

## Russian Popular Geopolitics During Crisis and War

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Turkish television series are a global sensation, and concurrently, targets of bans, boycotts, and protests. In Russia, Turkish series are countered with Russian television productions, promoted as disclosing truths about Turkey that are absent in Turkish series. A multimodal discourse analysis of *East/West* and *Eastern Wives* from a critical geopolitics perspective reveals Russian geo/political agenda in spaces of popular culture: It discursively positions Turkey as backward *East*, Russia as progressive *West*, and Ukraine as Russian territory. The Russian productions weaponize culture and deploy Islamophobic tropes to deter women from romantic pursuits in Muslim-majority countries. They are timely: Rising Russian conservatism exacerbates gender inequality and threatens Slavic Russian demography, as Russian women increasingly marry foreigners and migrate abroad. The productions also endeavor to mitigate anti-Russian public opinion in Ukraine and tame Turkish soft power in Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia toward Russian neo-Eurasianist objectives.

*Keywords: Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Russian media, Turkish TV series, popular geopolitics, women, Islamophobia, Eurasianism, Orientalism*

Turkish TV series are a global sensation reaching over 700 million television viewers in 146 countries ("Turkey's TV Series," 2019; Ustuk, 2019) and more on streaming platforms (Marshall, 2018; Yanardagolu & Turhalli, 2020). Concomitant with their global popularity, however, Turkish series are targets of bans, boycotts, and protests (Antonopoulos, 2020; "Bangladesh Actors," 2016; Flower, 2009; "Golden Dawn," 2013; Kraidy, 2019; Mohyidin, 2020; Najibullah, 2019; Sharma, 2018; Synovitz, 2018; Tursunbaeva, 2014). They have not (yet) been banned, boycotted, or protested in Russia. However, Turkish soft power in Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia—harnessed following the disintegration of the USSR and bolstered by Turkish TV series (Aleksanian, 2018; Koch, 2015; Shamarina, 2020; Vasileva, 2017; Zubkova, 2015)—is disconcerting to Russian elites; not least because Turkish series also captivated Russian viewers since *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014) spearheaded imports in 2012.

The Russian government and the media are attentive to the popularity of Turkish TV series. An explicit government riposte arrived in late 2015 at the behest of then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev for sanctions against Turkey, following the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish forces over the Turkey-Syria border area. Yevgeny Gerasimov, the Duma chairman of the Commission for Culture and Mass

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Communications, proposed banning Turkish television series in Russia, calling them “rubbish” (Gerasimov, 2015, para. 2; Petrov, 2015). Tatyana Batysheva, a member of the commission, inculpated Turkish series for the “outright popularization of Muslim men” and the publicization of the “wonderful life of the harem” (“MP Batysheva,” 2015, para. 2). Turkish series were not banned. Instead, Russian television productions promising to reveal truths about Turkey, purportedly absent in Turkish series, were distributed on Channel Domashny, targeting female viewers in the vast geography of Ukraine to Central Asia.

As Russia severed ties with and banned travel to Turkey in 2015, Russians watched stories of women’s plight in the Middle East. The docuseries *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a), advertised as the truth “behind the spectacular screen of expensive Turkish TV series” (“Eastern Wives,” 2015, para. 1), featured the heartbreaking stories of Russian (and Russophone) women married to—or divorced from—Middle Eastern men. Meanwhile, *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a), produced at the height of the Russo-Turkish jet crisis, was advertised as “based on real events” (Hvichiya, 2016, para. 1), and promised to disclose the truth about Turkey (“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016). Notably, *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) was filmed in Ukraine instead of Russia. That is, Ukraine was Russia in the series and Ukrainian actors depicted Russians in a most flattering light. This, a year after Russia wrested the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, as the conflict between Ukraine and Russia ensued, and pro-Russian discourse in Ukraine was pilloried. In Ukraine, the series was broadcast on Inter, a TV channel notorious for pro-Russian propaganda (Koshiw, 2016; “Ukrainians Besiege,” 2016). Meanwhile, Turkish actors undergirded the Russian script, which included declarations such as, “They destroyed Constantinople . . . They destroyed half of Europe!” (Tikhonova et al., 2016c, 21:13). *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) and *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) were promoted by Channel Domashny via didactic articles that warned Russian women against becoming involved with Muslims (“Eastern Love,” 2014; “Turkish Marriage,” 2018).

These developments inspired the leading questions of this study: Why do Russian productions counter Turkish TV series? How does Russian media define and perpetuate the geo-cultural signifiers *East* and *West*? More generally, what can transnational media illuminate about gender, culture, and geopolitics? To answer these questions, I apply theories from critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Sharp, 1993) and multimodally analyze (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) the docuseries *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a), the melodrama *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a), and promotional materials from the main distributor, Channel Domashny. In the following section, I begin with a brief contextualization of Turkish TV series in Russian media.

### **Turkish TV Series in Russia**

Postsocialist media in Russia is a neo-authoritarian media system that curtails media autonomy and limits pluralism (Becker, 2004). Silencing voices of dissent through media control has been Vladimir Putin’s priority since his presidential tenure began in 2000. Leading television channels are owned either by the government or by media groups with ties to the government (Imre, 2016). Various methods are used to retaliate against the unfavorable coverage of Putin’s policies, including applications of tax and criminal laws, death threats, and murders of journalists (Becker, 2004; Mickiewicz, 2008). However, several factors make effective control impossible for Putin, including the globalization of Russian television, market imperatives, and the aspiration to become a global market power, among others (Hutchings & Rulyova,

2009). For example, viewers' preferences for Western television content, such as crime thrillers, soap operas, and game shows, inspired the burgeoning postsocialist Russian television sector to replicate Western genres. However, when Russian television programs began to resemble those of the West, the Putin regime intensified its attempts to control TV stations and content (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). The gradual disenchantment of Russian viewers with American productions and their Russian counterparts, and the demand for alternate content, primed Russia for the popularity of Turkish TV series.

The first Turkish media to be sold to Russia was the mini-series *Lovebird* (Guntekin, Seden, & Seden, 1986) in 1986, followed by *Milky Way* (Aydin & Tibet, 1989) in 1989, both viewed by millions in the USSR. The third Turkish series, *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014), was the sensation that spearheaded the long-term distribution of Turkish series in Russia. *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014) aired in 2012 on Channel Domashny, one of the most popular television channels in Russia (Kislov, 2022). By 2013, headlines such as "Turkey Will Have Its Own Hollywood, Named Turkeywood" appeared in Russia, proclaiming the popularity of Turkish series in Russia and around the globe (Bektanova, 2013), and two Turkish series were among the most searched Valentine's Day entertainment ("Google and Yandex," 2013). By 2014, a quarter of the searched television series on Yandex were Turkish series ("In 'Yandex,'" 2014), 80% of which were for *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014; Romanchenko, 2014). The widespread popularity of Turkish series was also acknowledged in the Russian parliament, when two Duma deputies recommended banning them during the Russo-Turkish jet crisis in 2015 (Shilov, 2015). In 2016, the Russian production company Star Media, capitalizing on the roaring success of the Turkish series, falsely advertised *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) as a Russo-Turkish co-production ("East-West," n.d.; TV Channel Domashny, 2016).

Years after their initial broadcast, Turkish TV series and specifically *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014) remain rooted in the Russian mediascape and public discourse. Gossip articles about the actors and women in Ottoman harems ("The Tent," 2020) and Turkish destinations popularized following the broadcast of Turkish series (Shtetin, 2020) are some recent examples. *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014) is still among the highest-rated Turkish series on KinoPoisk<sup>1</sup> (Kinopoisk, n.d.), while Russian producers aspire to emulate its success ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016; "KIT Film Studio," n.d.). Meanwhile, Russian fans of Turkish series enroll in Turkish language classes, travel to Istanbul (Lotoreva, 2020), and create social media fan groups and websites about Turkish TV series and celebrities.<sup>2</sup> Turkish TV series in Russia are broadcast through cable and satellite television channels Domashny, Romantichnoe, Ruskiy Bestseller, and Timeless Dizi Channel (TDC; "SPI/Filmbox," 2020). Viewers also watch Turkish series, some dubbed by fans, on VKontakte, YouTube, and Netflix (Tsydenova, 2020). I now turn to the theoretical framework of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Yandex-owned Russian database of information related to cinematic and TV productions

<sup>2</sup> For example, turkishtvsoapopera.ru, teammy.ru, turkishtv.ru

### **Critical Geopolitics and Popular Culture**

Following Henry Kissinger's popularization of the term geopolitics in the 1970s, geopolitics was reconceptualized as a political discourse, with differentiation between *practical* (politicians, military commanders, etc.) and *formal* (strategic thinkers, public intellectuals, etc.) geopolitical reasoning (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) called for the deconstruction of elite discourses and traditional geopolitics that pose as neutral, albeit carrying national interest baggage. Agnew (2013) defines critical geopolitics as a critical sense in approaching world politics; a cognizance of the divisions of geographical space and foreign policy that rely on assumptions and schemas that are socially constructed and in no way reflective of a natural geopolitical order.

Political geographer Joanne Sharp countered Ó Tuathail and Agnew's (1992) focus on elite geopolitical texts and argued for the importance of popular culture (Saunders & Strukov, 2018). Sharp (1993) enriched critical geopolitics with an additional component of geopolitical reasoning, *the popular*, insisting that to construe geopolitical narratives, elites draw on hegemonic discourses that are in circulation through culture and reproduced through the media. Sharp (1993) emphasized that texts that are not direct products of statecraft are read with less suspicion, and therefore "the political encoding of such texts is more subtle and thus more easily reproduced" (p. 493). She argued against "the sharp distinction between the 'high' politics of statecraft and the 'mass' politics of the media" (Sharp, 1993, p. 502), stating that while media representations tend to be hegemonic, elites are also socialized through the media, and tend to reflect the widely circulating discourses of their readership. Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998) thus added *popular geopolitics* (e.g., mass media) to their previously theorized *formal* (e.g., academia) and *practical* (e.g., political institutions) geopolitics in what became a tripartite conception of geopolitics.

Meanwhile, popular culture's potency in geopolitics has been recognized by communication scholars for some time (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975; García Canclini, 1995; Jarvie, 1992; Lawson, 1953; Martín-Barbero, 1993; Schiller, 1971). In "Geopolitics and the Popular," a special issue of *Popular Communication*, Burkart and Christensen (2013) state that in line with Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998), they view "geopolitics as not only international relations and foreign policy making but also as contemporary political and economic transformations within which communication, culture, and media play an integral role in the global balance of power" (Burkart & Christensen, 2013, p. 4). I also espouse this view and, in this study, scrutinize the popular geopolitics of Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine during a time of crisis and war, when practical geopolitics collapsed. In the following section, I outline the methodology and describe and justify the data corpus.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) strata for multimodal discourse enable comprehensive data collection and analysis. The strata, or the various levels of multimodal communication, allow for the efficient categorization and interpretation of data. The strata include the non-hierarchical modes of discourse, design, production, and distribution as the domains of practice and the role of meaning-making. That is, they all have equal meaning-making potential. This allows for a comprehensive account of written text and the signification produced by the design, production, and distribution of the productions. I considered how all of

the separate, non-hierarchical components (e.g., narrative, design, distribution) encode meaning (Hall, 1973) to signify *East* and *West*. The primary materials were in Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian.

I selected the docudrama *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) and the television series *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) based on the temporal proximity of their production and distribution to the Crimean crisis of 2014, the Russo-Turkish jet crisis of 2015, and their promotion as a direct rejoinder to the Turkish series. I supplemented these with Channel Domashny promotional materials, as they illuminated the encoding structures of the producers and distributors in summary form. I also considered how *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) was marketed on the production company Star Media's website. As the *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) production company Ron Film's website was not live as of writing, I analyzed Ron Film founder Konstantin Raykh's public social media posts (Facebook, VKontakte, and Instagram) about *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a). I also searched for media coverage of the productions on yandex.ru and took this into account.

First, I viewed all 24 episodes of the first season of *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) and searched for the broadest meaning of *East* and *West*, since the director positioned Russia as *West* and Turkey as *East* to highlight cultural differences between the two countries (Hvichiya, 2016). The wealth of parallels and contrasts in the TV series led me to the second phase of my data collection, during which I took detailed notes of the first five episodes to discern pronounced patterns of signification. Specifically, I detailed representations of public and private spaces, people (physical appearance and relationships), and references to other countries, cultures, languages, and texts.

Following *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a), I analyzed the docudrama *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a). In this 16-episode docudrama that promised to unveil the truth behind the Turkish television series ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016), I observed many overlaps with *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a), including in the representation of public and private spaces, the depiction of relationships, the physical appearance of the characters, and predominant themes. Instead of taking detailed notes of the overlaps, in my selective reading, I transcribed supplementary novel data. From the interviewees, I detailed predominant themes in their autobiographical accounts. I also noted the additional elements in the docudrama (e.g., historical and cultural details, and featured settings). Finally, I coded and thematically analyzed the overlapping data in the two productions and the Channel Domashny promotional articles. I turn to the findings next.

## Findings

### ***The Russian Media Quest to Reveal "the Truth" About Turkey***

A predominant goal for the Russian productions was to persuade viewers that they are authentic representations of Turkey. Multiple tactics were deployed by the producers to this end, including hiring Turkish actors, filming in Turkey, and interviewing Russian women in Turkey. "The truth and only truth!" proclaimed the subtitle of an article advertising *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) on a Ukrainian television website ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016). The producers explained that they hired Turkish actors because they had decided that "everything should be real" ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016, para. 6). "We had to fight for the truth,"

asserted the producer, recalling the financial and political difficulties of hiring highly remunerated Turkish actors during a time of crisis and war<sup>3</sup> ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016, para. 8). *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) was advertised as a true story and framed as the modern sequel of two Turkish historical TV series: *Magnificent Century*<sup>4</sup> (Okay et al., 2011–2014) and *Kurt Seyit and Alexandra* (Gencoglu, Yorenc, & Saral, 2014; TV Channel Domashny, 2016).

Similarly, Channel Domashny's website description of *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) promised to reveal the truth behind Turkish television series: "Generous sultans, spice bazaars, luxury vacations. A solid eastern tale. But what is there—behind the spectacular screen of an expensive Turkish TV series?!"<sup>5</sup> ("Eastern Wives," 2015, para. 1). *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) creator and scriptwriter, Konstantin Raykh, stated that he was inspired to produce it after hearing yet another "horror story about how women are being hurt in the East" (Nemolyakina, Grishin, & Bykov, 2016, para. 3). The alarming accounts in *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) were foreshadowed in the thirty-second trailer (Telekanal Domashny, 2015), starting with the sound of the azan, the Islamic call to prayer, followed by the dramatic voiceover of the male narrator and clips of four women:

**Narrator:** They agree to leave their country.

**Woman 1:** Don't know the language, don't have a chance to ask for help.

**Narrator:** Change their religion.

**Woman 2:** [He said] You'll accept Islam, sit at home, and wear a burka. No? I'll slaughter you.

**Narrator:** To be a second wife.

**Woman 3:** Don't think that you're one and only.

**Narrator:** What can Russian women expect from an Eastern marriage?

**Woman 4:** They took my grandchildren. We need to get them back somehow.

**Narrator:** Four real stories. (Telekanal Domashny, 2015)

In these purported truths about Turkey, the most accentuated elements were hierarchized cultural differences, as I detail in the following section.

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<sup>3</sup> Most Turkish casting agencies did not believe that the series would be filmed in Ukraine, considering the temporal proximity of the production to the Crimean crisis and the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia ("Evgeniya Loza," 2016).

<sup>4</sup> *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) lead Adnan Koc (Kemal) is well-recognized from his role in *Magnificent Century* (Okay et al., 2011–2014). His voice in *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) is performed by Radik Muhametzyanov, the voice of Sultan Suleiman in the Russian-dubbed *Magnificent Century* (Hvichiya, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Episodes 1 and 9 are about Turkey. The rest cover other countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa, positioning Turkey as a metonym for Muslim-majority countries. An exception is episode 8, which is about Israel.

### ***Russia is West, and Turkey is East***

The Russian productions belabored Russo-Turkish cultural differences, clearly situating Russian culture as superior and Turkish culture as inferior. Director Denis Eleonskiy named the series *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) because "it constantly raises the question of the difference in mentalities" (Hvichiya, 2016, para. 17).<sup>6</sup> This "difference in mentalities" formed the core of the melodrama, with parallels and contrasts throughout the series. For example, music and scenery signaled transitions between the two countries: *ney*<sup>7</sup> music and mosques signified Turkey, while classical music and urban vistas signified Russia. Many of the contrasts were explicit, including the music, architecture, interior and exterior spaces, costumes, etc., while implicit contrasts, such as interpersonal relationships, were discernible from the culminating narrative. A summary of the contrasts encoded in *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) and *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) is in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. East and West Contrasts.**

Contrast Object	East	West
Music	<i>ney</i> ; arabesque	classical; pop
Architecture	mosques	high-rises
Interior design	extravagant; destitute	postmodern; minimalist; nostalgic
Health services orientation	money	ethics
Morality	low	high
Culture	low	high
Ethnicity	Turkic	Slavic
Clothing	black; red; colorful	beige; blue; gray
External environment	disarray	orderliness
Mentality	backward	progressive
Eurocentric modernity	artificial	natural
General atmosphere	tense	relaxed
Directionality	past	future
Epistemology	religion	rationalism
Religion		
Name	Islam	Eastern/Slavic Orthodox

<sup>6</sup> *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) first titled *Eastern Passions*, was distributed as *Eastern Sweets* in Ukrainian and English ("Eastern Sweets," 2016). It was not distributed in Turkey.

<sup>7</sup> An end-blown flute.

Deity	Allah	Bog; Gospod
Symbol	Crescent	Cross
Leader	Imam	Priest
People		
Relationships	inauthentic	authentic
Interpersonal relationship compass	opportunism	integrity
Women toward men <sup>8</sup>	dependent	independent
Love	possessive	unconditional
Mothers' primary abode	inside the home (e.g., watching TV)	outside the home (e.g., managing an art museum)

The promotional articles on the Channel Domashny's website also overemphasized differences. The articles' transparent *Arabian Nights* framing dwelled on fairy tales, passion, and tradition. Resonant with the productions, they also warned readers that if they marry a Muslim man, they will have to convert to Islam and live with strict rules, traditions, and meddling families. The following is a sample of the article titles:

Eastern Fairy Tale: The Most Beautiful Stories of Russo-Turkish Love ("Eastern Fairy Tale," 2018)

East-West: 15 Passionate Quotes ("East-West," 2018)

Turkish Marriage: Love and Traditions ("Turkish Marriage," 2018)

East-West: Two Poles of Love ("East-West," 2016)

Eastern Love: Truth and Delusion ("Eastern Love," 2014)

Hierarchized cultural differences were salient in the entire data corpus. Although space limitations preclude the detailing of all domains and ways that these were represented, to illustrate, in the section that follows, I present how mothers' roles were deployed.

### ***Mothers and Modernity***

While spotlighting cultural differences between *East* and *West*, the television series furnish a Russian performance of a superior West. The roles of the mothers in *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) and the testimonials in *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) play a key part in portraying a monolithic (Eurocentric) Russian modernity and Turkish backwardness. For example, the Turkish mothers' sole preoccupation is their families; they have no business outside the home. They are helpless and depend on

<sup>8</sup> No other genders are represented in the Russian productions, both of which are also heteronormative.



the men in their lives for their livelihoods. They encourage their daughters to be obsequious, and their lives are squandered watching television<sup>9</sup> and infantilizing their children.

In contrast, Russian mothers are strong and independent. In *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a), Olga, the Russian lead's mother, works at an art museum. She watches television briefly in only one scene while bedridden, but promptly turns it off, opting instead to look at a painting. In a scriptwriting slip that overlooked that Russia is *West* in this series, Olga laments that "they don't have a culture of enjoying art, especially there, in the West" (Tikhonova et al., 2016b, 26:10), after a tourist attempts to touch a painting in the museum. Later, she becomes active in a Russian women's association in Turkey, founded to protect Russian women, because although Turkey is exotic, it is dangerous, the other salient themes to which I turn next.

### ***Exotic, Dangerous Turkey***

In line with classic orientalism, exoticism and danger also predominate as themes in representations of Turkey and Muslims more broadly. Series creator Raykh described *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) as a "very exotic project," inviting viewers to an "Eastern fairy tale" (Raykh, 2015). All episodes begin with beautiful views and fairytale or tourism commercial-style narration, promptly followed by the voices of miserable Russian women. The male narrator begins the first episode with "Fluttering again<sup>10</sup> on the Turkish riviera, Russian . . . wives . . . following their Eastern husbands despite their national traditions" (Raykh et al., 2015b, 00:26) and continues by describing Turkish men using food analogies, concluding with "some tasted and loved, some got burned" (Raykh et al., 2015b, 01:37). In all episodes, there is a didactic segment of traditions, history, and challenges to Russian women's integration in the respective countries.

Meanwhile, the descriptions of *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) in Channel Domashny ("Eastern Wives," 2015) are framed like *Arabian Nights* stories and reflective of the irony in every episode. There is "great love" (Episode 1), and women are "blinded by passion" of "beautiful words of sultry handsome men" (Episode 2), and the "main character always finds her love" (Episode 3), dreaming of "becoming an Eastern wife" (Episode 4) of an "Eastern tale" (Episode 9), "showered with gold jewelry" (Episode 7) and "swimming in the compliments of Arab men" (Episode 10) in a "faraway" (Episode 11) "exotic country" (Episode 5). However, they "convert to Islam" (Episode 1) and find themselves with a "tyrant, a jealous man who often beats the girl" (Episode 7), in a "golden cage . . . with surveillance and jealousy" (Episode 4) in a "harsh reality of an Eastern wife: without the right to vote, her own opinion and freedom of movement" (Episode 2), "pushed to suicide" and thus "the flip side of a beautiful Eastern picture" (Episode 2) and "completely different from a fairy tale" (Episode 3). But why does the Russian media—closely aligned with the government—perpetuate these stereotypes? In the next section, I analyze the findings in light of Russian women's status in contemporary Russia.

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<sup>9</sup> The disparagement of Turkish series (e.g., Tikhonova et al., 2016d, 32:17) appears intentional—channel Domashny also distributes Turkish TV series.

<sup>10</sup> "Again" here means that they are back after the lifting of the Russia-imposed travel ban to Turkey in 2015.

## Analysis

### ***Russian Women's Reality: Intimate Partner Violence and Rising Conservatism***

The Russian productions weaponize culture to maintain the contemporary Islamophobic status quo in Russia (Werleman, 2018) and tame the influence of Turkish series, known to popularize Muslim men ("MP Batysheva," 2015). For millions of Russian tourists and Turkish series fans from Ukraine to Central Asia ("The Number," 2020; Toksabay, 2018), Turkey is no longer the mysterious Other. However, Russian media grapples with Turkish soft power bolstered by Turkish series, by positing to disclose truths about Turkey that tourists and viewers ostensibly cannot grasp. The Russian productions are marketed as more authentic representations of Turkey than Turkish series, albeit constructing Turkey and the Middle East in orientalist, backward, and Islamophobic terms. Concurrently, Russia is represented as a pristine contrast: a Slavic Orthodox country where independent women and dignified men luxuriate in French high culture and Eurocentric modernity. Also distributed in Central Asia, there the Russian productions function as a civilizing mission, resonating with other Russian texts in which Slavic Russian characters "liberate" women from Central Asia (Koplatadze, 2019).

*Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) and *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) cast Turkey as backward, dangerous, and beholden to oppressive Islamic traditions at a time of geopolitical crisis and the formidable popularity of Turkish series in Russia. Intimate partner violence is the most dominant theme in the productions, warning Russian women against traveling to and becoming romantically involved with individuals from the Middle East and North Africa. The intimate partner violence depicted in the productions is in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2012) definition as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm" (p. 1). Tamara Pletnyova, the chairwoman of Duma's Committee for Family, Women, and Children Affairs, echoed this concern, stating that when Russian women marry foreigners, relationships end badly: Women are often stranded abroad, and even if they escape back to Russia, they are unable to reunite with their children; and children of mixed races suffer from discrimination in Russia (Balmforth, 2018). This was the rationale behind her call to Russian women to abstain from sexual relations with non-white men during the World Cup in 2018.

However, unlike these productions, which perform an idealized Russia where women thrive, the Russian reality is bleak. Forty percent of violent crimes in Russia are committed within the family (Bruntzeva, 2012; Masyuk, 2015), and about 40 women are murdered daily by an intimate partner (Broomfield, 2017). Pussy Riot founder Nadezhda Tolokonnikova recollected that most of the women with whom she was imprisoned were convicted for defending themselves from domestic violence (Tolokonnikova, 2020). Women's situation in Russia exacerbated since 2017 when the parliament decriminalized domestic violence. Since decriminalization, battery has become legal (Stallard, 2018) and violence is on the increase ("Moscow Domestic Violence," 2018). *The Moscow Times* launched "Mothers and Daughters," a special project to recognize the plight of women in Russia in reaction to the decriminalization of domestic abuse ("The Moscow Times," 2018). The political empowerment of women in Russia also leaves much to be desired. Russia ranks 122—below several countries featured in the Russian productions, including Turkey (109), the UAE (75), Algeria (99), Egypt (103), and Jordan (113; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). The United Nations Gender Inequality Index also does not reflect the posited superiority of Russia in the productions, as several

countries are ahead of its rank of 52, including Turkey (48), the UAE (26), Qatar (42), Saudi Arabia (35), and Bahrain (35; United Nations, 2021).

Rising conservatism in Russia indicates that gender inequality will remain and intensify. Russians were reunited with religious freedom after the fall of socialism and the aggressive atheist ideology of the USSR. Russian authorities leveraged the revived conservative values (e.g., national pride and respect for authority) for manipulative political gain (Trudolyubov, 2014). Russian conservatism began with Putin's first presidential win in 2000, supported by the Orthodox Church, as Putin and the Orthodox Church harnessed political power. This partnership provided Putin with ideological, imperialist legitimacy (Rogan, 2018) by championing conservative values, opposing LGBTQIA+ rights, and fighting feminism. The decriminalization of domestic violence arose from this vein of Russian conservatism that is averse to the state's meddling in family affairs. Socialism had leveraged the power of men and emancipated women to serve the state (Ashwin, 2000; Kamp, 2011)—and this is what Russian conservatism seeks to undo. No wonder then that one in three Russian women seeks to marry a foreigner ("Eastern Love," 2014), and the charming Turks in Turkish series and vacation resorts are perceived as threatening to an already troubled Russian demography (Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018), as Russian women continue to migrate to Turkey (Bloch, 2017) and elsewhere. Furthermore, Russian Eurasianism galvanized the Russian productions for geopolitical clout, which is the topic of the following section.

### ***Russian Popular Geopolitics: Taming Ukraine and Turkey***

On September 1, 2017, Vladimir Putin's open class entitled "Russia, Looking to the Future" began by underscoring powerful global competition, asserting that the "*passionarity*"<sup>11</sup> about which Gumilev spoke" (Kremlin, 2017, para. 15) will propel the Russian civilization forward. While encouraging Russians to excel in artificial intelligence, he declared that "Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world." ("Whoever Leads," 2017, para. 2). This vignette exhibits Russian geopolitical ideology since the end of the Cold War: a commitment to Lev Gumilev's neo-Eurasianism, in which global leader Russia leads a united Eurasian empire in opposition to the transatlantic West.

In 2004, Putin claimed that Gumilev's ideas were "beginning to move the masses" ("Prominent Russians," n.d.). Gumilev's Eurasianism inspired Putin's establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, in which Russia joined its former subjects in a union that most likely aims to bring the region under Kremlin power (Clover, 2016). Thus, the conceptual borders of Eurasian ideology are the linchpin of post-USSR Russian geopolitics, as they emphasize maps of meaning, overlook maps of states, and are consequential for material borders. According to prominent Russian geographer Vladimir Kagansky, "The Russian Federation has not yet become a country . . . so far it is only a field for assembling fragments of the USSR" (Kagansky, 2004, para. 12). The Russian productions also reassemble the USSR. *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) interviewees are from Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, among others, although they are portrayed as Russian women in promotional materials. On the other hand, the *East/West*

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<sup>11</sup> Coined by Lev Gumilev, *passionarity* is defined as a unique essence of the Russian civilization that led Russia to greatness (Laruelle, 2012).

(Tikhonova et al., 2016a) production team included Ukrainians, Turks, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Kurds: "a large conciliatory ark," according to Director Denis Eleonskiy (Hvichiya, 2016, para. 19).

Far from conciliation, Ukrainian animosity toward Russia has been ongoing; it magnified since Russia deployed neo-Eurasianist ideology to "reassemble" Crimea in 2014, as it strives to "reassemble" Ukraine in 2022. Guiding neo-Eurasianist principles are that Ukraine is an "unnatural state" that threatens the geopolitical security of Russia and the pursued Eurasian empire, and that Ukrainian state sovereignty should be dismantled through non-military and/or hybrid warfare to "reassemble" most Ukrainian territories under Russian control (Shekhovtsov, 2017a, p. 185).

Mitigating anti-Russian perceptions through Ukrainian media was crucial in the Russian attempts to dismantle Ukrainian sovereignty. When practical geopolitical relations collapsed between Russia and Ukraine, popular geopolitics took center stage. At a time when any hint of a pro-Russian discourse in Ukraine was vilified, Russian TV channels were barred<sup>12</sup> and Russian-produced media banned ("Ukraine Imposes," 2016), Star Media bypassed all pro-Russia filters by hiring Ukrainian actors and filming in Ukraine while they performed as Russians in Russia. That is, *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) propagated Russian neo-Eurasianism by hailing the Russian civilization through Ukrainians on Ukrainian soil. As mere women's entertainment that appealed to Ukrainian Slavic Orthodox identity, the melodrama was not perceived as destabilizing or threatening Ukrainian sovereignty. Russian productions like these conspired in setting the stage for "reassembling" Ukraine, manifest in 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, and Putin's announcement of the annexation of four Ukrainian regions in early October 2022.

Concurrently, when Russo-Turkish practical geopolitics were at a standstill, and tourism to Turkey was banned following the jet crisis in 2015, popular geopolitics rose to the occasion. Russian producers sought to tame Turkish soft power by revealing "the truth" about Turkey. However, even before the wide distribution of Turkish TV series, Turkey was a popular destination for Russian sea-bound tourists, pilgrimage-bound Orthodox Christians, and joint venture-seeking Russian investors; these are reputed in Russia and could not be entirely discounted. Thus, to be construed as realistic, *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) and *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) also showcased these appealing aspects of Turkey while projecting orientalist stereotypes on most other elements. They sought to tame Turkish soft power by warning viewers about the discomforts and dangers of Turkey, representing Turkey as a corrupt, chaotic country with an underdeveloped infrastructure, and emphasizing elements that are underplayed or absent in Turkish TV series (e.g., traffic, mosques, pickpockets). They also asserted Russian neo-Eurasianism by

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<sup>12</sup> *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) was broadcast in Ukraine on Inter, a popular national television channel ("Eastern Sweets," 2016; Television Industry Committee, n.d.), owned by oligarchs with allegedly strong connections to Russian business (Grigas, 2016). Inter was besieged by activists in September 2016 for spreading pro-Russian propaganda (Koshiw, 2016; "Offices of Ukrainian," 2016; Petrov, 2016; "Ukrainians Besiege," 2016). If Inter were a Russian television channel, it would have been banned (Zinets & Prentice, 2014). However, Ukrainian legislation approaches domestic channels differently ("Ukraine May Involve," 2015). Former Inter's CEO (2001–2006) Ryashin Vitalievich established Star Media in Moscow, "one of the largest producers and rights holders of TV products on the territory of the Russian Federation and the CIS—first in Ukraine and TOP-3 in Russia" ("Vlad Ryashin," n.d., para. 1).

representing Turkey as backward, dangerous, and incapable of leading Eurasia in response to Turkish Eurasianism, which has been seducing Central Asian countries since the fall of the USSR (Tufekci, 2017). This backward Turkey with dysfunctional relationships was represented by Turks on Turkish soil to provide legitimacy to the Russian productions and persuade viewers that they are authentic representations of Turkey and Muslim-majority countries, in general. *East/West* (Tikhonova et al., 2016a) and *Eastern Wives* (Raykh et al., 2015a) aspire to warn Russian viewers that while they can enjoy vacations, business partnerships, and Orthodox Christian pilgrimages in Turkey—the East—they should remain in the normative and imagined West—Russia—because the East is backward, Islamic, and oppressive to women, and the dangers are not worth the pursuits.

### Conclusion

As Putin severed relations and banned travel to Turkey in 2015, the Russian productions were tasked with taming Turkish soft power and anti-Russian public opinion in Ukraine. They discursively reproduced Turkey with essentialist and orientalist undertones while focusing on Russian high culture, integrity, and economic superiority. They also continued to muddle Russo-Ukrainian socio-cultural conceptual borders when Ukraine was hellbent on asserting its material borders.

Discursively reproducing *East* and *West* cultivates orientalist stereotypes and perpetuates an ahistorical Other. While transnational media, trade, tourism, and international marriages are opportunities for cultural exchange and intercultural communication, the Russian productions and promotional materials are encoded to sustain Islamophobic stereotypes. Why? For one, doing so moves the focus away from Russia's domestic problems related to women's inequality. The frightening, Islamophobic productions nearly warrant gratitude from Russian women for their implied superb life in Russia. The consequences of Russia's rising conservatism are ameliorated because the message is that, unlike the volatile Middle East, Russia is safe: there is no war in Russia, and women will not lose their children to hot-tempered Middle Eastern husbands in case of divorce. However, as neoliberalism is incompatible with closed borders and digital isolation, and because millions of Russians have traveled to Turkey and the countries have extensive economic partnerships, there is an attempt to tame, not entirely deny, popular Turkish realities, such as vacation resorts and Bosphorus views.

Popular geopolitics decenters statecraft and material borders and pivots on conceptual boundaries and practices. This study illuminates the salience of conceptual boundary drawing with the mutually constitutive concepts of *East* and *West*. Although geographically Russia extends much further east, the productions position Turkey as *East*—Muslim, backward, and corrupt. On the other hand, the producers position Russia as *West*, underscoring the concept as an assertion of superiority and modernity. That is, Eurocentric modernity, revealing Russia's imperial difference, allowing "Western philosophy, knowledge, and culture to colonize itself [Russia] . . . a colony in the presence of the West" (Tlostanova, 2015, p. 272). This discourse is indiscernible in practical and formal geopolitical discourse where for over 200 years, Russian national identity was defined in opposition to the West (Robinson, 2019), its other *Other*, namely, Western Europe and the United States. As Russian political rhetoric requires the *West* as its *Other*, popular geopolitics incorporates *East* to position Russia as *West* for audiences in Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia. An overemphasized White Russian modernity is paralleled with Western European modernity and defined in

opposition to Turkish culture, to reposition and reproduce the *East* and *West* binaries and neutralize Turkish soft power vitalized through Turkish TV series. Russia is thus showcased as the legitimate leader of Eurasia, crucial especially in Turkish Eurasianism-chaired Central Asian countries, where viewers consume Turkish series and Russian media.

Russia's positioning as *West* in the productions aligns with the view of conservative White Russians who have taken it upon themselves to guard European heritage and Whiteness from globalization, liberalism, and postmodernism (Robinson, 2019), affirmed by their alliances with White supremacists in the West (Shekhovtsov, 2017b). This resonates with what Kalmar (2022) has noted about Central Europe:

Critical of the West *as is*, that is, of the liberal and *multiracial* West, illiberal white Central Europeans see themselves as true to the West's real "heritage," that is, to its racially white character. They are the real, that is, the purely white, Europeans. (Kalmar, 2022, p. 147; emphasis in original)

The Russian productions exhibit an aspiration to trumpet an imagined White Russia and pose as sentries of European heritage, high culture, and most earnestly, Russian women's bodies. Paradoxically, although Russian women are noticeably absent from formal political domains (WEF, 2020), they are at the forefront of this Russian raid on Turkish TV series. Turkish series in Russia, and transnational media, in general, give prominence to the private as the global, and can highlight women's political agency in their everyday lives (Enloe, 1989/2014), even in countries where they are not sufficiently represented in politics. Transnational media readily consumed by women can consequently afford indirect geo/political participation, by shifting women's perceptions, preferences, and lives, thereby compelling state intervention.

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