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Cross-Border Media Consumption As A Significant Factor in Belief Formation

Riccardo Pelizzo & Serik Orazgaliyev[1]
Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University

Nygmetzhan Kuzenbayev
International School of Economics, Maqsut Narikbayev University

Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between trust in Russian television and belief in conspiracy theories among viewers in Kazakhstan. Drawing on an original 2024 survey, we examine whether individuals who consider Russian broadcast television a reliable source of information are more likely to endorse the conspiracy theory linking 5G networks to the spread of COVID-19. Our findings reveal a significant positive association between trust in Russian TV and belief in this conspiracy theory, even after controlling for demographic and socio-economic variables. In contrast, trust in internet news sites is negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs. These results underscore the importance of cross-border media influence and information politics, especially in contexts where countries share common historical and cultural identity traits, such as a Soviet past and a common language. By exploring how foreign media shape narratives and public trust, the paper contributes to our understanding of the role of propaganda and conspiracy in shaping national identity and collective consciousness. The paper also adds to broader studies on informational sovereignty, symbolic politics, and nation-building in transitional regimes.
Keywords: Conspiracy theories; Cross-border media consumption; Cultural Identity, Information politics; Informational sovereignty; Nation-building; Symbolic politics.

Introduction

This study investigates the relationship between exposure to Russian television and the prevalence of conspiracy theories among the Kazakhstani population, utilizing original survey data collected in 2024. By doing so, it contributes to two interrelated lines of inquiry: the determinants of conspiracy beliefs in Kazakhstan – a topic that remains underexplored – and the broader question of how media consumption influences conspiratorial thinking, a theme that has attracted increasing scholarly attention (e.g., Enders et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2022).

Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, they have been used – often inaccurately – to explain political and social events. As Karl Popper famously observed, conspiracy theories attribute outcomes, even those appearing unintended, to the deliberate actions of powerful actors (Popper, 2013, p. 307). These theories have attracted scholarly interest across disciplines: epistemologists have debated their truth claims (Popper,

[1] The corresponding author for this paper is Serik Orazgaliyev, Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University, 53 Kabanbay Batyr avenue, Astana, 010000, Kazakhstan, email: serik.orazgaliyev@nu.edu.kz

2019); semioticians have questioned their structure and logic (Eco, 1992); postmodern thinkers have engaged with their interpretive potential (Peters, 2021); and social scientists have examined their political and social correlates (Douglas et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred renewed academic focus on conspiracy beliefs. Scholars have revisited questions around the definition, consequences, and drivers of such beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Particular attention has been paid to the role of media, especially social media, in propagating COVID-19-related conspiracies (Allington et al., 2021; Grau, 2021; Nicolosi, 2023; Romer & Jamieson, 2021).

However, much of this literature overlooks the role that traditional media – including television, newspapers, and radio – can play in disseminating conspiracy narratives in non-democratic settings. In authoritarian contexts, mainstream media often function not as impartial sources of information but as instruments of state power: legitimizing regimes, concealing failures, and shaping public opinion. In Russia, for instance, state-controlled media have been shown to manipulate public discontent (Lankina et al., 2020), justify foreign policy actions such as the war in Ukraine (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023), and promote conspiracy narratives to bolster government legitimacy (Yablokov, 2015).

Significantly, the reach of Russian media extends beyond its borders, particularly into former Soviet states. This reach raises critical questions about the transnational effects of Russian information flows, especially in regions where Russian-language television remains influential.

This study, therefore, asks two interrelated questions. First, is the belief in conspiracy theories associated with the perceived reliability of various media sources, including national TV, international TV, Russian TV, newspapers, YouTube, and online news sites? Second, and more specifically, is trust in Russian television associated with a greater propensity to endorse conspiracy narratives? By addressing these questions in the context of Kazakhstan, this study offers new empirical insights into the media–belief nexus in authoritarian settings.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section situates the study within the broader literature on media influence, conspiracy theories, and authoritarian information strategies, with a particular focus on Russian media. The theoretical model links media trust to conspiracy thinking, followed by a description of the data, variables, and methodological approach. The empirical results are discussed in detail, highlighting key associations between trust in Russian television and belief in conspiracy narratives. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of the findings for understanding media-driven belief formation in authoritarian contexts and suggests directions for future research.

Literature Review

Conspiracy Beliefs

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of conspiracy studies (Douglas et al., 2019). Social scientists (Douglas et al., 2019), philosophers (Peters, 2021; Popper, 2019), and semioticians (Eco, 1990, 1992; Madisson & Ventsel, 2020) have all begun paying increasing attention to conspiracy theories. In doing so, efforts have been made to define what a conspiracy theory is (or is not), to understand whether conspiracy theories are always and inevitably incorrect, and to identify their correlates.

One stream of inquiry (Uscinski et al., 2020; Peters & Besley, 2020; Sherwin, 2020) has identified denialism, the tendency to reject information received from authoritative sources, the inclination to regard political events and phenomena as the product or result of conspiratorial activities, and partisanship as some of the main determinants of conspiracy beliefs. If the findings of this line of inquiry apply to the Kazakhstani case, one could then

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hypothesize that viewers or respondents who regard Russian TV and other official media as an unreliable source of information are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. By contrast, if the findings of this line of research did not apply to Kazakhstan, then one could hypothesize that greater exposure to mainstream media, including Russian ones, should be associated with a greater propensity to believe in conspiracy theories.

The reason why it is worth exploring which of these two hypothesis holds in the Kazakhstani case is that while the literature has long been aware that authoritarian regimes engage in information politics and propaganda, it has also documented that authoritarian regimes, depending on a wide range of contextual factors, may have different expectations as to which channels of communication would be most effective, may choose different tools and channels and may more or less effective in their propaganda efforts (Litvinenko, 2023; Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024).

Studies conducted in a second stream of inquiry have instead noted that the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories depends on religiosity, traditional beliefs and on the belief in the supernatural because conspiratorial cognition resembles religious cognition (Boudry & Coyne, 2016; Wood & Douglas, 2018), hermetic semiosis (Eco, 1990) and a traditional mindset (Kinyondo et al., 2024). Lowicki et al. (2022) documented that religious fundamentalism is a major determinant of the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. In a similar vein, Frenken et al. (2023) reported that, in four of the five studies they conducted using metadata from German, Polish, and American data, a significantly positive association was found between the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs and religiosity. Interestingly, however, Frenken et al. (2023) observed a noticeable difference in the relationship between conspiracy thinking and religiosity and spirituality. While the association between religiosity and conspiracy thinking weakens considerably if political orientation is controlled for, the strength of the association between spirituality and conspiracy thinking remains essentially unchanged.

Finally, most studies conducted in this line of inquiry noted the main reason why religiosity, spirituality and traditional beliefs are positively associated with a greater propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is the cognitive processes through which religious/spiritual individuals make sense of the world are the same as those employed by the believers in conspiracy thinking. It is, in other words, that religious individuals and those with a traditional mindset employ the same processes of signification used by conspiracy believers, which increases the probability that they may also become conspiracy believers in their own right (Kinyondo et al., 2024).

A third stream of inquiry has explored the impact of media usage on the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. This line of research has generally reported that social media promote (the diffusion of) conspiracy theories (Cinelli et al., 2022), that the use of social media increases the probability of believing in conspiracy theories (Allington et al., 2021; Enders et al., 2021; Min, 2021) though this literature has also acknowledged that the causal link between social media usage and propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is not entirely straightforward (Douglas et al., 2019).

One reason why this relationship may not be straightforward is that the causal link, as Enders et al. (2021) underscored, is conditional, as it depends on other individual-level predispositions. An individual who believes in conspiracy theories, the supernatural, or traditional beliefs is more likely to believe in another conspiracy theory (Van Prooijen et al., 2022). Hence, according to this account, the impact of social media usage on the propensity to believe a conspiracy theory depends on whether an individual's cognitive process or mode of signification is similar to or compatible with that of those who engage in conspiracy thinking.

A second possible explanation for why the association between conspiracy beliefs and social media usage may not be straightforward is consistent with several of the claims advanced in the literature on conspiracy theories and beliefs (Uscinski et al., 2020) and is consistent with

the claims advanced by political scientists on how voters seek and process information. Famously, Campbell et al. (1960) noted that American voters have a party identification, which shapes their electoral behavior (i.e., whether to vote or not, and whether to prefer one party over another). Additionally, this party identification influences how they process political information to minimize cognitive dissonance (Al Marrar & Allevato, 2022). If social media users, like voters, seek to avoid cognitive dissonance, if they tend to have a conspiratorial mindset, if the content of social media is more conspiratorial than what one would find in mainstream media, then social media usage is a consequence rather than a cause of the propensity to believe in conspiracies.

A third reason why the impact of social media usage on the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories may not be straightforward is that while the usage of some social media has a positive impact on the acceptance of conspiracy beliefs, the usage of other social media has a negative impact. Theocharis et al. (2023), for instance, revealed that the use of Twitter, now X, reduced the propensity to believe in Covid-19 conspiracy theories; the use of other social media increased it.

In sum, there are three possible reasons why the association between social media usage and the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories may not be straightforward: the association may be conditional (as it may depend on other factors/conditions); social media usage may result from rather than induce the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories; and, finally, while some platforms are linked to higher acceptance of conspiracy beliefs, others are associated with lower acceptance.

Politics of Media, Misinformation, and the Rise of Conspiratorial Narratives

Before the age of digital media, there was not much disagreement about the importance of media for democracy and liberal values. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas is known for his seminal works on the role of media in shaping the public sphere, where public opinion is formed through open discussions (Habermas, 1991). Habermas analysed the importance of the public sphere in the liberalisation and democratic transformation of European societies in the late nineteenth century. With the rise of digital media in our age, considerable optimism has emerged about the role of the internet and social networks in shaping the "public screen" (as analyzed by Habermas), where public opinion can be formed through open discussions in digital spaces.

There were promising examples when social media served to facilitate democratisation. In Russia, for example, President Putin's biggest enemy, opposition leader Alexei Navalny (died in prison in 2023), made his name on social media, while in mainstream broadcast media, his name was barely mentioned (Kazun & Semykina, 2020). Navalny also utilized social media extensively to launch anti-corruption investigations and organize large-scale street protests and demonstrations. In another example, the Arab Spring revolutions across the Middle East demonstrated that social media can also serve as a mass mobilization mechanism for facilitating revolutionary democratic transitions. However, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, most revolutionary transitions failed to consolidate into fully functioning democracies. At the same time, it was argued that the role of social media in overturning ruling regimes was exaggerated (Dalacoura, 2012).

As time passed, the initial optimism about the role of social media in democratization began to wane. Worse, social media came to be recognized as a possible channel for the dissemination of conspiracy beliefs and lower levels of policy compliance (as in the case of COVID-19).

One reason why social media is believed to be responsible for the diffusion of conspiracy theories is that there is little to no control over the content available on these

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platforms, which allows them to be used for disseminating false, incorrect, or misleading information. This effect is amplified by the interactive nature of social media, which fosters participatory engagement and reinforces political messaging in echo chambers (Nguyen et al., 2022). Social media can be instruments of misinformation. The internet is replete with false, incorrect, and misleading information (Kumar & Shah, 2018). But the fact that the internet and social media are filled with fakes and forgeries, that they can be used to run campaigns of disinformation, or that they are the ideal media for the diffusion of conspiracy theories and beliefs, should not make one overlook the possibility that even mainstream media can also be used to misinform and promote conspiracy theories and beliefs.

Populist leaders in recent years have made extensive use, as a self-legitimizing propaganda tool, of conspiracy theories. Pirro and Taggart (2023) have documented that "populist conspiracism unequivocally helped demonise and delegitimise enemies (…), to promote or prolong a sense of crisis (…), to rally the people – that is, the deceived people, the victims – against a common enemy, but importantly around populists in government" (pp. 420-421).

Russian political elites and media have also made extensive use of conspiracy theories. Umland (2013) noted that "there is a danger that the increased campaign of incitement against the US may … permanently establish a conspiracy-minded, paranoid worldview as a legitimate pattern for the interpretation of international events" (p. 2). Kragh et al. (2020) reported that "a study undertaken by the Russian daily newspaper *Vedomosti* showed that conspiracy theories in Russian media were on average six to nine times more frequent in 2018 than they were in 2011" (p. 334).

As Kragh et al. (2020) noted, "conspiratorial ideas have moved closer to the mainstream of Russian political discourse" (p. 334). In Russia, one can find anti-West, anti-migrants, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, especially "among Russian devotees of neo-paganism" (Yablokov, 2019, p. 295). This finding is consistent with the analysis of German data (Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023).

These conspiracy theories are instrumental in characterizing Russia as a victim of aggression (Borenstein, 2022), in creating discomfort and confusion in the masses (Sazonov, 2019), in justifying the war in Ukraine (Bergmann, 2023; Bergmann, 2024; Radnitz, 2023; Šorytė, 2023). Some of these conspiracy theories were produced by the Russian government and disseminated by the Russian media, while others were created and disseminated by the Russian media themselves (Sazonov, 2019).

The Russian media played a significant role in disseminating and popularizing conspiracy theories for political purposes (Bogatyreva, 2024). Russian media, however, are not watched exclusively within the Russian borders. They are also monitored, to a lesser or greater extent, in several of the former Soviet states, where they serve as instruments of soft power to improve the relationship between Russia and the other former states (Laruelle et al., 2019; Hudson, 2022). While the studies discussed above have explained why Russian media promotes conspiracy beliefs among the Russian population and the effects of these beliefs, it is much less clear what the effects of Russian media are on viewers outside of Russia. This is precisely what we wish to assess in the remainder of this paper. In the next section, we will explain how and why Russian media may affect viewers outside of Russia. In the following section, we test our explanatory model by analyzing an original set of survey data collected in Kazakhstan.

Model Development

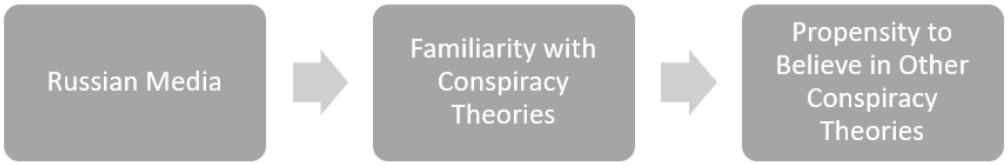
The relationship between watching Russian TV, which serves as the mainstream media source from which we collected data, and the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories can be explained in two ways. One argument is that viewers with a predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories may be more inclined to use media that disseminate conspiracy theories.

As we noted above, the literature has established that citizens who believe in conspiracy theories are more inclined to believe in other conspiracy theories. Hence, a viewer with a conspiratorial mindset, with a greater (intellectual) curiosity/appetite for other conspiracy theories, is more inclined to watch Russian media where conspiracy theories are broadcasted more frequently than they are by other media.

Alternatively, one could hypothesize that the exposure to Russian media, which are known to broadcast and disseminate conspiracy theories, induces familiarity with conspiracy theories and conspiratorial explanations of world events. This familiarity with conspiracy beliefs increases viewers' propensity to believe in such beliefs because, as Kinyondo et al. (2024) noted, the mindset of those who believe in conspiracy theories and traditional beliefs is "based on the twin principles of universal analogy and sympathy" (p. 1383) which meant, according to Kinyondo et al. (2024) that "items of this world are linked by way of resemblance to elements of the superior world" (p. 1383).

One aspect that Kinyondo et al. (2024) neglected was whether, to what extent, and in what ways the conspiratorial mindset operates to prevent cognitive dissonance and to provide behavioral guidance. In this respect we posit that the principle of similarity works in another, deeper, respect in the sense that people are more inclined to believe what they know (and, subordinately to believe in something similar to what they know) and to reject what they ignore but that they are also more inclined to believe in the merits of the processes of signification that are more similar to those they are more accustomed to (using). Thus, the following conceptual model is proposed:

Figure 1. Conceptual model linking trust in Russian media to belief in conspiracy theories.



The model suggests that Russian media, which disseminates, makes extensive use of, presents conspiracy theories (CT), breeds familiarity with such theories (and with the process of signification that such theories rest upon); the familiarity with this set of theories (and their mode of signification) increases the likelihood that viewers may believe in other conspiracy theories because all conspiracy theories, despite their specific differences, engage in the same process of signification and make sense of reality in precisely the same way. This conceptual model leads to the following hypothesis, which we will test empirically:

H1: Greater trust in Russian television is positively associated with belief in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

Methodology

Empirical Model

To empirically test the proposed hypothesis, we estimate the following ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model:

$$Belief\ in\ 5G\text{-}COVID\text{-}19\ conspiracy_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Trust\ Russian\ TV_i + \beta_2 \mathbf{X}_i + D_r + \varepsilon_i$$

Where $Belief\ in\ 5G\text{-}COVID\text{-}19\ conspiracy_i$ is the outcome variable for respondent i; $Trust\ Russian\ TV_i$ is the key explanatory variable; $\mathbf{X}_i$ is a vector of individual-level control variables; D_r are regional dummies; and ε_i is the error term.

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This model allows us to examine whether trust in Russian television is associated with belief in the conspiracy theory linking 5G networks to the spread of COVID-19, while accounting for individual-level demographic characteristics and regional variation.

Population and Sample

This study utilized data from an original online survey conducted across Kazakhstan in 2024 to examine the intricate relationship between media consumption and conspiracy beliefs. The survey targeted adult residents (aged 18 and above) from all administrative regions of the country. The survey was administered online using the *Qualtrics* platform. To maximize outreach and engagement, the questionnaire link was disseminated primarily through instant messaging platforms such as *WhatsApp*, reaching individuals via workplace chat groups, parenting groups, and local community networks. This distribution strategy did not rely on individual email addresses and was chosen for its practicality and broad accessibility. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and provided digital informed consent before beginning the survey. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University (#792/31102023). Although data collection relied on a convenience sampling strategy within regions, the final dataset was large, diverse, and analytically valuable, capturing meaningful variation across age, gender, education, and place of residence.

Results

Descriptives and Correlations

The dataset included responses from more than 3,000 individuals. However, the number of valid observations varies across variables due to item nonresponse. For the multivariate analysis, we retained 1,334 cases with complete data on all variables included in the regression model. Among the full sample, 59.6% identified as female and 67% held a university degree (see Table 1). The sample covered a broad range of age groups, with 50.2% of respondents aged 18-30, 21.8% aged 31-40, 18.3% aged 41-50, 7.1% aged 51-60, and 2.6% aged 61 and above. Additionally, 27% of respondents report living in rural areas, ensuring representation from different geographical settings.

The dependent variable in this study was the *Belief in 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy*, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement with the conspiracy theory linking 5G networks to the spread of COVID-19 (*How much do you agree with the following statement:* "*5G networks may cause the spread of COVID infection*"). The mean score for this variable was 2.384 with a standard deviation of 1.06.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of the Variables*

Variable	Description	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Belief in 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy	The degree to which respondents believe in the conspiracy linking 5G networks to the COVID-19 spread.	1994	2.384	1.06	1	5
Close Circle as a Reliable Info Source	The extent to which respondents consider conversations with friends and family as reliable information.	1838	3.319	1.36	1	5
National TV as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of national TV channels as a reliable source of information.	1852	3.118	1.42	1	5
International TV as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of international TV channels as a reliable source of information.	1821	3.16	1.402	1	5
Russian TV as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of Russian TV channels as a reliable source of information.	1751	2.401	1.472	1	5
Newspapers as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of newspapers as a reliable source of information.	1809	2.938	1.486	1	5
Social Media as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) as reliable sources.	1923	3.435	1.279	1	5
YouTube as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of YouTube as a reliable source of information.	1871	3.237	1.302	1	5
Internet News Sites as a Reliable Info Source	Respondents' perception of online news websites as reliable sources of information.	1889	3.496	1.285	1	5
Female	Binary indicator for respondent's gender (1 = Female, 0 = Male).	2892	.596	.491	0	1
Age category:		.	.	.	.	.
18-30	Binary indicator for respondents aged between 18-30 years.	2897	.502	.5	0	1
31-40	Binary indicator for respondents aged between 31-40 years.	2897	.218	.413	0	1
41-50	Binary indicator for respondents aged between 41-50 years.	2897	.183	.387	0	1
51-60	Binary indicator for respondents aged between 51-60 years.	2897	.071	.258	0	1
61 and more	Binary indicator for respondents aged 61 years and older.	2897	.026	.158	0	1
Income level	Respondent's self-reported household income level.	2538	4.992	1.697	1	9
University Education	Binary indicator for respondents with a university degree.	2890	.67	.47	0	1
Rural Residence	Binary indicator for respondents living in rural areas.	2879	.27	.444	0	1

We included independent variables that measured the perceived reliability of different information channels to analyze the relationship between belief in this conspiracy and trust in various information sources, measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Each variable is measured on a 5-point scale, where a higher score indicates greater perceived reliability. These channels included conversations with close circles, national and international TV channels, Russian TV channels, newspapers, social media, YouTube, and internet news sites.

Table 3 presents the pairwise correlations between the dependent variable and perceived reliability of various information sources. *Belief in 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy* shows small but

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positive correlations with perceived reliability of Russian TV, national TV, newspapers, international TV, YouTube, social media, and conversations with close circles. Its correlation with internet news websites is slightly negative. Meanwhile, moderate intercorrelations are observed among the media variables themselves, suggesting shared patterns in how respondents evaluate media credibility. These bivariate associations provide preliminary insights, which are further explored in the multivariate regression analysis that follows.

Table 3. *Pairwise correlations*

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Belief in 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy	1.000								
(2) Close Circle as a Reliable Info Source	0.081	1.000							
	(0.001)								
(3) National TV as a Reliable Info Source	0.095	0.404	1.000						
	(0.000)	(0.000)							
(4) International TV as a Reliable Info Source	0.054	0.323	0.620	1.000					
	(0.024)	(0.000)	(0.000)						
(5) Russian TV as a Reliable Info Source	0.120	0.358	0.569	0.554	1.000				
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)					
(6) Newspapers as a Reliable Info Source	0.076	0.288	0.621	0.515	0.613	1.000			
	(0.002)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)				
(7) Social Media as a Reliable Info Source	0.020	0.444	0.370	0.346	0.341	0.314	1.000		
	(0.387)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)			
(8) YouTube as a Reliable Info Source	0.036	0.449	0.342	0.355	0.408	0.341	0.663	1.000	
	(0.128)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
(9) Internet News Sites as a Reliable Info Source	-0.019	0.331	0.503	0.417	0.434	0.469	0.492	0.501	1.000
	(0.415)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	

Note: p-values are reported in parentheses.

The independent variable of interest was trust in Russian TV channels, based on respondents' self-reported assessments of how reliable they find Russian television as an information source. Like the other media variables, this measurement of reliability used a 5-point Likert scale, which reflects subjective trust rather than actual media consumption or exposure.

Additionally, in the regression analysis, we controlled for gender (binary: 1 = Female, 0 = Male), age (categorical dummies: 18-30 as the reference group), household income (self-reported on a 1-9 scale), educational level (binary: 1 = university degree, 0 = otherwise), ethnicity (categorical dummies), and rural residence (binary: 1 = rural, 0 = urban). The empirical analysis employs an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model with robust standard errors. Regional dummies are included to control for unobserved differences across different areas in Kazakhstan.

Regressions Results

Table 4 summarizes the regression results. The findings reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between trust in Russian TV channels and belief in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory ($p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that individuals who consider

Russian TV channels as a reliable source of information are more likely to believe in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theory. In contrast, trust in internet news sites exhibits a significant negative relationship with conspiracy beliefs ($p < 0.01$), indicating that respondents who find online news sites reliable are less inclined to believe in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy.

Other information sources, such as close circles, national television, international television, newspapers, social media, and YouTube, show varying degrees of association with the belief in the 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy. However, these associations are not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Regarding the demographics, female respondents were significantly more likely to believe in the conspiracy ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, respondents aged 31-40 and 41-50 are significantly more likely to believe in the conspiracy than the reference group aged 18-30. Income level was negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs ($p < 0.05$), while education level and rural residence did not exhibit significant relationships.

These results highlight the critical role of media consumption, particularly reliance on Russian TV channels, in shaping conspiracy beliefs in Kazakhstan.

Table 4. *Estimation Results*

	(1) Belief in 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy
Close Circle as a Reliable Info Source	0.0409
	(0.0253)
National TV as a Reliable Info Source	0.0108
	(0.0310)
International TV as a Reliable Info Source	-0.0276
	(0.0270)
Russian TV as a Reliable Info Source	0.0897**
	(0.0293)
Newspapers as a Reliable Info Source	0.0121
	(0.0279)
Social Media as a Reliable Info Source	-0.00199
	(0.0324)
YouTube as a Reliable Info Source	-0.00121
	(0.0329)
Internet News Sites as a Reliable Info Source	-0.0865**
	(0.0292)
Female	0.246***
	(0.0583)
Age category:	
18-30 (base category)	
31-40	0.260***
	(0.0719)
41-50	0.280***
	(0.0791)
51-60	0.0841
	(0.133)
61 and more	0.161

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	(0.171)
Income level	-0.0380*
	(0.0171)
University Education	-0.0125
	(0.0649)
Rural Residence	0.108
	(0.0682)
Constant	2.491***
	(0.240)
Ethnicity dummies	Yes
Regional dummies	Yes
R^2	0.1459
N	1334

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Our effort to understand whether and to what extent exposure to Russian media and TV affects viewers' propensity to believe in conspiracy theories was situated within a broader debate regarding how media usage relates to conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy thinking. The literature on this point has generally, but not unanimously, suggested that the use of social media tends to promote the acceptance of conspiracy theories. A major qualification of this claim, proposed by Theocharis et al (2023), is that the reason why the usage of social media does not automatically, directly, unequivocally lead to a greater propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is that the impact of social media on conspiracy thinking varies across the types of social media. Furthermore, the literature has generally, but not unanimously, agreed that the use of traditional media sources tends to reduce the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Since most research on these and related topics has been conducted in industrially advanced Western societies, it is unclear whether and to what extent the conclusions advanced in these studies also apply to developing, post-Soviet states such as Kazakhstan.

The reason why the evidence generated by analysing the data from (predominantly) Western countries may not apply to Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states is that Western countries are generally democratic, which means, among other things, that the press is free and independent and is instrumental in keeping governments accountable. In contrast, though possibly undergoing a process of political liberalization, Kazakhstan is only a formal (or illiberal or imperfect) democracy, in which the traditional media are not believed to be sufficiently free and independent to be a reliable source of information—hence, in the Kazakhstani context, the population propensity to rely on social media or internet news sites as reliable sources of information.

This set of claims implies that the use of national TV and newspapers may not have a significant impact on viewers' and readers' propensity to believe in news provided by such sources, and, subsequently, to accept conspiracy theories. By contrast, in countries where social media and internet news sites are regarded as reliable sources of information, they should be expected to shape viewers' and readers' mindsets, including their propensity to believe in conspiracy theories.

The results of our statistical analyses partially confirm the claims that we have just advanced. The coefficients for national TV and newspapers are statistically insignificant, as expected. The coefficient for internet news sites as a reliable source of information is also, as expected, statistically significant and negative, which means that critical readers who seek and

use not only reliable, but also somewhat independent and critical sources of information, are less inclined to believe in conspiracy theories. This pattern aligns with broader characteristics of Kazakhstan's political economy, where resource wealth has enabled the state to consolidate control over media and public discourse (Orazgaliyev & Akhmetzharov, 2020). Recent research has also highlighted evolving political cultures in Central Asian states that influence media trust and citizen behavior (Serikzhanova et al., 2024). The coefficient for YouTube as a reliable source of information is instead statistically insignificant- a result that could probably be explained by the fact that YouTube is used more as a source of entertainment than as a source of information in Kazakhstan.

The key finding of the present study, however, is that respondents who regard Russian TV as a reliable source of information are significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. These findings demonstrate the ability of Russia's traditional media not only to shape the mindset of viewers in Russia but also in other post-Soviet states where Russian TV programs are broadcast.

These findings carry several implications for future research, policy, and regional media strategy:

- Media literacy efforts in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states should target not only social media but also legacy media sources that may disseminate conspiratorial content.
- Foreign media influence—particularly from Russian state-controlled outlets—should be monitored as part of broader national information security and soft power assessments.
- Scholars studying authoritarian media systems should consider cross-border media consumption as a significant explanatory factor in belief formation.
- Public health communication strategies must consider the influence of trusted media sources in shaping perceptions of scientific misinformation, particularly in crises such as pandemics.
- Comparative studies could investigate whether similar patterns exist in other former Soviet states or among diaspora communities that consume Russian-language media.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the study was limited to Kazakhstan. Second, while perceived reliability offers meaningful insight into attitudes toward Russian media, the absence of behavioral data on media exposure (e.g., frequency of viewing) is a limitation that future studies could address through more detailed media-use diaries. Third, the survey may be subject to common method bias, a limitation inherent in all surveys. Fourth, this survey measured responses at a single moment in time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the impact of watching Russian TV on the propensity of Kazakhstani viewers to believe in conspiracy theories. Specifically, we assessed whether Kazakhstani viewers who trust Russian media are more or less likely to believe that 5G networks caused the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were three primary reasons why we believed such a study was worthwhile. First of all, we had a specific interest in whether and to what extent exposure to Russian media influences the opinions and/or the mindset of viewers outside of Russia. Previous studies, as mentioned above, have extensively documented that Russian media, in general, and Russian TV, more specifically, make extensive use of conspiracy theories for propaganda purposes.

ISSN: 2149-1291

These studies have also documented how exposure to Russian media affects the opinions and mindsets of Russian viewers. It was less clear whether the exposure to Russian media would have any such effect outside of Russia—hence our decision to explore the impact of Russian media on the opinions of Kazakhstani viewers.

Second, we had a specific interest in the determinants of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. The literature that we have attempted to summarize earlier had already identified several factors that affect the propensity to believe in general conspiracy theories and to believe the conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. By conducting this research, we believed that we could identify an additional channel or factor instrumental in the dissemination and diffusion of conspiracy theories about COVID-19. In this regard, the results of our statistical analyses reveal in a rather compelling way that exposure to and trust in Russian media has a clear, strong, positive and statistically significant impact on the viewers' propensity to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic was connected with or, to be more precise, was the direct result of the launch/adoption of 5G.

Third, building on the work of Kinyondo et al. (2024), we wanted to explore in greater detail whether and to what extent the propensity of believing in conspiracy theories is, among other things, a function of what semioticians call the process of signification, that is, how we make sense of reality. In this respect, we hypothesized that viewers who are exposed to Russian media (and trust it as a reliable source of information) develop a familiarity with (other, general) conspiracy theories, and are therefore more inclined to believe in other conspiracy theories, such as the ones surrounding COVID-19. The reason why someone who believes in a conspiracy theory is more inclined to believe in another conspiracy theory is, as Kinyondo et al. (2024) noted elsewhere, because the signification process that is employed to make sense of a phenomenon/event and that results in the willingness to believe in a conspiracy theory is the same process of signification that is employed to make sense of other phenomena and events.

The results of our analyses allow us to address each of the questions that we attempted to answer with the present study: exposure to Russian media affects viewers from countries other than Russia and, second, exposure to (and trust in the reliability of) Russian media affected the viewers' propensity to believe in the conspiracy about COVID-19. While the data at our disposal allow us to test whether exposure to and/or trust in Russian media is responsible for a higher propensity to believe in conspiracy theory, they do not allow us to test why exposure to Russian media increases the probability that a viewer will believe in a COVID-19-related conspiracy theory.

In this respect, the evidence that we have been able to present is consistent with our claim that Russian TV affects the process of signification, makes viewers familiar with conspiracy theories, employs conspiracy theories to explain (political phenomena and events) and, by doing so, induces in its viewership a propensity to believe in other conspiracy theories such as the ones on COVID-19. However, it is insufficient to prove this, which future studies may be able to do.

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Notes on Contributors

Riccardo Pelizzo is a Professor and the Vice Dean for Academic Affairs in the Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University. A comparative politics specialist, he has extensively explored party system change in sub-Saharan Africa. With Gianfranco Pasquino he recently published The Culture of Accountability (Routledge, 2023). He can be contacted at riccardo.pelizzo@nu.edu.kz.

Serik Orazgaliyev is an Associate Professor at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Public Policy (NU GSPP). His research focuses on issues of public policy, governance and sustainable development. He served as Principal Investigator in the project *Social Fragmentation, Polarisation and Digital Media in Kazakhstan*, within which the data for this paper was collected. He can be contacted at serik.orazgaliyev@nu.edu.kz.

Nygmetzhan Kuzenbayev is an Assistant Professor in the International School of Economics at Maqsut Narikbayev University. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy from Nazarbayev University. His research focuses on behavioral economics and political psychology. He can be contacted at n_kuzenbayev@kazguu.kz.

ORCID

Riccardo Pelizzo, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7581-7689
Serik Orazgaliyev, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8273-7633
Nygmetzhan Kuzenbayev, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6121-9215