

Zombie Russia

By [Richard Lourie](#)

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The  Moscow Times

Every so often one country or another will publish a color supplement in The New York Times. Usually the idea is to change the public's mind that, say, Mexico, is not all bullets and beheadings. My guess is that practically no one actually reads those supplements anymore than anyone reads the full-page open letters that detail the steps to world peace or prove once and for all who is really at fault in the Arab-Israeli conflict. People do not read these ads and supplements so much as note them, considering them serious because of their expense. They are more signal than substance.

The May 11 edition of The New York Times included "Russia Beyond the Headlines," identified as a "special advertising supplement ... sponsored and written by Rossiiskaya Gazeta." Since Rossiiskaya Gazeta is the official paper of record of the Russian government, this supplement must be read as the image that the Kremlin wants to project at a time when attracting foreign investment and expertise is high on Russia's agenda.

The main stories on the supplement's front page concern terrorism and an effort to project anti-Islamist solidarity in the wake of Osama bin Laden's death. In fact, due to sloppy writing,

translating or editing, both the killing of al-Qaida's emissary to the North Caucasus and of bin Laden seem to have been the work of Russian forces: "In 2011, Russian authorities have stepped up their anti-terror efforts, but aside from the high-profile killings of bin Laden and Abdullah Khurd, there is no sense that the insurgency is diminished."

The supplement also features progressive West-pleasing stories about Moscow's first gay parade (it hasn't happened yet) and jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is presented as a "muse" inspiring writers and filmmakers. Still, a hard-hitting comment from prominent writer Boris Akunin is quoted: "Until Khodorkovsky is out of jail, all the beautiful words about civil society, independent courts and the struggle against corruption will be taken as empty." And yet it is precisely these words that are most damning to "Russia Beyond the Headlines." It is using them to parade a more liberal, "balanced" view of Russia, not in an attempt to enlighten but in an attempt to entice and deceive. A government unjustly imprisoning someone who then prints quotes like Akunin's has reached new levels of hypocrisy.

PR (now a Russian word), spin, hype, damage control and lies exist in every society at every level. The Soviet Union had a huge government apparatus for propaganda, and, to some degree, "Russia Beyond the Headlines" reminds me of the free newspapers available in the infinitely dreary lobbies of Soviet hotels.

But there is a cardinal difference between Soviet Russia and the Russia of today. Twenty years after the Bolshevik Revolution, there was no question about the nature and identity of Soviet Russia. Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Russia has failed to forge a new identity for itself. It has no vision, no symbols and no values but to make hay while the sun shines. No single defining adjective has yet to adhere to its name — like Muscovite, Tsarist or Soviet Russia. No name has even been found for the 20-year period itself, like Thaw or Perestroika, which had caught on quickly in the past. No one believes in the country's future past the end of oil. There is a void at the core of today's Russia. Perhaps it should be called Zombie Russia.

Richard Lourie is author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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