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The Kremlin's New Chief Propagandist

By Georgy Bovt

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The appointment of militant anti-Westerner Dmitry Kiselyov as the director of Russia's new propagandistic state-owned news agency, which will be called Rossia Segodnya, was the most predictable response the Kremlin could make to recent events in Ukraine.

The appointment of Dmitry Kiselyov, known for his inflammable anti-Western views, to head a new state-owned news agency suggests that the Kremlin's

propaganda
campaign against
the West will
become even
more aggressive.

Russia's ruling elite primarily views the huge demonstrations by Ukrainian supporters of integration with Europe as a Western conspiracy against Russia in the battle for geopolitical influence among the former Soviet republics. Through the prism of Kiselyov's reports on state-controlled Rossia 1, where he has worked as an anchor of a talk show and a weekly news program "Vesti Nedeli," Kiev has become the "final battlefield." If Russia does not respond quickly and decisively, Kiselyov warns, the West will gain control over the entire Ukrainian market, their wealth will be plundered, and NATO tanks will stand at Moscow's doorstep. The pro-European demonstrations in Kiev are a "war against Russia," Kiselyov claims. Sweden is a major agent provocateur in the turmoil in Kiev, as it is taking revenge against Moscow for its 1709 victory in the Battle of Poltava. We are also told that "depraved Europe" wants to spread its infection of LGBT rights and other "liberal values" as widely as possible.

No doubt many observers consider this a clumsy, even obscurantist approach in the worst traditions of Soviet anti-Western propaganda. But this is precisely the approach that is most popular among a majority of Russians today. Thus, the mantle of "Russia's image-maker" has been handed to Kiselyov, a man who infamously said on the Rossia 1 talk show he hosted, "Historical Process," that "the hearts of gays should be buried in the ground or burned as unfit to live" and called for prohibiting homosexuals from volunteering as organ donors.

According to the thinking of Russia's leaders, now that an irreversible course of confrontation with the West has been set, why try to maintain appearances? Why worry about any false respectability if those in the West insist on viewing Russia as a geopolitical enemy that must be defeated? It is a matter of life and death for Russia. Those in the West still believe former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's maxim: "Without Ukraine, Russia will never again become an empire."

On the contrary, RIA Novosti, the news agency that President Vladimir Putin liquidated with his decree that was released Monday, had been trying in recent years to "put a human face" on government propaganda. Indeed, in her more than 10 years heading RIA Novosti, Svetlana Mironyuk had turned RIA Novosti into an effective information agency equipped with the very latest technology. Many young and progressive-minded people were attracted to the agency's unique work atmosphere, its "drive" and the opportunity to build a career using the most advanced methods for gathering and reporting information. It is not surprising that RIA Novosti was chosen as the main agency for covering the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

At the same time, many free-thinking Russian journalists, who were either fired from other publications or could not find work because of their liberal views, found refuge with RIA Novosti. Their site often published bold commentaries and cartoons that criticized the Kremlin's policies — an independence rarely found in the Russian media. The Kremlin was particularly irritated by RIA Novosti's "nonconventional" (read: fair) coverage of the

opposition protests and their reports that showed the small numbers who turned up for the parallel pro-Kremlin marches.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 provoked a strong political reaction in Russia resulting in a complete restructuring of domestic politics. The pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group was formed, former Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov introduced his theory of "sovereign democracy," and the authorities began tightening the screws on the opposition. However, current developments in Ukraine seem to have provoked an even stronger reaction among Russia's leaders and could lead to actions that would make the "innocent pranks" in which Nashi youth taunted Western embassies look like child's play.

In addition to heading RIA Novosti, Kiselyov will help direct the Voice of Russia radio station, part of the holding company that owns the state-controlled RT television station, formally known as Russia Today. RT broadcasts to a number of countries and has already captured a large audience with its anti-Western and anti-U.S. rhetoric and propaganda. It is clear that the Kremlin considers the aggressive, often offensive approach taken by RT as more effective than the "liberal babbling" of RIA Novosti.

The authorities also point to financial considerations behind the decision to create a new state-owned information behemoth under Kiselyov's management. The government has cut funding for state-controlled media by 2 billion rubles ($61 million), but reductions in spending were necessary even without that. However, this move involves more than just saving money. It seems that the whole approach to state propaganda is changing to a more aggressive, offensive style. In one of his first statements as the new head of RIA Novosti, Kiselyov said his job was to "Restore a fair attitude to Russia as an important country in the world with good intentions."

Kiselyov's phrase is an exact throwback to Soviet news agencies, which produced huge quantities of high-quality glossy magazines and books, printed in Finland. They were distributed around the world in foreign languages in an attempt to promote the glorious Soviet way of life. The theory was that millions of foreigners around the world would sympathize with the Soviet Union as the country fighting "for the cause of world peace" and turn against their "imperialist and corrupt governments."

Apparently, the Kremlin's appointing of Kiselyov to head an even more aggressive, anti-Western propaganda campaign is a result of the fact that Russia, despite all the resources it has already spent on RT television and other media outlets, hasn't completely won that propaganda battle to "restore the image of Russia as an important country with good global intentions." With Kiselyov's appointment, that propaganda battle has gained new ammunition.

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