example, they are formally owned by foreign firms whose real owners are unknown. But that's not the only way to protect business assets. If you're an oligarch, and you're friendly with the government, the government will not take your property, and it can even protect you from other oligarchs who might want to take it from you. Obscuring or hiding ownership is probably more important when you don't have political connections to the government because you don't have other means of protection. And that's what we see in the data on Ukrainian firms: those oligarchs who were close to the government didn't put as much effort into hiding their ownership as did oligarchs who were, so to speak, in the opposition.

You also argue that affirmation propaganda is used by popular autocrats to garner public support. Can you elaborate and give some examples?

A lot of research on propaganda argues that autocrats can design it in some way to increase support. But it doesn't

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consider a situation when the autocrat already has a lot of support, like Putin in Russia, so he doesn't really need additional supporters. Instead, when you're already popular, you need to avoid losing supporters. That's where what I call affirmation propaganda comes in: it's propaganda that's designed to appeal to supporters' identities, to acknowledge their existing political views, to tell them a comfortable story about themselves—that they and their country are on the right side. The goal is not to change anyone's mind, it's to tell them that what they feel is fine, so they should continue supporting the autocrat.

As an example, Putin's propaganda in the past decade has very strongly focused on the themes that resonated with the pro-Putin majority. It talked about how disastrous Russia's post-communist transition had been under the previous government, how the country's global standing diminished, how unfair it was that the Soviet Union collapsed, that it was the West's fault, and that Russians themselves were a great, heroic, kind nation. These are all ideas that Putin himself voiced, and that contributed to his rise to power. Instead of saying something new, Russian state media for many years repeated all these grievances, which were comfortable for pro-Putin Russians to hear. That helped the Kremlin's propaganda to gain some trust among the public, and it also helped to portray Putin as Russia's savior from all those bad things and foreign enemies.

Another example is how Russian propaganda portrayed the war on Ukraine. Many Putin supporters already believe that NATO and the U.S. want to destroy Russia, and they are also very proud of Russia's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. Propaganda presented Ukraine as NATO's puppet in its alleged effort to destroy Russia, and it said that some Nazis took control over Ukraine, so they should be defeated. This helped create a narrative that Ukraine was a military threat (even though it wasn't). And propaganda sold this new narrative by integrating it into familiar anti-Western ideas and comforting tales about Russians fighting Nazis.

What are you currently working on?

In a couple of projects, I am trying to understand when citizens (Russians, mostly) can resist propaganda and detect misinformation better, when they can understand that state media are lying to them, and whether it's possible to encourage them to be more critical about state-controlled media. In another project, my coauthors and I want to understand when U.S. media relies on Russian state media and their reporting about Ukraine. I also study polarization and trust in other countries, for example, in Kazakhstan.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

Don't take on too many projects but do take on multiple projects. If you have too many, you're constantly distracted. But you need multiple projects because it's risky to bet on just one or two, and also because you get tired, emotionally and otherwise, from working on the same thing over and over again. Being able to switch between projects gives you a fresh perspective and something to be excited about.