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"Foreign Agent" as internal representative of the West in Russia's geopolitical discourses

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Introduction

Since 2012, Russian authorities have introduced several laws on "foreign agents". The first law, implemented in 2012, had a significant impact on the arena of civil society, as it obliged all nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that engage in political activities and receive funds from abroad to register as foreign agents. Since then, the legislative scope of the term has been expanded twice: in 2017 to apply to mass media organisations that receive funding from abroad, and in 2019, to individuals who may reach wide audience and who receive money transfers from abroad. The ambiguous wording has allowed selective implementation, making these laws a flexible tool for the Kremlin in keeping the non-governmental organisations as well as internationally oriented media of the country on their toes.

This chapter analyses the representation of the "foreign agent" in Russian newspapers from a critical geopolitics perspective. In contrast to "traditional" or "classical" geopolitics that seeks to explain the impact of geographic features upon states' foreign policies and actions,

critical geopolitics focuses on the formal, practical and popular discourses about security, sovereignty and statecraft in order to understand how geographical claims function in politics. (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, Kuus and Sharp, 2013) Following this approach, the chapter asks how threats to Russia's national security are produced in language. It observes that "foreign agent" (Rus. *inostrannyi agent*) has (re)emerged as a key concept in Russian security discourse and argues that the contemporary foreign agent legislation serves as an important marker for the Russian state security discourse in maintaining the border between Russia and the West.

As the editors of this volume point out in the introduction, "the concept of West has got new significance in Russian political rhetoric as a symbol of a unified hostile security political block". In finding that the meaning of the "foreign agent" overlaps with that of a "Western influencer", the chapter contributes to the unpacking of the motives of Russia's changing political rhetoric about the West and illuminates the interwoven internal and external security threat perceptions in contemporary Russia. Thus, the implications of the contemporary "foreign agent" discourse concern both the Russian society and the Russian foreign policy sphere.

Critical Geopolitics in the Russian context

Critical geopolitics studies the geographical meanings and the way they shape world politics. Although critical geopolitical analyses vary greatly, Géaroid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew's (1992) initial call to analyse the way political actors "spatialise" international politics has remained the general goal of the field of inquiry. (Kuus, 2010) According to the critical geopolitical perspective, discourse matters because it has power to construct space and provide it with meaning. (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Müller, 2013) Moreover, scholars like

Joanne Sharp (1993) and Richelle Bernazzoli (2010) demonstrate that the media has an important role in circulating geopolitical ideas from political actors to wide audiences and back. This branch of critical geopolitics, sometimes categorised as "popular geopolitics", examines the way media enable the exclusion of some narratives and the elevation of others to become taken for granted. The critical geopolitics perspective has been employed to explain Russian foreign policy in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. (See e.g. Smith, 1999; O'Loughlin, Tuathail and Kolossov, 2005; Omelicheva, 2016; Foxall, 2019)

Today, Russian discourses on threats to national security are in flux. If in the early 2000s Russian security discourse was primarily concerned on combating international terrorism, the government's discourse from the mid-2000s onward assumes that external and internal threats are intertwined. Following the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 and the wave of subsequent popular resistance movements aiming to topple authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet sphere and beyond, foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become portrayed as an "external internal" threat in the Russian discourse on national security. (Ambrosio, 2009, Chapter 4) According to this narrative, the NGOs serve the interests of the West by channeling foreign ideas and practices that can generate political and social unrest in Russia domestically. Thus, the threat they pose is internal since the actors operate from the Russian soil; however, as they assumedly execute orders from foreign powers, the threat is essentially an external one and links to the understanding of the West in the Russian geopolitical thought. This portrayal intensified in media during and after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

The West is a key category also for the Russian identity. Many studies on Russia's national identity describe the West as Russia's main Other. (See e.g. Tolz, 2001, p. 69) However, the connection between the West as an idea and the West as a territory remains contested. In the contemporary Russian geopolitical discourse, the boundaries of the West become more

visible when the concept is mirrored against that of Europe and, more precisely, when Russia's belonging to either of these entities is analysed. The ambiguous positioning of Europe and the West either as a model or as an antipode has long roots in the Russian intellectual history. Marlene Laruelle (2016, pp. 277, 293) points out that today's official narratives resemble the debates of the nineteenth century in their perception of Western Europe as a liberalist, materialist and consumerist counterpoint to Russia that represents the authentic European values. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the official political language portrays Russian civilisation as "spiritually superior to the Western world," while the government's foreign policy discourse stresses the view that Russia belongs to Europe (Zvereva 2014, 233). As Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012, p. 5) notes, even in the cases where Europe and the West would be used interchangeably, the two strategies to describe "Russianness" against its Other remain: assimilation and relativisation. Characteristics of Russianness are either presented as similar to the "Western" ones, or distanced from them, often through negative portrayal of the West.

The change in Russian discourse about the West took place after the mid-2000s, after the Orange Revolution and NATO's enlargement in 2004 to Central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the formerly optimistic approach of the Russian political leadership towards the European Union has been yielding space for growing suspicion. (Foxall 2019, p. 176) In recent years in particular, the Russian foreign policy discourse has been narrating "Europe" and the EU as a part of the increasingly liberal Western "civilisation", where the United States acts as the hegemon of the unipolar world. The emergence of a "civilizational divide" between Russia and the West lays in the core of the contemporary Russian security discourse that stresses the incompatibility of Western and Russian values.

Hence, the state officials' view of Russia as "the *other* Europe," the one rejecting Western liberalism and representing authentic, conservative European values (Laruelle 2016, p. 295), subscribes to an interpretation of ideas having a spatial aspect. Konstantin Kokarev (2018) has suggested that it was in 1997 that certain ideas were in juridical terms labelled "foreign" for the Russian territory for the first time in the post-Soviet context. This was when the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" categorized different religions as "traditional" and "non-traditional" and described their position in the society accordingly. The legislative language of "foreign agents" functions along these lines: it borrows the Soviet term in portraying certain actors as suspicious, and denies their right to belong to Russia both in ideational and spatial terms.

Method and the selection of material

The foreign agent legislation has been studied primarily as a link in the chain of Russian regime's instruments of repression over civil society actors. The focus has previously been on the authoritarian legislative practices, their implementation, and the consequences in the civil society. (Daucé, 2015; Flikke, 2016; Lipman, 2016; Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva and Henry, 2018) In this chapter we adopt a different approach by examining the discourse related to the "foreign agents" from a critical geopolitical perspective. To what extent is the "foreign" a "Western" agent, and how does this illuminate the broader understanding of the West in contemporary Russian security discourse?

To do this, we gathered a set of articles from three major newspapers representing the central media, *Argumenty i fakty*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda* and *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, between January 2012 and March 2020. *Argumenty i fakty* is a weekly outlet; *Komsomol'skaya pravda* is a general daily newspaper with a popular weekly supplement; and *Rossiiskaya gazeta* is a daily newspaper, published by the Russian government. These outlets do not represent Russian

media as a whole, but they all have an established status, and they are leading Russian print newspapers by readership. (See e.g. Federalnoe Agentstvo po Pechati i Massovym Kommunikatsiiam, 2014) While it is true that the number of Russians who acquire information online has recently outgrown the audiences of the traditional press, (Deloitte CIS Research Center, 2019, p. 8) we maintain that including material from the selected journals' online portals is not necessary, because the online content consists primarily of reproduced material from the print edition.

In order to study the discourses on foreign agents specifically vis-à-vis the West, we composed a set of primary material by conducting searches in the Integrum database. The search was conducted by applying the commands of "foreign agent" (*inostrannyi agent; inoagent*) and "West" (*zapad*), represented in the same text (but not necessarily within the same sentence). As a result, fifty-four newspaper articles were left for the close reading – fourteen of them were published in *Argumenty i fakty*, eighteen in *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, and twenty-two in *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. Initially, we also conducted searches with other combinations (such as "Western agent"; "European agent"; "American agent" / "agent" and "United States"; "Chinese agent" / "agent" and "China/Chinese"), but these did not return many results. In addition to the actual primary newspaper material, articles produced by Russian news agencies, such as RBK, were consulted to clarify the legislative processes.

From the perspective of "popular geopolitics", the central newspapers have a role in distributing, mediating and empowering certain narratives of the political establishment to the audience. The traditional media in Russia is increasingly state-controlled and faces both political and economic constraints, (Wijermars and Lehtisaari, 2020) which affects the ways it contributes in molding the security discourse. In our collection, we expected *Rossiiskaya gazeta* to reproduce the government's narratives, but tried to remain sensitive to possible alternative interpretations when analysing the texts.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to the data to discover patterns in the discursive connection between the foreign agents and the West. This approach was chosen as it allows the transformation of a large amount of text into an organised summary of key results. (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012; Schreier and Flick, 2014) Both authors were involved in, first, the coding of meaning units and, later, in the elaboration of categories. In the end, we grouped our findings in three categories: the profile of the "foreign agent"; the assumed mechanism of how the "foreign agents" operate; and the justification of the "foreign agent" legislation. In the next section we highlight the layered meanings of the "foreign agent" by analysing these three interlinked categories separately.

Between Russia and the West: Popular geopolitical narratives about the "foreign agents"

The discourse on foreign agent vis-à-vis the West does not form an internally coherent narrative; instead, it consists of several overlapping, complementary, and sometimes contradictory arguments explaining the nature of the legislation and those intended to be its objects. This section analyses the profile of the assumed foreign agent in the newspaper discourse: What meanings define the foreign agents, and how do those connect to the idea of the West? Then, we focus on the narratives that justify the need for foreign agent laws in different phases of developing the legislation. After that we analyse the counter-narratives represented in our material, and end with a concluding chapter.

1. "The enemy within" – What does the foreign agent do and why?

The first research task was to reconstruct an ideal type of "the foreign agent". What was such an organisation like? As has been mentioned above, the legislative project with the "foreign

agent" label was first introduced in June 2012, when the act was brought to the State Duma. After a rather quick proceeding, the president signed the law on July 20. Technically, the new law consists of amendments to existing laws on non-commercial organisations. (Kremlin.ru, 2012) The law obliges organisations that engage in "political activity" and receive funding from abroad to register as foreign agents at the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. The punishments for failing to self-identify as a foreign agent are severe, as they feature prison sentences of up to two years and fines of up to 5 million rubles. The law came into effect in November 2012, and by 2020, over 200 organisations labelled as "foreign agents" have been included on the list of the Ministry of Justice, (Vareshchagina, 2019) with 70 NGOs remaining there in April 2020. (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2020)

Natalia Kupina, drawing from the Russian press material in July 2012, has noted that the arguments on "foreign agents" rotated around the Soviet collective memory of the foreign agent as a spy or as an enemy. The term "agent" alone refers to someone representing the Other or "them" (*chuzhoy*) instead of the Self or "us" (*svoy*), and the prefix "foreign" explicates that the agent serves a foreign, possibly hostile, master. Since the early uses of the concept, "agent" also carries a connotation of secrecy. (Kupina, 2012, pp. 43–46; Sokolyanskaya, 2018, pp. 24–28) The negative connotation of foreign agent working for an enemy is so strong that it cannot be escaped even in the arguments defending the need for the new law. Indeed, in 2012, some lawmakers supporting the contents of the law criticised the expression. For example, in the discussions around duma proceedings, a term "agent of a foreign customer" (*agent inostrannogo zakazchika*) was suggested to replace the "foreign agent". (RBK 4.7.2012).

The re-introduction of the inherently negative "foreign agent" label to the post-Soviet legislative language inspired some authors to use other similar terms. The expressions "fifth

column" or "national traitor" refer to the enemy infiltrated in the society, and were sometimes used together with the "foreign agent," mostly in cases that were critical of the legislative acts. (e.g. AiF 29.10.2014; AiF 12.3.2014; AiF 4.6.2014.) Some texts also drew parallels between the language of the law and Stalin's era practices, warning, for example, that the search for the enemy from the within could target innocent people. (RBK-daily 2.7.2012; AiF 29.10.2014.)

In our sample, three texts explicitly discussed the historical roots of the practice of the "foreign agents". Curiously, however, reference was not made only to "foundations like the USAID" functioning as "weapons in the Cold War" (KP 14.12.2012), but also to the activities of Soviet spies and influencers abroad. (AiF 18.12.2013) This linguistic practice does not challenge the dominant narrative of contemporary Russia being the object of foreign agents, but complicates it by applying the strategy of relativisation: the West had deployed its agents in the Soviet Union, but the USSR had done the same.

In general, majority of the articles characterised the activities of the "foreign agent" associations as deceitful and unpatriotic. Many sources present a major discrepancy between the acclaimed and the "real" objectives of the NGO. Although the "foreign agent" claims to thrive for the common good in the Russian society, whether environmental protection or the respect of human rights, their true aspiration is to promote the interests of their financial supporter. For example, it is argued that "certain powers abroad are highly interested in creating mechanisms that would generate social unrest inside Russia" (RG 13.09.2013). The observation reflects the popular geopolitical narrative about the West in general, as it assumes that the interests of Russia and "certain powers abroad" are incompatible.

As has been described above, the state authorities became increasingly suspicious of the internationally funded civic activities in Russia in the mid- 2000s. According to their

interpretation, the Western sponsors behind democracy and human rights organisations wished to assist a similar regime change in Russia. (See e.g. Finkel and Brudny, 2012, pp. 16–17) In 2005, Nikolai Patrushev, then the director of the KGB successor Federal Security Service (FSB), claimed that foreign NGOs were often used for espionage. (Sumskoi, 2005) Later that year, Putin himself suggested that foreign funding, especially from the United States, comes with strings attached, noting that NGOs "cannot bite the hand that feeds them". (Quoted in Hemment, 2015, p. 61) In general, a key assumption in the state authorities' discourse on foreign agents is that the sponsor fully determines the agenda that the agent pursues. This way, the agent is portrayed as having no independent ambitions or means to fulfil them.

The mutual exclusiveness of national interests is essential for the security discourse, because it makes the behavior of the "foreign agents" unpatriotic by definition. In the recent years, the Russian state leadership has put more emphasis on patriotism as a uniting idea of the society – in 2017, President Putin asserted patriotism as *the* national idea of Russia. The connotation of foreign agents as unpatriotic was linked to their presumably critical attitude, voiced, for example, by the actor Oleg Basilashvili:

> I do not understand why one who has a different opinion not shared by the majority of people is perceived as unpatriotic?! Why does a person who wants to voice to the authorities unpopular and not too complimentary remarks instantly receive a label of a national traitor, foreign agent, or a representative of the 'fifth column'?! (AiF 04.06.2014)[1]

The idea that a foreign agent was critical of the current Russian establishment was prominent in the research material. One article refers to the "well-known critics of the authorities from the camp of 'foreign agents'", (AiF 23.10.2019) while another refers to criticism "ordered"

[1] Citations in this chapter translated by authors.

by the foreign supporter. (KP 21.06.2013) Voicing criticism can also serve as a justification to label an organisation as a foreign agent. In the case of a socially oriented NGO providing legal services to migrants in Moscow, the organisation's criticism of the practices of the Russian Immigration Service was interpreted as an attempt to influence Russian immigration policy, which falls to the category of engaging in political activities as listed in the law on "foreign agents". (RG 29.06.2016)

The assumption that "foreign agents" functioned as transmission belts of undesired foreign ideas was stated several times. One of the articles analysed (KP 14.11.2012) presents the case of the U.S. Russia Foundation (USRF), an American non-profit organisation operating in Russia since 2009. According to the author, the NGO organises internships in the United States to members of the future Russian elites hoping that once they ascend to power, they will prioritise the geopolitical interests of the U.S. over those of Russia. "Ideas about right and wrong, according to American interests, are being circulated in the public through networks of supposedly educational, human rights, media, environmental and other projects", another *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* article explains. (KP 13.11.2014)

As the next section argues, these narratives assert that NGOs operating as "foreign agents" are one of many weapons applied by the West against Russia in the new era of conflict. The contemporary representation of the West borrows from the Cold war collective memory in using the imagery of a unified bloc, but the discourse on "foreign agents" simultaneously fits to the scheme of "hybrid warfare" that assumes the presence of a variety of military and non-military means as well as non-state actors. According to the dominant security narrative, these NGOs are filled with "useful idiots" that are either too naïve to see the geopolitical aspirations of their sponsors or unpatriotic egoists that do not care about the interests of Russia.

The data suggests that the authorities know who they mean by "foreign agents" even before they are officially recognized. The aim of the legislation is therefore *not* to uncover "foreign agents" operating in secrecy, but to label them as such for the general public. The fact that the law was designed to target a specific group of NGOs is either explicitly or implicitly apparent in numerous statements and becomes clear when talking about how the law fails to serve its purpose. For example, Mikhail Fedotov, Chairman of the Council at the President for Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, pointed out that the early draft of the law was formulated so badly that "absurdly" even the Russian Orthodox Church would have been categorised as a foreign agent. (AiF 18.7.2012) What defines a foreign agent in practice is, therefore, not only limited to foreign sources of funding combined by the engagement in political activities.

In terms of geography, the narratives point to a clear origin of the funding received by "foreign agents": the United States and countries belonging to the European Union. In this way, the spatial aspect of the "foreign agents" detected by the state authorities follows the scheme of the EU and the U.S. being strung together under the category of the West. In this discourse, the West, led by the hegemonic U.S. and followed by the European Union, forms a threat to Russia's national security. (Foxall 2019, p. 181) In practice, the threat means financial support for potentially hostile actors within Russia. Indeed, Vladimir Putin manifested this interpretation already in his address at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, stressing that there had been "an increasing influx of money from abroad being used to intervene directly with our internal affairs." As Andrew Foxall notes, "[w]hile the source of the 'influx of money' was not named, this and other references to external threats are associated with the EU, as well as the United States, NATO, and the West generally." (Foxall 2019, 182.) At the time of writing this chapter, the list of "foreign agent" NGOs includes only one association funded from a non-Western source, namely, the Eurasian Anti-Monopoly

Association funded by a Kazakhstan-based law firm. (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2020) The finding that the "foreign" agent is, essentially, a "Western" one, is not a result of selective sampling. In our study, we applied initially search commands for the combination of "foreign agent" and a number of different countries, such as China and India. However, these queries only yielded that those countries had or were planning corresponding legislation – not that "agents" funded by them would be operating in Russia. (See e.g. KP 21.06.2013)

2. Justifying the legislation on "foreign agents": From standard procedure to geopolitical battlefields

As has been described above, the political will to increase control on foreign-funded actors existed since mid-2000s, but the actual legislative move took place as a response to the widespread protests against the leadership of the country in 2011–2012. It put a symbolic end to any lingering hopes of political liberalization of the civil society as a part of Dmitry Medvedev's "modernization". (Wilson, 2015) During the protests, state officials portrayed demands for democracy, such as fair elections, as of Western origin. After the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term in the presidential office, a process to limit political contention in the country intensified. In the press, it became customary to refer to these changes as "tightening the screws" (*zakruchivanie gaek*). (e.g. AiF 8.8.2012; RG 7.5.2013) Interestingly, the actors close to political establishment also used this term when stating that this was actually not taking place (KP 15.10.2014). The expression stresses the perception of foreign agents as an internal threat: by increasing domestic control, it is assumed the state authorities aim to tackle the problem.

However, one of the state officials' counter-arguments to the increasing control, and a key justification frame for the law in general, rested upon the idea of the West as a model. The need for the new legislation was explained by referring to similar laws already being in force in the West and elsewhere in the world. Thus, Russia would just follow an international norm. (e.g. AiF 8.8.2012; KP 14.12.2012) This assimilation strategy vis-à-vis the West was used by the President, the Prime Minister, and other actors of the political regime. (RG 8.4.2013; RG 27.11.2012; KP 15.10.2014) In some of the cases, the speakers defending the law noted that other countries have implemented much stricter measures to control foreign agents than Russia does. For example, the head of the presidential administration at the time, Sergei Ivanov explained:

> Or, do we prohibit travelling abroad, broadcasting of foreign media, work of non-profit organisations, including those declared as foreign agents? They are merely asked: you declare that you live on Western grants, and continue working. (KP 15.10.2014)

The argument that the law, actually, does not influence the NGO's possibilities to continue their activities is presented in several texts. On the level of rhetoric, it is connected to another set of key phrases used by state authorities: preserving the legality, order, and transparency within the society. A strong emphasis on law and order has been typical for Putin's rhetoric since the early 2000s. Putin has been actively reproducing the narrative of "chaotic 1990s", to which his terms in office provided a correction. (Malinova, 2018) In particular, he often insists everyone to act lawfully:

> The head of the state thinks that Russia needs a strong opposition: development is impossible without competition. But this does not mean that it should be financed from abroad. Moreover, demonstrations need to take place within the framework of law (*v ramkakh zakona*). "Ordnung muss sein," Putin said in German. "There needs to be order. Chaos cannot be allowed." (RG 8.4.2014)

Transparency as a justification strategy links to the idea, mentioned above, that the agent by definition pursues a secret agenda. Following this logic, self-registering as a foreign agent would make this agenda visible, and that way contribute to the maintaining of the societal "order".

Yet, it is clear that Russian civil society has been affected by the legislation since 2012. Several organisations whose activities have been defined political have faced serious challenges, to which they have reacted in various ways. (Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva and Henry, 2018) Some organisations, such as the electoral monitoring organisation Golos, have refused to self-register as "foreign agents" and appealed their cases to international courts. Golos was one of the first NGO's targeted with the 2012 law – in fact, its director at the time, Liliya Shibanova, suspected that they were the reason why the entire law project was introduced. (RBK-daily 16.7.2012) Golos had a visible role in revealing the fraud in the 2011 legislative election, and it had enjoyed significant financial support from USAID, banned in Russia on October 1, 2012. (RBK-daily 6.12.2012) Today, Golos functions as a "movement" instead of association after being liquidated by court decision. Since 2012, many Russian NGOs have given up foreign funding and consequently scaled down their activities. For instance, the sociological research agency Levada-Center must include the "foreign agent" label in its work, including research publications, poll interviews and website. Despite the various paths that the NGO's have taken, the 2012 law has clearly shifted many NGOs' resources from the actual activities to coping with the situation by, for example, applying alternative sources of funding or composing pleas to courts. In this way, the legislation has hampered the work of non-governmental organisations in Russia even for those who have been formally able to continue their work.

However, at the same time, various forms of state funding have been available for NGOs to apply. (See e.g. Javeline & Lindemann-Komarova, 2020) Françoise Daucé (2015, pp. 59–60) studied Russian NGO's in 2013, and noted that the state authorities rely on a combination of two policies: on one hand, they control their activities with selective law enforcement, but on the other hand, they provide funding for certain organisations from the state. As a result, NGO activists find themselves in a conflict between "submitting to the law, opposing the government, and cooperating with the administration." This has been the case, for example, for the human rights organisation Memorial that has received both significant grants from the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation as well as several fines for violating the foreign agent law. Dauce (2015, 59–60) explains that "this duality of the state's NGO policy has major demobilising effects and helps undermine any collective mobilisation against the law, as each NGO tries separately to understand and negotiate its own situation with state agencies." All in all, the state policy has demonstrated control potency to non-compliant NGOs and links to the authorities' aim of building a domestically funded civil society. (See e.g. Javeline & Lindemann-Komarova, 2020)

3. From the NGO field into the media sphere: changes in justification, 2017–2019

In 2015, a new restriction came into force as a law on "undesirable organisations" was adopted. A foreign or international organisation could be declared "undesirable" if its activity would pose a threat to "the foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, to the defense capability of the country, or to the security of the state." (Lipman 2016, 346–347.) In a way, the project was a continuation to the "foreign agent" legislation, even if it did not mention the term. In 2017, however, the "foreign agent" term was brought back and its scope was extended to new societal sphere: the media. According to the new law, signed by the President on November 25, the Ministry of Justice may declare any media functioning in

Russia and receiving funding from abroad as a foreign agent. (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 2017) Already in 2015, the shares of foreign ownership in the Russian media had been restricted to 20 per cent.

The extension of "foreign agents" to the media sphere was justified partly in different terms than the legislation concerning NGOs. The need for the media law grew from the increased tension in the U.S.-Russia relations, and more precisely, from the U.S. authorities' pressure that in November 2017 forced the Kremlin-owned, international TV-channel Russia Today to self-register as a foreign agent according to the U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA). In the Russian press, the new law was described as "a response" and as a mirroring act to this decision. The assimilation strategy vis-à-vis the West as a model, that the state leadership still employed in 2012, was temporarily abandoned. Instead, in the outlets of 2017, the need for legislation was justified by the need of keeping up in the conflict over information, or even "information war". (RG 22.11.2017; AiF 10.10.2018.) Thus, in the security discourse, characteristic of the later phases of developing "foreign agent" legislation, Russia and the West were presented no longer as one following the other's example, but as opposing sides in a conflict.

In the material collected for this chapter, the legislation on "foreign agents" is also justified by the need to defend Russia against a presumed attack from the West. From around 2007 onwards, Russian political elites began to present not just the U.S. and NATO but also the EU as actors seeking to "dictate policies, norms and values on Russia and, in doing so, to seek to undermine its sovereignty". (see also Foxall, 2019, p. 182; Averre, 2007) According to this narrative, the aim of the West, led by the U.S., is to secure the supremacy of U.S. interests in the Russian territory by gaining access to Russia's abundant natural resources. (e.g. AiF 10.06.2015) The need to defend "fortress Russia", internalised in Russian citizens'

vision of geopolitics, (Kasamara and Sorokina, 2017) was either implicitly or explicitly narrated as the core justification for the "foreign agents" law. "If we had no nuclear weapons, America would have brought its democracy to us a long time ago", claimed the actor Aleksandr Adabash'yan in a 2012 interview to *Argumenty i Fakty* (AiF 8.8.2012)

If the perception of Russia under attack was present already in 2012 when the first "foreign agent" law was passed, the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 and the following deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia is strongly pronounced in the data. In one account, the author asserts: "the coup d'etat in Ukraine and the new (for now, cold) war declared on us by the West has put the very existence of Russian statehood at stake". (AiF 30.9.2014) Drawing a direct link between foreign-funded NGOs and Russia's national security, a 2014 report compiled by the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Russian Federation and reprinted in *Rossiiskaya gazeta* maintains that "nobody doubts that uncontrolled and non-transparent financial flows from abroad to the 'third sector' can have negative consequences for national security". (RG 7.5.2015)

While the extension to the legislation in 2017 was portrayed as a direct answer to the U.S. decision concerning Russia Today, there was no such clear "trigger" for the Russian authorities to expand the foreign agent legislation once more two years later. Namely, in December 2019, Vladimir Putin signed another amendment to the mass media law that made not only organisations or media outlets but also individuals potential "foreign agents". If an individual actor (physical or legal person) would publish information with unrestricted audience and receive funds from abroad, they should register as "foreign agents". (Pravo.gov.ru, 2019) The amendment came into force on February 1, 2020, and at the time of writing this chapter, no cases have been reported in the Russian press of applying the law. Based on the previous amendment, eleven media outlets have been identified as "foreign

agents" and added to the list maintained by the Ministry of Justice by February 2020. (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2020)

Already in 2012, when the first foreign agent law regarding NGO's was discussed, there were attempts to extend the legislation to the media. In July 2012, a bill written by United Russia Duma deputy Evgeny Fedorov proposed an amendment to the media law to require foreign-funded media to register as foreign agents. The bill was criticised for being hastily written, and it was suspected to be merely a means of Fedorov's self-promotion. (RBK-daily 19.7.2012.) Fedorov is known as a coordinator for nationalist-conservative organisation National-Liberating Movement (*Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, NOD) founded in November 2012 to "return Russia's sovereignty" and to combat the harmful influence of the West in Russia. Today, the organisation promotes conspiracy-like ideas of the U.S. controlling Russian media sphere (NOD, 2020) – carrying, thus, a logical connection to Fedorov's bill in 2012. Although the bill was rejected, Fedorov continued to work on it. (RBK-daily 2.11.2012) Commenting on the "revised version" of Fedorov's bill, a deputy from Just Russia party Leonid Levin deemed the whole project to be "against common sense." (RBK-daily 12.12.2012) After this statement, Fedorov's bill does not appear in our research material. Interestingly, it seems that the idea of labelling media actors as foreign agents grows from "ridiculous" into a fully legitimate legislative amendment within only five years.

In a similar way, the idea of individuals being considered as foreign agents was also voiced in 2012. In the Duma proceedings, Irina Yarovaya, one of the authors of the bill, mentioned that the corresponding legislation in the U.S. covers advertising agencies and individuals, but she did not suggest the element ought to be included in the Russian law. (RBK-daily 4.7.2012) However, this expansion did eventually take place in 2019. Then, the U.S. legislation was still referred to as a "model", but in an altered context. At this phase, the main justification

strategy was the need to cope in the conflict with the West by mirroring its maneuvers. (RG 4.12.2019)

In explaining the 2019 legislation, the authorities themselves have explicitly stated that the implementation of the new law is, inevitably, selective:

> At all stages of the proceedings, deputies and senators emphasised that the Russian authorities are not going to apply the new legal norm massively. The expression 'could be recognised as a foreign agent' means that this is only a possible tool when a response is needed. (RG 4.12.2019)

As has been described in the previous sections, the state authorities' comments have revealed their interpretation that the legislative measures will only target certain actors, most often known in advance. The head of the temporary commission named "Federation Council for the Protection of State Sovereignty" Andrei Klimov explained the new law text in the press several times, noting, for example, that not only bloggers could end up on the list, but practically "anyone – any person, private entrepreneur, pensioner, housewife" if the content they distribute is "illegal". (RBK 11.11.2019) In practice, the new law gives the state authorities a powerful instrument to prosecute whoever they wish, even if this instrument would be mainly used as a deterrent.

One more previously voiced argument to justify the need of legislative amendments in 2017–2019 was that the law will only clarify existing situation, and the work of foreign agents will not be hampered. As it was formulated by *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, "the document does not prohibit the activities of the foreign media agents – it only requires them to honestly admit whose interests they work for." (RG 4.12.2019)

Around the same time, in summer 2018, the requirements for the NGOs labelled as foreign agents were expanded. The Ministry of Justice stated that the NGOs should report not only the direct funding they receive from abroad, but also their Russian sponsors who enjoy financial support from abroad. (RBK 18.2.2020) It thus seems that the foreign agent has become a permanent instrument for the authorities to control the perceived security threats. Even if the laws would not be widely utilised in practice, they function as deterrents for those who do not respect the borders between the values of the West and those of Russia.

4. Counter-narratives: Alternative interpretations of "foreign agents"

The sections above have described a particular security discourse on "foreign agents" in contemporary Russia. Majority of the texts studied for this chapter followed narratives of the foreign agent as a representative of the West within Russian society, acting according to the potentially harmful ambitions of their sponsor. In these narratives, the Western interests, promoted by the unpatriotic agent, were incompatible with Russian ones. Moreover, the West was portrayed as threatening Russia. However, in addition to those narratives that were to a large extent compatible with each other (such as the justification narratives that frame the foreign agent legislation as a standard procedure or as Russia's response to an attack from the West), the sources also provided counter-narratives about "foreign agents".

Some texts published in different outlets openly challenged the official justification of the 2012 law, suggesting that the image of an external enemy was constructed by the authorities. In these articles, the West is not seen as a real threat to Russia, instead, the threat perception is believed to cover some other motives. Depending on the author, the enemy construction is narrated either as a deliberate policy to divert people's attention away from domestic problems or as a way to justify stricter policies towards critical opposition. (AiF 04.06.2014,

AiF 29.10.2014, RG 09.04.2014; RBK-daily 2.7.2012.) As the political scientist Dmitry Oreshkin, interviewed in *Argumenty and Fakty*, explains:

> The authorities are trying to increase their support from the public. There are no longer positive ways to do it, which is why they try to consolidate people against an imaginary 'enemy'. For this role they already tried to put those who demonstrated for free and fair elections and 'foreign agents' among NGOs. (AiF 19.6.2013)

The fact that such narratives, directly undermining the dominant official narrative on the justification of the law, could be printed in media outlets with considerable circulation also works as a reminder that there is no full censorship in the Russian traditional media on sensitive issues. The political control over any media has increased, and self-censorship further conditions the plurality of views. In our study, it was interesting to note that the Russian government's newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* published critical takes on the 2012 foreign agent legislation by citing the annual reports of the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Russian Federation, who, for instance, expressed his concern that the law contradicts the constitution of the Russian Federation. (RG 9.4.2014; RG 7.5.2015.)

Another significant counter-narrative was to point out the many irregularities of the laws. Critical comments on the vague language of the new law were particularly frequent in the years 2012–2013. For example, Aleksandr Verkhovskii, the director of the research center Sova, claimed that the expression "NGOs participating in political activity" was incomprehensible. (RBK-Daily 16.7.2012) Also, the intended scope of the initial text of the bill raised concerns and indignation – would it include trade unions, Orthodox parishes, educational institutions, advertising agencies? (RBK-daily 16.7.2012; AiF 18.7.2012; RBK-daily 5.7.2012) However, not all the views criticising the law challenged the need for this legislation *per se*. As was mentioned above, the Commissioner for Human Rights reported on problems related to the law both in his accounts on the year 2013 and 2014, suggesting that

the law should be re-written because of its unclear language. *Rossiiskaya gazeta* also mentions the Commissioner's meeting with the President in November 2014, after which some amendments were made, such as the possibility to remove a foreign agent from the list after they stopped receiving foreign funding. (RG 7.5.2015)

The counter-narratives seem to have focused on the earlier phase of the foreign agent legislation, when it concerned the NGO field. Interestingly, in our material, there were no clear cases of alternative interpretations in the later phases, namely, after 2017 when the term was extended to media and individual actors. The amount of texts in our collection is limited, and therefore we must refrain from far-reaching conclusions. One may still assume that the shock of re-introducing the Soviet foreign agent terminology into the juridical sphere was greater in 2012 than around the extension of its scope some years later. Sociological surveys reported in the Russian media show that majority of Russians do not feel strongly about foreign agent legislation, and do not consider the threat of Western influence particularly serious. As the journalist explains, "[f]or an average citizen, it is difficult to imagine herself in the place of a semi-mythical 'foreign agent' – this story is about someone else, it does not concern an ordinary person." (RBK 28.11.2019)

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the Russian discourses on "foreign agents" from a critical geopolitical perspective. By unpacking the narratives about the "foreign agents", the chapter has demonstrated the complexity and temporality of Russia's interpretations about the West as the legislation evolved between 2012 and 2019. While the first law on "foreign agents" that targeted non-governmental organisations receiving funding from abroad and engaging in political activity was officially presented as a case of standard global procedure,

the laws that concern media and individuals have been narrated as necessary responses to a presumed attack of the West in the information war against Russia. Thus, even if the security discourse on foreign agents present the West as potentially hostile already in 2012, the justification strategies for the laws change between the years 2012 and 2017. When the scope of the legislation extends to the sphere of media, the West is no longer a model for development, but an opponent in war. Foreign agent legislation as such follows shifts in the official Russians security discourses that took place already in mid-2000s, and has therefore characterised Russian policies already before the 2014 war in Ukraine. Yet it was the war and the following deterioration of Russia's relations with the United States and the European Union that has validated Russia's actions regarding its "internal enemies" in a more profound way. Moreover, although the analysed texts refer consistently to the "foreign agents'" links to the Western origins, they mostly signify the United States, or less frequently, the countries of the European Union.

In November 2020, yet another proposal to expand the legislation was introduced. From now on, any individual engaging in political activity and supported by foreign resources could be listed as a foreign agent. They would also be banned from state service. According to *Kommersant* ("Bol'she agentov, khoroshikh i raznykh" 2020), participants of the Duma committee meeting deemed the current legislation too "liberal" in comparison to the American one. Thus, the authorities continue to use "foreign agents" as a tool for selective targeting. As this chapter and the recent developments demonstrate, the legislation on "foreign agents" remains an important marker in Russia's security relations with the West. An interesting phenomenon worth future research is the new meanings attached to the concept. For example, members of the Russian political opposition, especially in the large cities, are already starting to sarcastically self-identify with the label of a "foreign agent", (RBK 10.10.2019) which could be interpreted as a strategy to overcome its stigma. Indeed,

collective and individual responses to the legislation circulated in the mainstream media will inevitably shape the narratives on “foreign agents” and, as a result, people’s perceptions of Russia’s relations with the West.

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