The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Boost for the Kremlin's Soft Power

By Alexei Pankin

December 23, 2013




Alexei Pankin

In 2009, I interviewed former RIA Novosti editor-in-chief Svetlana Mironyuk. Referring to the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 and the fact that most Western media had sided with former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, I asked her, "Why is it that Russia, a country with a powerful information agency like RIA Novosti, always seems to lose in the information wars?"

"We need to look concretely at each specific situation," she answered. "The overall problem is that Russia has yet to decide which image it wants to project to the outside world. Does Russia

want the world to love it, or to see it as it really is? Does Russia expect to be treated as a regional power or as a superpower? Each strategy requires a separate type of information campaign."

If the state is unable to formulate a coherent strategy for media under its own control, the best thing that reporters and editors can do is to practice journalism free of values, using energy normally spent on political battles toward other constructive ends. RIA Novosti did exactly that, creating a professional, first-class multimedia company. In an era when traditional media must struggle to employ the very Internet technology that threatens its existence, RIA Novosti's managerial experience was in high demand at professional media forums throughout the world.

Meanwhile, the West's anti-Russia — or, more precisely, anti-Putin — information war has only intensified, becoming just plain grotesque in the last two years. I admit that the Pussy Riot members received an overly harsh sentence for their distasteful dance in church, but it was hardly an event of global significance. In fact, it is bordering on the profane to compare the young exhibitionists with dissident Andrei Sakharov.

Nor was it appropriate for many Western states to respond to the Russian law on gays by comparing President Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler and the Olympic Games in Sochi to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. The West's portrayal that Russian gays' rights are blatantly abused is highly exaggerated and certainly was not a valid reason for U.S. President Barack Obama to skip the Sochi Olympics.

Ultimately, I think it was pressure from Western ultra-liberals that prompted Putin to finally settle on the international image he wanted for Russia. He began to more clearly position Russia as a country whose legitimacy derives from its strict adherence to the letter of international law and as a conservative state professing traditional values. Interestingly, Putin first enunciated these ideas during a RIA Novosti project devoted to the question of Russia's identity at the Valdai Forum in September. He later enlarged on the same ideas in his presidential message in December.

This new Russian identity will find a receptive audience in the world — particularly among those who are tired of the West's "humanitarian" military interventions, among those who dislike the way an aggressive minority imposes its agenda on the majority, and among European taxpayers who do not want to pay billions of dollars to expand European Union bureaucracy to Ukraine and other members of the Eastern Partnership under the banner of "spreading European values."

In this context, the merger of RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia into the new Rossia Segodnya (Russia Today) media corporation seems like a logical concentration of resources to promote Russia's newly defined conservative values in the global arena.

Alexei Pankin is the editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionals.

Original url:

https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/12/23/a-boost-for-the-kremlins-soft-power-a30737