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UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH POSTERS

Russian Propaganda: A Case Study in Turkish Political Cartoons

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As consumers of information, we must improve our ability to spot potentially bad-faith actors and manipulation campaigns (state-sponsored or otherwise). However, spotting these bad-faith actors and manipulation campaigns can often be quite difficult. This project first offers a set of guiding principles for identifying propaganda, and then applies those principles to examine an ongoing case study. Specifically, this project examines the dissemination of Turkish political cartoons by Sputnik News—a Russian state-owned media company.

My investigation begins by defining terms—differentiating between rhetoric, persuasion, propaganda, and an influence operation. Next, I apply these concepts to examine Sputnik News’s multilingual dissemination of political cartoons. I uncover and outline a systematic framework that Sputnik likely follows when producing its cartoons. I then use this framework to inspect Sputnik’s Turkish political cartoons. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, my investigation reveals a trend—that Sputnik News’s Turkish political cartoons consistently portray the U.S. and Turkey as adversaries engaged in a zero-sum game. I conclude by describing how this portrayal fits my proposed criterion for propaganda. In the closing remarks, I outline additional methods that Sputniks News uses to disseminate this propagandistic narrative to Turkish audiences and describe how such multimodal dissemination tactics are indicative of an influence operation. I also discuss policy implications and offer suggestions for further research.

The poster provided here summarizes my investigative process. A brief snapshot of my quantitative analysis and findings are included on panels 5 and 6. Using custom Python code, I extracted and compiled the keyword tag data that Sputnik News applies to each of its 2000+ Turkish cartoons. Given limited poster space, I chose to only showcase the top 7 entries for Sputnik’s “Geo” tag category here. I selected this snippet because I feel it’s the most revealing—Turkish speakers are the intended target audience, yet Sputnik publishes cartoons referencing the US roughly six times more often than Turkey. Such a



large discrepancy supports my claim that Sputnik News is attempting to persuade the Turkish public to adopt the false narrative that these propagandistic cartoons illustrate.

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1. Definitions

Rhetoric – How language is used—the collective set of techniques that a user of language employs to transfer information

Persuasion – An intentional attempt to influence someone to adopt a change in a given attitude or behavior

Propaganda – If the purpose of disseminating X is to persuade others to adopt certain preferences, then X is propaganda.

Influence Operation - The multimodal dissemination of propaganda by a single actor

2. The Actor: Sputnik News

Sputnik operates sites in many languages. Many of these sites contain a caricature page where language specific political cartoons are published.



3. The Dissemination Process

Some of the caricature pages on these different sites contain the exact same cartoons. But, what's most interesting is that regardless of whether or not the cartoon was cross-published on other language-specific caricature pages, in almost all cases, it was drawn by the same artist—Vitaliy Podvitskiy.



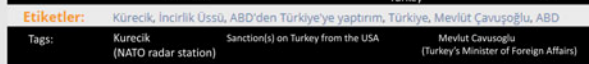
4. A Suspected Template

Now, it's obvious that Podvitskiy doesn't speak all of the languages his cartoons are published in. So, that leads me to suspect that something along the lines of what I've outlined here occurs:

- 1) Podvitskiy draws a cartoon (without any text)
- 2) Podvitskiy annotates what text should be included, and where it should go
- 3) An editor for each site decides if the cartoon helps Sputnik News's influence operation in that country (if yes, move to next step)
- 4) A translator uses Podvitskiy's notes to add language specific text
- 5) The "updated" cartoon is published on the corresponding sister site's caricature page
- 6) Keyword tags are then applied to the cartoon

5. The Task: Translating Keyword Tags

There are over 2000 political cartoons published on Sputnik's Turkish caricature page. I used a custom Python script to extract and compile the keyword tag data associated with each of these cartoons. Sputnik associates each tag with one of eight different classes, so I constructed a database which utilizes this same structure. I then translated the data into English and performed statistical analysis to identify trends.



6. Selected Findings

Recurring Theme – Turkey and the U.S. are falsely portrayed as adversaries in a zero-sum game. This portrayal attempts to convince the Turkish target audience that there are no opportunities for Ankara and Washington to cooperate, collaborate, or mutually benefit—and that anti-NATO sentiment directly benefits Moscow

