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Raping turtles and kidnapping children

Fantasmatic logics of Scandinavia in Russian and German anti-gender discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social, political, and fantasmatic logics involved in the production of contemporary discourses about Scandinavia as a symbolic site and imagined place of sexual and moral decay and as a gender dysphoric dystopia by actors in the global anti-gender movement. Empirically, we draw on a rich digital archive of multi-modal media texts from an ongoing research project on anti-gender movements in Russia and Germany – two countries which provide particularly poignant examples of sites in which this mode of anti-gender propaganda is currently on the rise. In the analysis, we explore the discursive workings of a particularly prominent node in the material – that of the vulnerable child – and show how this figure is construed and instrumentalised to add urgency and fuel outrage among domestic audiences in Russia and Germany.

KEYWORDS: anti-gender propaganda, traditional values, discursive logics, Russia, Germany

Introduction

"A culture that does not place the Family and Motherhood at the top of its hierarchy of values will not survive for long", mused Marie Louise Schellen (2010), a regular contributor to Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – adjacent publication of *Die Freie Welt* – in her breakdown of the consequences of "burying Christian values" in Europe. For Schellen, Sweden emerges as a particularly troubling case, as in the country "every third child suffers from psychological

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disorders. Drug depression and alcohol problems among young people are increasing at an alarming pace. […] In legal books, the word family has been replaced by the word household" (Schellen, 2010). Meanwhile in Russia, in the conclusion of his programme on Russia's Channel One discussing Swedish children's television show *Biss I Kajs* [*Pee and Poo*] – a show that ostensibly sought to educate children about bodily functions in a humorous manner – one of Russian television's chief propagandists Dmitry Kiselev spoke of the "radical rise in abortions among children in Sweden" (Malgin Andrey, 2013), where "sex from age of 9 is common, as is impotence from age of 12". In another incident of public outrage directed at a Scandinavian country and laced with mockery – with a heavier serving of the latter – the 21 September 2020 edition of the same channel's programme *60 Minutes* was dedicated to a discussion of Danish television show for youth *Ultra strips down* [*Ultra smider tøjet*]. A speaker talked of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses that the show could beget and portrays the Danish television show as a recruiting ground for paedophiles. Later, Duma MP Aleksey Zhuravlev listed a series of moral failings by the West and contextualised *Ultra strips down* in relation to the problems of Danish society, where zoophiles can go to a brothel in Copenhagen and "rape turtles" (60 Minutes, 2020).

These examples illustrate a distinct pattern, which forms the empirical focus of this article. While inaccurate and seemingly ridiculous, the claims operate as hyperbolic instances of the paradoxical space Scandinavia currently occupies in discourses produced at the intersection of far-right and conservative anti-gender movements around the world. In such discourses, Scandinavia has become a projective surface onto which racialised fantasies of national glory and decay are interlaced with an obsessive preoccupation with sexual promiscuity and rape. Sweden in particular, with its history of state-led gender mainstreaming, is construed as the ultimate site of a destructive "gender ideology" causing a threat to "natural gender roles" and "traditional family values". While Sweden is often singled out, Denmark and Norway also feature prominently. It is towards the intricacies and contingencies of these discourses *about* Sweden and Scandinavia more generally that this article directs attention.

To offer context: Despite advances in LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality over the past decades, issues of gender relations, reproduction, and sexuality are becoming increasingly contested. A set of movements and actors that converge around resisting "gender ideology" is seeking to establish what is perceived as traditional family values as a universal European norm (Graff et al., 2019; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). An important feature uniting such positions in Russia and Germany revolves around a dominant trope reoccurring across different types of media appearances and campaign materials. Disparate actors in both countries recurringly invoke Scandinavia as a particularly frightening example of a place which has fallen into disarray and is succumbing to the decay of modern relativism and an aggressive form of "gender ideology" threatening the constitution of "the family, the distinct values of masculinity and femininity, society, the Church, and civilization itself" (Butler, 2019: 2). Our study suggests

that Sweden is emerging as a powerful shared trope in the transnational grammar and "common populist-propaganda discursive front" (Vatsov, as cited in Zienkowski, 2021: 6) of contemporary anti-gender discourse.

However, despite these commonalities, a distinction must be made between the strategic narratives circulated by state-aligned media in a context of "rewired propaganda" (Oates, 2016) in authoritarian Russia, and those distributed by hyper-partisan alternative news media in a liberal democracy such as Germany. Both Tolz and Teper (2018) and Oates (2016) observed a shift in Russia towards more politicised media content since the large-scale protests against electoral fraud in Russia in 2011–2013. This coincided with, or is the result of, Russia becoming a neo-authoritarian media regime, according to Becker (2014). Oates (2016: 399) described how "a commitment to disinformation and manipulation, when coupled with the affordances of the new digital age, give particular advantages to a repressive regime that can pro-actively shape the media narrative". In Germany, on the other hand, the rise in neo-fascist, far-right discourse tied to issues of reproduction and so-called traditional family values is primarily produced and circulated by actors outside or at the fringes of institutional politics, and who are often in opposition to the ruling parties and mainstream media. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and its adjacent network of alternative news sites is a hub for the production of anti-gender discourse in Germany (Berg, 2019; Bitzan, 2017). While false information proliferates in this political landscape, anti-gender propaganda in Germany primarily occurs as distorted and hyper-partisan news produced from within the online ecosystem of outlets tied to groups and organisations associated with the far right, and often includes the strategic omission of certain information. Rather than mere "propaganda machines", alternative news media are both an amalgamation of journalistic practices and part of a broader political movement (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2021). They work as hybrid "infopolitical organizations which can function simultaneously as quasi-journalistic organizations, disinformation producers and political organizations aiming to shape public attention and action" (Yang, 2020: 5). We can therefore usefully distinguish between texts which convey overtly false information (such as the Russian claims of zoophilia described above) and those which "merely" demonstrate cherry-picked and distorted news stories produced by partisan actors. Texts within this latter category combine journalistic and movement logics with propagandistic tactics and might be understood as propaganda packaged as news. At the same time, these discourses are remarkable in their transnational coherence, which, rather than merely the result of "fake news" and disinformation emerging from Russia, reveal the utility of such images of Scandinavia in the international grammar of illiberalism. Our aim with this article is to understand the (social, political, and) fantasmatic logics involved in the production of contemporary discourses about Scandinavia as a symbolic site and imagined place of sexual and moral decay and as a gender dysphoric dystopia. We draw on qualitative case studies from Russia and Germany, using political discourse analysis to approach a body of propagandistic texts. We take a specific interest in the discursive functions of these claims in Germany and

Russia, respectively. As such, we take cues from Edenborg (2021: 499), who stated that such an endeavour, "rather than being interested in the image of Sweden for its own sake", is about understanding "'Sweden' and 'Swedishness' as inscription surfaces for narratives relating to broader issues around gender and nation". Finally, we ask whether specific imaginaries of Scandinavia enable the articulation of anti-gender positionalities, which are in turn evoked as the only possible answer lest societies in the respective contexts succumb to similar forms of "degradation".

The preoccupation with Scandinavia as "Absurdistan, northern province"

The primacy of Sweden and the Nordic countries in conservative scare-mongering discourses by contemporary anti-gender actors in Germany and Russia should perhaps come as no surprise. Indeed, throughout much of the twentieth century, Sweden and the Swedish (or Nordic) model have functioned as both utopia and dystopia in political discourse around Europe and the US. Sweden "has been idealised, demonised or otherwise employed" by politicians of varying ideological backgrounds (Newby, 2009: 308). No doubt, this historical elision of Sweden and modernity has fed into contemporary ideas of the country as the progressive (and by extension, smug) pinnacle of liberal European values that we see surfacing in much of the illiberal backlash against civil liberties, multiculturalism, and gender equality.

Scholars interested in the recent surge in disinformation tactics deployed by specifically Russian actors have also found a persistent preoccupation with the Scandinavian region in Russian media discourse. Considerable efforts have been put into analysing pro-Kremlin narratives about the Nordic countries from the state-sponsored broadcasting company Sputnik (e.g., Colliver et al., 2018; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019). In this context, Deverell and colleagues (2020: 15) found that among the Nordic countries, Sweden, alongside Denmark, is framed most negatively – often as an ultraliberal state in (moral) decay – in strategic narratives intended to "destruct, direct and suppress" these nations through soft power. Indeed, "Sweden has been systematically portrayed by Russian media as a particularly bad example of extreme liberalism, possibly because of its traditionally strong liberal policies in realms such as gender and multiculturalism" (Wagnsson & Lundström, 2022: 3). There is a long history to these discursive patterns, from a range of different political contexts, in which Scandinavia, and Sweden in particular, is used as a slate onto which fantasmatic tropes are projected. In international far-right circles, Scandinavia holds a prominent and paradoxical place in a shared imagination of white heritage and racist fantasies of superiority. On the one hand, as a trope and source of mythic inspiration, Scandinavia has long been celebrated by white supremacists whose self-representations are laced with the iconography and symbolism of Viking heritage, Norse mythology, or paganism (Gardell, 2003; Kølvraa, 2019; Miller-Idriss, 2018). "The Nordics" have historically functioned as whiteness standard-bearers in pseudoscientific race typologies (Teitelbaum & Lundström, 2017) and in far-

right circles, at home and abroad, and Sweden is often imagined as the cradle of white purity: "the whitest of the whites" (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011: 50).

On the other hand, Sweden is frequently singled out as a failed project of multiculturalism succumbing to its own "imported violence" – a form of "paradise lost" in the political rhetoric of conservative and far-right movements internationally. In an interview study with politicians and supporters of four ideologically diverse populist radical-right parties across different national contexts in Europe,[1] Thorleifsson (2019) found remarkable similarities in discourse, images, and tropes around what she dubbed "the Swedish dystopia". She suggested that Sweden-as-nation, alongside long-standing figures of the racialised Jew or the Muslim Other, has come to feature as one of the most violent and radicalising imaginaries of the far right globally. Further, the results of a comprehensive study of international malign influence campaigns circulating around the 2018 election in Sweden similarly found that the country has become a "narrative crux" in far-right discourse around the world. The study identified a cluster of international far-right actors online, particularly Norwegian, Danish, and Polish, who were connecting with the Swedish far right in concerted efforts to present Sweden as an emblem of multiculturalism gone wrong and a collapsing society on the verge of racial civil war. Titley (2019: 1020) noted how dystopian ideas about Sweden serve as a particularly powerful "repository of myths, fantasies and projections" in far-right alternative media, particularly in the US. Mulhall (2020) suggested that part of the reason the Sweden trope is particularly effective in the US has to do with a host of Swedish social media influencers with English-language channels and a relatively large international following who systematically entertain the narrative when they are used as sources in the online ecosystem of American far-right media (see also Becker, 2019). Some of the same social media influencers were later identified by Robinson and Eli (2022) to have shaped the conversations around the 2018 Swedish election in the global Twittersphere with a similar anti-immigration and Islamophobic frame. The Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem in the US continues to be heavily preoccupied with Sweden, producing hundreds of stories with headlines such as "Sweden facing collapse" (Edmunds, 2015), "Sweden's society may be dissolving due to mass migration" (Tomlinson, 2020), and "Feminist Swedish politicians defend migrant rapists" (Deacon, 2016). These news frames implicate the idea of a degenerating, feminised welfare state committing "suicide by immigration", as part of the "white genocide" allegedly unfolding in Sweden and threatening the Western world. At the intersection of white supremacism and male supremacism, a "revenge fantasy" around this alleged genocide is often iterated around visual and rhetorical tropes of "Swedish feminists" or "Swedish whores" being gang-raped by immigrants (Askanius, 2021; Askanius et al., 2023). Horsti (2017) found a similar pattern in the larger Scandinavian counter-jihadist blogosphere around the recurring trope of "the Swedish woman" as both victim (to "Muslim rape") and "race traitor" indoctrinated by liberal feminism.

While this growing body of work on the pervasive Sweden-narrative has provided detailed insights into its discursive workings in a variety of national contexts

and its importance to transnational flows of xenophobia and islamophobia, this research shows how the trope is morphing and migrating into other, related "retrogressive mobilisations" (Norocel & Băluță, 2023) at the heart of which are attacks against gender equality and a host of related issues including women's autonomy, abortion, reproductive rights, gender mainstreaming, sex education, and transgender rights. Importantly, we show that many of the positions and claims first propagated by anti-democratic, white supremacist actors are today entertained in new versions by more moderate, mainstream conservative actors and merging with anti-gender activism around the notion of the vulnerable child and children's rights in new and so far unexplored ways. In order to make sense of these invocations of Scandinavia in contemporary conservative anti-gender discourse, we turn to the fantasmatic logics underpinning them, and in particular the recurrent and imagined equation of (destabilised) gender identities with destabilised national identity and security. By understanding how various iterations of Scandinavia are weaponised at this critical juncture, when conservative, anti-gender movements are on the rise across liberal and illiberal democracies, we get a more general sense of the direction of these mobilisations in Europe and internationally, and about the "stickiness" of the ideas that fuel them.

Theoretical framework: A logics approach to understanding anti-gender propaganda

We take a political discourse theoretical approach to propaganda. While the notion has had a revival in media and communication studies in recent years,[2] propaganda remains under-theorised in discourse studies. Vatsov (2018) – one of the few scholars in post-structuralist discourse studies engaged in reinterpreting propaganda along discourse theoretical lines – argued,

> [we are witnessing a global] emergence of a common populist-propaganda discursive front – that is, a specific language whose resources are utilized by different political actors, including Vladimir Putin, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Victor Orban, Marine le Pen, and Donald Trump but also by different locally institutionalized or entirely non-institutional everyday speakers. (Vatsov, as cited in Zienkowski, 2021: 6)

Drawing on Laclau, Vatsov (2018: 78) proposed the notion of a "populist-propaganda discursive front" to understand propaganda as an articulatory practice that creates a "populism from above" via "strategically reinforced bullshitting" that blurs the meanings of statements that makes signifiers and statements exchangeable and arbitrary. Contemporary forms of propaganda thus produce discursive horizons in which Laclau's empty signifiers abound. The meanings of these excessive empty signifiers are "arbitrarily layered upon one another, thereby creating the illusion of coherence, but above all an illusion of totality of the final message" (Vatsov, 2018: 85). This ultimately creates social worlds in which "nothing is true and everything's possible" – described as a core sentiment of the "surreal heart of the new Russia" by Pomerantsev in a volume of the same name (2014).

This study draws on the "logics approach" of the political discourse theoretical approach (Glynos et al., 2009) to discourse analysis to understand and disentangle the social, political, and fantasmatic aspects of anti-gender and traditional values discourse mobilised around ideas of Scandinavia. Overall, the aim of such an analytical approach is to "capture the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible, intelligible, and vulnerable" (Glynos et al., 2009: 11). Scandinavia becomes an empty signifier to which meaning can be assigned to different ideological projects, making it susceptible to multiple and even contradictory interpretations. We take the notion of empty signifiers along with "logics of fantasy" (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008) in order to understand how interchangeable articulations of Sweden, and by extension Scandinavia, work as a contingent and changeable focal point for affective investment. In terms of the logics themselves, social logics – as they pertain to the discursive practices we encountered – help identify taken-for-granted notions about Scandinavia, and the ideas and tropes thereof in the materials we study. They connote the shared assumptions among actors, their internal coherence, as well as the (kind of) public addressed in these ideas. Capturing these logics goes beyond "extrapolating directly from texts and media representations but requires a 'to-and-fro movement' between documents, observations, and events in order to understand the central concerns of a regime of practices" (Glynos et al., 2021: 70). Understanding the political logics of a practice means identifying sites of antagonism and examining political frontiers being drawn, which in this case refers to the ways in which a sense of "us versus them" is established through such international or transnational comparisons. It requires explaining processes of collective mobilisation, and of the emergence and dislocation of political practices. It enables an understanding of the consolidation as well as the contestation of regimes. Finally, fantasmatic logics ask who is to blame for the perceived (theft of) enjoyment of subjects, where and when to locate an imagined Golden Age, and how a reference to Scandinavia enables the production of certain fantasmatic images, in both their "beatific" and horrific dimensions. These logics account for the means by which a discourse grips subjects, typically through the construction of a narrative promising an imagined state of fullness. It covers over the radical contingency of social relations, as well as the obstacles that prevent the attainment of that state, and the horrifying scenarios that emerge lest this state is attained – the latter being a major focus of the discourses we analyse in this discussion.

Data and methodology

This study is part of an ongoing research project addressing broader comparative questions of anti-gender thought in the context of Germany and Russia. The two countries share several crucial commonalities that make them susceptible to anti-gender activism: Both are experiencing population changes (in Russia, a decreasing birth rate with high net migration; in Germany, an ageing population combined with a large influx of migrants and changes in demographic makeup);

Both suffer from high (Russia) or increasing (Germany) economic and social inequalities,; and though traditionally multi-ethnic and relying on migrant labour, both have continuous discussions about protecting a Christian-yet-secular "Leitkultur" under threat. Additionally, the legacy of socialism and its collapse, and the resulting transitions, have been linked with right-wing ideas and movements, with the electoral success of AfD particularly in East Germany as just one example. In order to study the media discourses and knowledge production of anti-gender actors and initiatives in Germany and Russia, a number of case studies were developed to track their rhetoric and media strategies across multiple platforms, with specific attention paid to initiatives targeting children, education, and the topic of childhood generally.

The data analysed in this article therefore draws on a larger empirical database of digital media texts covering speeches, live television performances, written commentary, and literary work produced by actors in Russia and Germany in 2010–2022.3 From this extensive archive of data, we identified a key thematic cluster around issues related to Scandinavia which emerged as part of the initial data analysis for the larger project. We then conducted a more directed search within the data of all mentions of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway in the texts. Where possible, we point out the context or origin of the examples used. Some of these seem closer to figments of a feverish imagination – or clear examples of fake news – while others rely on isolated incidents and transform them into societal trends. The majority lie somewhere in between. If understood as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018: 124), most of the material analysed in this article might be conceptualised as disinformation. Our primary analytical concern is, however, not with assessing the level of falsehood or disentangling truth from falsehood in the ideas propagated; rather, we are interested in how these ideas (regardless of their veracity) are mobilised to establish hegemony over a discursive or narrative landscape. Further, we approach the broad topic of propaganda in this journal issue with an interest mainly in *form* rather than circulation, reception, digital affordances, or platform-specific concerns around contemporary propaganda. Such an approach, focused on the discursive workings of media texts, brings the political discourse theoretical into debates on the continued relevance of propaganda to disentangle the intricate ways in which ideological and hegemonic struggles over geopolitics and shifting world power are being waged in relation to notions of gender today. We have translated to English quotes used in this article.

Analysis: "Sweden, the madhouse of the world"

Edenborg (2021) proposed that we understand Russian news about Sweden in terms of "geostrategic communication" and as a distinct form of disinformation informed by highly gendered narratives. Featuring an understanding of propaganda that moves beyond the state-centred lens of national security, his analysis of audiences' reception of news on Sweden – specifically from the Rus-

sian outlet Sputnik – shows how this mode of geostrategic communication *about* Sweden is intricately tied up with everyday boundary-making around racism, Islamophobia, anti-feminism, and queerphobia *in* Sweden and Scandinavia. In her extensive 2017 article in *Komsomol´skaya Pravda*, "Raped Sweden suffers from Stockholm syndrome", Russian author Darya Aslamova described in detail a ravaged Sweden of "no-go zones" that is no longer under the control of the state and in which "young gangsters wake up at three o'clock in the afternoon and go out to hunt for whites", and where "rape is daily bread"; this "once mighty and beautiful Sweden" is in terminal decline after "feminists have gained unlimited power" (Aslamova, 2017). In order to support her claims, Aslamova (2017) invites "native" voices, such as a candidate for the Sweden Democrats, who stated:

> The decline of civilisation is the sanctioned murder of one's children, the interest in other people's children and the loss of interest in one's own family. Education has become absurd. Even in kindergarten, a child is taught that all people are the same and that a foreigner is a potential friend who should be pitied because he is going through a difficult time. This does the child a disservice. He is incapable of resisting.

Importantly, the local expert was identified as a "humanitarian" running several charities, while Aslamova neglected to inform the readers of his political affiliation.

A similar strategic omission was made by Brigitte Kelle (2020), prominent anti-abortion and pro-traditional family values advocate in Germany in the first chapter of *Noch Normal? Das lässt sich gendern! – GenderPolitik ist das Problem, nicht die Lösung* [*Still normal? We can always make it about gender! – Gender politics is the problem, not the solution*], where she recounted a video entitled "Am I a Cat?" (Hanna Lindholm, 2016) recorded on campus at Södertörn University. The video features Hanna Lindholm, active in the youth section of the Sweden Democrats, asking passers-by on campus whether – as someone with the appearance of a cisgendered woman – they would believe her if she were to tell them she is a man. The interviewees acknowledged her right to self-identify as a man, but also clearly signalled that they did not think she is. Lindholm then proceeded to go through a series of possible self-descriptions of escalating unlikeliness and even absurdity, featuring, among others, being of Asian ethnicity (the reporter is Caucasian and sounds Swedish), being a cat, and being a 7-year-old – who might wish to date other 7-year-old children. Kelle recounted the video almost in its entirety, without revealing Lindholm's political affiliation. Instead, she delighted in the squirming discomfort of the interviewees, telling her readers that if they find accepting someone's self-reported gender identification curious, uncomfortable, or illogical, they are not alone. Indeed, the "madness" is in the gullibility and seemingly blind willingness to accept another person's self-identification, as displayed by the "progressive" Swedish students. While the pointing out of "absurdities" and excesses of identity politics is an international staple of right-wing pundits – and the preferred rhetorical means

of Kelle herself in the crusade against "gender madness" – the choice of Sweden as her first example is strategically important.

Within the right-wing media ecosystem in Germany, in prominent publications – including the AfD-adjacent site *Freie Welt*, right-wing populist *Tichys Einblick*, and neo-fascist print magazine *COMPACT Magazin* – articles and debate entries about Sweden similarly make regular appearances. These paint a picture of a country which, though perhaps once a remarkable example of post-war economic growth and wealth distribution, has now lost its way, through an adherence to false notions of progress and gender equality. Recurrent themes include a feminist government engaging in excesses of gender mainstreaming, and "gender ideology" imposed on institutions and citizens, ranging from gender-neutral education to discouraging masculine identification in boys, and instead encouraging all children to question their gender identity (e.g., Die Freie Welt, 2019), as well as a misguided commitment to human rights, leading to uncontrolled migration, and spikes in crime.

Sweden is depicted as a country which "exemplifies the failure of a feminist social experiment", and as such, is on a "fast track to disaster": Once "an exemplary country", Sweden has been "ruined within the past 40 years" (Die Freie Welt, 2018b). The country is continuously presented as a "demographic disaster" with an alarming male surplus due to excess immigration of young males from Muslim countries. To German actors, Sweden seems to operate in a specular fashion: "A look at Sweden shows us our problems as if we were looking into a mirror […]. Just like in Germany, the country's situation is made worse by immigrants, who are predominantly male and, by the way, cheat with their ages, again just like in Germany" (Die Freie Welt, 2018b). German actors frequently make explicit comparisons and references to Sweden as a "dark mirror" of sorts, for example, when a recurring contributor points out how "the denial of reality by many established social and political forces in Sweden, on this issue and others, is reminiscent of Germany and vice versa" (Tichys Einblick, 2018). These comparisons suggest a subtle but interesting difference in the German imaginary of Sweden compared with other national contexts, in which the doomsday tale of Sweden built up since the refugee crisis has been saturated by a distinct schadenfreude (see, e.g., Becker, 2019; Rapacioli 2018; Titley, 2019). This sentiment is sometimes articulated as violent, racialised revenge fantasies in which a self-destructive welfare state and self-proclaimed humanitarian superpower finally gets what it deserves. Such fantasies are also often expressed among more extremist, white-supremacist actors in which they are iterated around various visual representations, such as memes of "Swedish feminists" being gang-raped by immigrants. In Germany, however, there instead seems to be a sense of solidarity and allegiance with Sweden. In articles about "Swedish conditions", authors express compassion for Sweden, as a sort of companion in the suffering about which "German media hardly tells us anything" (Tichys Einblick, 2018).

"Queer ideology for the youngest"

Within these broader Scandi-dystopian discourses, a particularly powerful figure reoccurs in the Russian and German material: the vulnerable child. As a discursive trope, the child provides a window to the the social, political, and fantasmatic logics at work in the data more broadly and thus deserves detailed analytical attention. German actors highlight how, for example, in some kindergartens, children are no longer addressed as girls and boys, but only in a gender-neutral way as children: "Instead of he and she, gender-neutral personal pronouns are used" (Die Freie Welt, 2017b). This imposition of gender neutrality apparently drives young boys to turn to violent videogames:

> Here they can really play at being a man. Boys used to want to play pirates, cowboys, cops and robbers. Today they take refuge in the digital world because the real one hardly gives them any opportunities to follow their innate inclinations. But gender ideology doesn't care. Boys are feminised with full force. (Die Freie Welt, 2017a)

Throughout the material, children – or rather, child safety – is a central node through which anti-gender claims are tied together and attain a (seeming) degree of coherence. Generally, child safety and a potential "loss of innocence" are recurrent, transhistorical tropes which have been used to both advance child protective legislation, and, by diverse actors, to "rein in" what they believe are societal threats to children, often through potential moral corruption. Of course, hand-wringing over the well-being of children happens within national contexts as well, with different actors engaging in debates over, for example, educational agendas, the degree of involvement of social services, and state support for parents. However, making Scandinavia the site of such child harm achieves a different outcome than merely using national examples. In effect, the recurrence of different Scandinavian sites as examples of dysfunction showcases the utility of the *imagined* Scandinavian region, whose borders are somewhat fuzzy, and which is reinforced by ideas rather than physical structures or geographical bounds.

Across child protection discourses, there is often a focus on the content of media to which children are exposed. In line with this observation, several of our cases focus on children's television shows in Sweden and Denmark as illustrated in the introduction. There is also a strong focus on educational and childcare settings – typical of the anti-gender movement's concern with state interference in family matters. German actors criticise "Egalia", a gender-neutral kindergarten in Stockholm, taking it as a model of Swedish education in general (Die Freie Welt, 2017a, 2017c; Elternaktion, 2021), or the "harmful practice" of placing children in nursery "too early" (Schellen, 2011). Most of the examples involving children are preoccupied with the alleged traumatisation of children as a result of gender-progressive, feminist ideas instilled too zealously, leading to, for example, their "premature sexualisation" (*Frühsexualisierung* in German). In Russia, this is expressed by, for example, the head of a Russian Christian parents' organisation, who fears that Russian schools might follow European models where "they

teach children masturbation instead of embroidery in school, with the help of German or Swedish cartoons" (Artiukh, 2013, as cited in Höjdestrand, 2016). In other words, what is conveyed in these discourses are alarmist scenarios in which children are alienated from traditional (i.e., heterosexual) family values and left in the hands of state or institutional authorities, who are willing to jeopardise children's safety in order to retain their influence. Sometimes this is pushed further, beyond the idea of the state alienating children from their parents ideologically, to the state physically removing children. For these cases, Norway is identified as the most problematic context:

> [Norway is an] example of a country which is going to hell [… and where] sodomy has already been officially recognised as the norm there. But the descendants of the Vikings go even further. Everything is being done in the country to legalise paedophilia. (Pshenichnikov, 2022)

In fact, this is a good illustration of the toxic stew of legitimate concerns or critique, such as that of Norway's overzealous social services (Whewell, 2018), being intertwined with classic homophobia in the Gayropa trope (and the idea of children being taken from heterosexual families to be raised by paedophiles) which has become a staple narrative of Russian disinformation campaigns (Cushman & Avramov, 2021). As we argue in the conclusion, making the figure of the child the object of concern in anti-gender propaganda raises the affective stakes, with intentionally divisive outcomes.

Discussion: The logics of Scandinavian degradation

The figure of the child is used for an evocation of innocence lost, connected to a sense of loss in general, while simultaneously being capable of mobilising anxieties about the future. The child is an ideal mechanism for bridging the gap between personal and more abstract *political* concerns, as it "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (Edelman, 2004: 11) – the irrefutability of child protectionism being further enhanced by the sacralisation of childhood which began in the twentieth century (Zelizer, 1994). This discursive logic takes one from children to society, and further back to oneself, in the present.

The social logics of childhood innocence and vulnerability (i.e., taken-for-granted ideas thereof) thus become intertwined with those of Scandinavia and its contradictory meanings. Sweden is particularly often treated as shorthand for a former childhood idyll, due in no small part to the huge popularity of Astrid Lindgren's books and the television shows based on them.[4] Sweden is a place of nostalgia, with many German commenters to the articles cited here complaining that Sweden used to be a place they desired or loved to visit – "until" the transformations of recent years. The story of Sweden's decline and fall due to an overzealous, dogmatic implementation of false ideas of gender and racial equality is contrasted with a previous state of simplicity and equality. The fact that such an "unspoilt" and near-yet-far site could undergo such drastic changes

makes it a perfect case for discourses meant to incite displaced outrage. The dreaded transformation which has afflicted Scandinavia, and which cannot be avowed or even named, is that of a loss of privilege – in particular of whiteness and patriarchal heteronormativity at home.

For both Germany and Russia, Scandinavia not only signifies a paragon of modernity, but also a Blut und Boden fantasy of whiteness. The coveted fantasmatic object of Scandinavia can then be used as projection matter for the horrific dimension of (right-wing) mythology: white displacement, the destabilisation of gendered relations, and gender itself, and the ensuing loss of sexual, social, and economic privileges. While mourning the loss of white male supremacy is so far foreclosed, at least publicly, it can be displaced onto other, connected sites and other, connected losses, for which the audience may legitimately feel nostalgia. This includes the end of childhood and the loss of enchantment that comes with it, and which one has had to trade for an increasingly unpleasant awareness that one is implicated in the injustices of the world. Defending "traditional childhood" can thus also be read as a refusal to acknowledge the complexities of the world.

In terms of the political logics of the discourses examined, a clear aim is to establish an antagonism between the fun-house mirror version of Scandinavia evoked here, and the safety of more traditional, national values. Emphasis is not on factual correctness – or even, importantly, on newsworthiness – but on the rejection of what is presented. As Lucie Jarkovská (2020: 140) has found in her work on Russian disinformation campaigns in Czechia and Slovakia: "The aim of this propaganda is not to convince everyone, but to divide society into irreconcilable groups". For Russia, invocations of Scandi-dystopia are designed to achieve only maximum outrage, coupled with a geopolitical dimension. While the region becomes a proxy to talk about a Europe on the brink of collapse, stories of perversion and decline are almost always mentioned alongside examples of Ukrainian corruption and decay. The implied, or even enunciated, conclusion is that Ukraine is seeking to follow the perverted path of Europe, to which Russia is in opposition – not because it is a priori opposed to the existence of an independent democratic Ukraine. In this roundabout political logic, mentioning the dystopian conditions of Scandinavia justifies the denigration, and anticipates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Conclusion

The concept of propaganda has been seminal to the formation of media and communication studies as a field and is regaining popularity in a digital age where notions of activism and propaganda are once again being brought to centre stage and problematised. This renewed interest is a response to not only "anxieties resulting from new forms of large-scale manipulation by means of social media, big data and algorithms" (Zienkowski, 2021: 1), but also to political developments in which we are seeing a rise in foreign interference in democratic elections, such as widespread systematic information manipulation and disinformation campaigns by the Russian government and aligned actors as an operational tool

in its war of aggression against Ukraine. In this political moment, reinterpreting the notion of propaganda along discourse theoretical lines provides one crucial way of harnessing critical communication research with better tools for media and communication scholars to participate in these ongoing debates.

Our analysis gives evidence to the "return of propaganda", and the prominence of gender in current instantiations thereof. Examining the discursive function of stories of Scandinavian decline in Germany and Russia has specifically meant parsing what makes their elements effective – that is, what inspires outrage in parts of the public, and why this outrage is useful. The propaganda produced by anti-gender actors in both countries are united by their radically backwards-looking, regressive direction, which is enabled and made more effective by recruiting the child as a central node and core concern of these narratives. To Russia, Scandinavia represents the apogee of a general European decline (or that of the "collective West", in more recent rhetoric, such as Putin's Valdai club speech in October 2022). For both Russia and Germany, the region, and particularly Sweden, is a site where children are at the mercy of state institutions that have succumbed to radical feminism, "gender ideology", and multicultural delusions. Discourses around the loss or perversion of child innocence can thus be seen to similarly perform the work of "gendered boundarymaking" (Edenborg, 2020, 2021; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2022) and give insight into the geostrategic use of communication, as it is "entangled in global gender politics, where international power struggles are framed as a conflict between competing gender orders" (Edenborg, 2021: 511). While children are often connected to acts of care and empathy, here these are meant to be reserved for those upholding "traditional" gender and racial orders, creating and exploiting an antagonism between a Scandinavia which, by embracing feminism and migration, has failed to care for its "native" population.

However, it is necessary to return to the example of the zoophile brothel mentioned at the beginning of this article, which is presented as forming part and parcel of the perverted cocktail of European values finding their nadir in the modernising project of Scandinavia. Much entertainment value can be derived from some of the exaggerations, conspiratorial thinking, and blatant fairy tales that are offered as examples for why domestic audiences must not follow the examples of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. But the aim is not to offer the deceptive absurdity of these examples as reasons for why conservative and right-wing actors can be easily dismissed. Instead, they tap into a sense that these trends and occurrences – were they to happen anywhere – could, at least on the level of fantasy, take place in Scandinavia. Thus, these stories may feel true even when deprived of factual value, as they give direction to a sense of alienation and anger that can be channelled into myths of decay and dystopia.

The fact that the more outlandish examples of violated turtles and state-sanctioned exhibitionism and "sodomy" emerge from Russia is not an indication of the greater gullibility of Russian audiences necessarily, but of a change in media strategies which took place in Russian state media during Putin's third term as president. A shift to a format which favours political and quasi-political

talk shows on Russia's Channels One [Pervyi Kanal] and Russia [Rossiya], along with what feels at times like the ambience of reality television, has been termed "agitainment" by Tolz and Teper (2018). The key to understanding the appeal of these shows is to see them in terms of how successfully they mix performative affect with authority over reality – the authoritative aspect often being embodied by the well-known hosts of these shows such as Dmitry Kiselev, mentioned at the beginning of the article, who "are aware of their role as co- producers rather than mere disseminators of official discourse and of the approved system of values" (Tolz & Teper, 2018: 222). Their role is more frequently becoming central to the production of "staged outrage", while they engage in almost playful acts of trolling. The aim is to stoke a whole gamut of affect such as fear and envy, but also a sense of triumph or schadenfreude. Similar feelings are evoked in the debate pieces in the German hyper-partisan media cited here. Often these address the reader directly to create a solidarity of grievances with those "not alone" in assuming that the world has gone haywire and that things no longer make sense. Treating the stories of Scandinavia as part of disinformation campaigns' "info war", some say their aim is to "create an alternative reality in which all truth is relative and no information can be trusted" (Nimmo, 2015). Thus, the absurdity is partially intentional, as it enables a highlighting of affect over facts to create strong – that is, memorable – responses in audiences, who come together as affective communities.

Utilising the logics approach to political discourse theory has enabled us to move away from a focus on the content of the news stories presented here, and towards an analytical pairing of narrative with that of the underlying investments and fears present in them. The intended effect of the tendentious and propagandistic messages, which range in character from biased to clear examples of disinformation, is not one of logical coherence and a concrete repertoire of action emerging from them. Instead, there is an intentional confusion of meanings and blurring of the notions of truth and falsehood. As such, "successful" propaganda creates a discursive horizon in which strict logic no longer applies. The veracity of the claims made about Scandinavia is irrelevant here – but as a polyvalent yet empty signifier, it is able to provide a type of "affective coherence", creating a transnational rallying point and a shared language with which to mobilise against and attack democratic values and rights long taken for granted in Europe.

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Notes

1. The United Kingdom Independence Party, the Hungarian Jobbik party in Hungary, The Progress Party in Norway, and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden
2. Scholars in media and communication studies, political communication and related fields often do not engage the notion propaganda explicitly but instead anchor discussion in the conceptual horizons of for example "fake news", disinformation (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018), geostrategic communication (Edenborg, 2021), antagonistic strategic narratives (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019), "antagonistic messaging" (Walker, 2016) hyperpartisan media or pseudo-journalism (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).
3. The data we draw on for this article form part of the larger corpus of data for the EU-funded project "The child as cipher for a politics of 'traditional values' in the anti-gender movement: A comparative study of Russia and Germany". This comparative project explores conservative and right-wing populist movements that advocate "traditional family values", in particular conservative sexual and gender politics, in the name of protecting children. Media texts that form part of the data include anything from social media posts, speeches, and campaign material such as leaflets by formal political actors in Russia and Germany promoting "traditional values" positions, parental initiatives (particularly those concerning education), and books, essays, and articles by pro–traditional-values actors and publications ranging from small alternative media sites to state television channels and shows airing at prime time in Russia. This larger dataset consist of approximately 300 items equally distributed across the two countries. Only data directly cited has been included in the reference list.
4. And, not surprisingly, there is a significant subsection of articles criticising the "censorship" of Astrid Lindgren in overly politically correct Sweden published in Die Freie Welt. The broad popularity of Lindgren in the Soviet Union is also important in the recent campaign in Russia branding her as a Nazi sympathiser.

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