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The Media War Behind the Ukraine Crisis

By Oleg Sukhov

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A sign in Sevastopol using a Nazi symbol to urge people to vote to join Russia in an upcoming referendum.

As the fate of Ukraine grows more uncertain by the day and Crimea looks set to become part of Russia, pro-Kremlin and Western media have accused each other of launching information wars in a bid to sway public opinion in their favor.

Less than a month after Ukraine's former President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted amid mass discontent over his decision to move away from the European Union and toward Russia, the tug-of-war over Ukraine has now focused on Crimea, where experts say an information war has been launched after many Ukrainian news outlets were shut down and replaced by Russian state-owned ones.

Russian state media have been accused of resorting not only to half-truths and distortions but also to direct lies in their description of Ukrainian authorities and protesters.

The Kremlin, in turn, has accused Western and Ukrainian media of whitewashing the

Ukrainian protest movement and the actions of the country's current government.

Russia's state-run media came under increased scrutiny after the pro-Russian Crimean administration took Ukrainian television off the air last week and replaced it with Russian broadcasts. OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatovic spoke out and condemned the closure of television channels and attacks on journalists in Crimea, warning in a statement over the weekend that these actions paved the way to "the worst kind of propaganda."

At times, it seems like Western media reports and Russian ones are describing completely different places and situations, with the latter portraying as a humanitarian crisis what the former describes as a Russian-manufactured provocation to justify military intervention.

The discrepancies have been so obvious that they have prompted television anchors to speak out. Liz Wahl, an anchor at Kremlin-funded television channel RT's U.S. division, announced her resignation on air last Wednesday, saying she disagreed with the network's support for Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and its "whitewashing" of Putin's actions.

Another anchor for the same television channel, Gayane Chichakyan, devoted a segment called "Propaganda Watch" to what she called U.S. propaganda. She slammed U.S. media for portraying the protests in Kiev as largely peaceful and allegedly failing to mention that many of the protesters had violently attacked riot police.

Below is a look at some of the more contentious reports and facts that have been distorted.

Russians in Danger?

As momentum builds in the Crimean parliament's campaign to officially join Russia, many pro-Russian Ukrainians have explained the move by saying they distrust the new government in Kiev and do not want to fall under its jurisdiction.

The distrust likely stems, at least in part, from media coverage of the new government.

Certain state-run Russian media have described Ukraine's new leaders as fascists and painted a picture of anarchy, chaos and pogroms reigning in Kiev. The Kremlin has also argued that Ukrainian authorities are severely suppressing the rights of Russian-speaking residents in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, a violation they say justifies Russian military intervention.

Alexei Garan, head of the Political Analysis School at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, said Russian state media coverage of Ukraine was so skewed that it could be described as "Goebbels-style propaganda."

One of the facts that many critics say is radically distorted is the reality on the ground and the danger to Russians and Russian speakers.

Russia's state-controlled media have said that the justification for Russia's military intervention in Crimea was the persecution of Russian speakers, a fact they say has been ignored by the West.

Describing this alleged persecution, Valentina Matviyenko, speaker of Russia's Federation

Council, said last week that there had been casualties among local residents during an attempt by Igor Ovrutsky, who had been appointed head of Crimea's police by Kiev, to seize the police headquarters in Simferopol from local self-defense units. The information was later denied by Vyacheslav Svetlichny, Russia's consul in Crimea.

Arsen Kermenchikli, a reporter at the Segodnya newspaper's Crimean office, denied that there was persecution of Russian speakers in Crimea, saying he had no information on such occurrences.

"Facts are presented in a biased way [in the pro-Kremlin media]," he said, adding that "they use understatements and half-truths."

Kremlin-affiliated media had also described the situation in Crimea as increasingly unstable and spiraling out of control before the armed forces identified by Ukraine and Western countries as Russian took over the peninsula last week.

When Vesti.24 described clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Kiev protesters in Simferopol last week, it showed footage of earlier protests in Kiev, which were more violent, instead of videos from Simferopol.

It is unclear whether the discrepancy was a simple blooper or part of a wider misinformation campaign intended to create an air of emergency.

Russian state media have also warned of pogroms that supposedly included attacks on churches and synagogues in southern and eastern Ukraine. But representatives of Ukraine's Orthodox and Jewish communities have denied this information.

Garan of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy dismissed reports about "fascism" being rampant in Kiev, saying that Svoboda, one of the nationalist parties, had evolved into a very moderate force that attempted to prevent violence.

In keeping with the idea of the new authorities being fascist, some Russian media have extensively covered the alleged repression of Russian-speaking residents in Ukraine.

In February, Rossia television reported that Oleh Tyahnybok, the leader of the Svoboda party, called for a ban on Russian and the introduction of criminal penalties for anyone violating the ban. There has been no evidence to back up the claim.

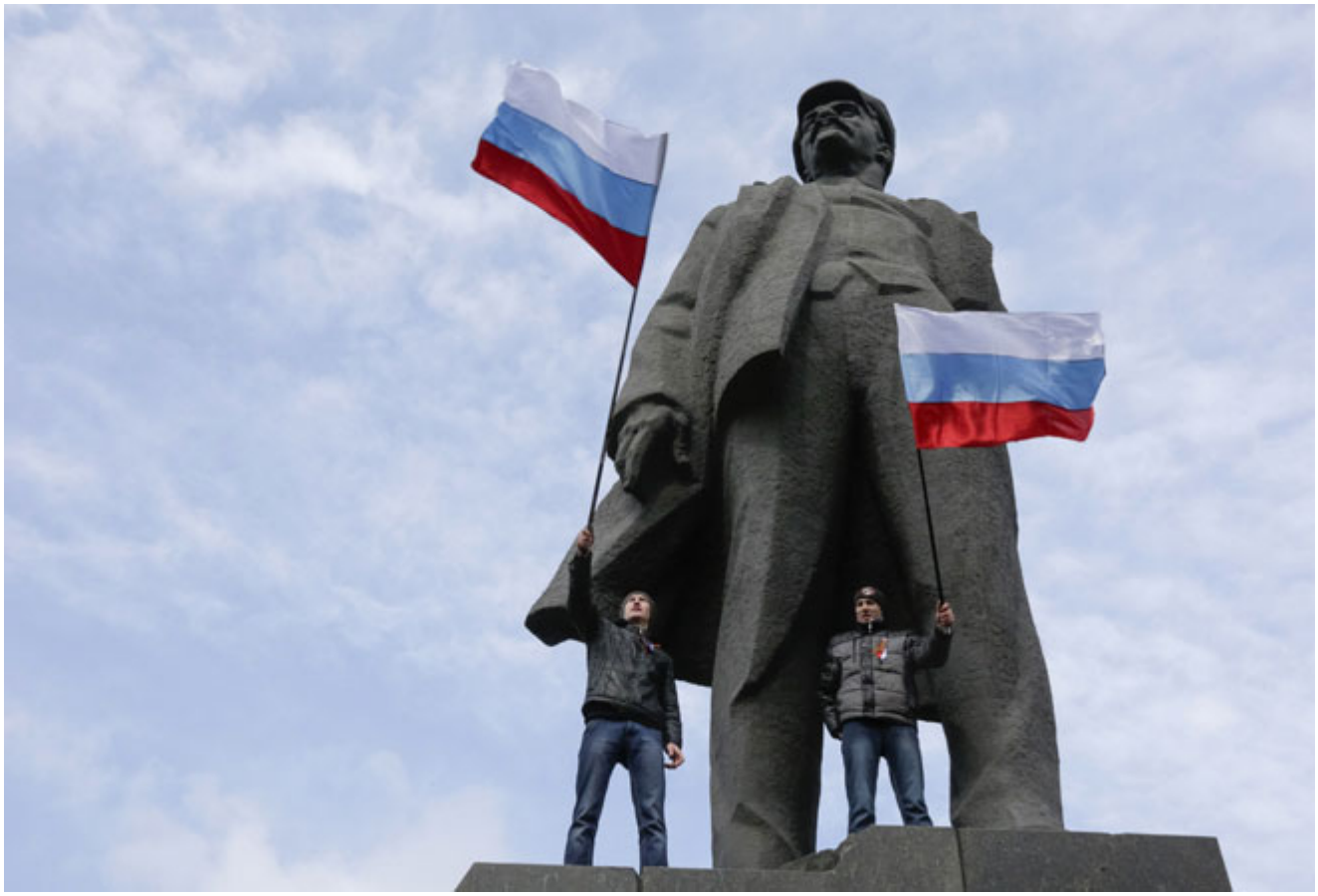
In fact, in footage shown by Channel One, Tyahnybok said that while Ukrainian should be the state language, there should be no discrimination against linguistic minorities.

RIA Novosti and other Russian media seemed eager to highlight the idea of a "humanitarian crisis" unfolding next door, however. RIA Novosti and Channel One television reported in early March that Ukraine's eastern regions had recently seen a flood of refugees heading for Russia's Belgorod region.

Yet the Federal Migration Service's branch in the region subsequently denied the information, saying that only five Ukrainians had recently applied for refugee status.

Yevgeny Perebiisnis, a spokesman for Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, said that Channel One had

undermined its own credibility by showing a picture of a checkpoint on the Ukrainian-Polish border while reporting on "Ukrainian refugees fleeing to Russia."



Konstantin Chernichkin / Reuters

Demonstrators at a pro-Russia rally standing on a statue of Soviet state founder Vladimir Lenin in Donestk.

Troops

While pro-Kremlin media have been mostly keeping mum about the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, they have had plenty of things to say about Ukrainian ones.

Russian state-controlled media describe the military units without insignia that have recently occupied the peninsula as local "self-defense" forces, reflecting the Kremlin's official position that there are no Russian troops outside naval bases in Ukraine.

Yet, according to Kermenchikli, extensive evidence has been presented to prove that they are in fact Russian armed forces.

Their uniforms and weapons are Russian, he said, and so are the license plates of their vehicles.

Some of the armed men identified their Russian titles themselves when they blocked Ukrainian military units and told them to surrender earlier this month, Kermenchikli said.

Ukrainian media also posted a video on YouTube last week where a representative of the troops without insignia identifies himself as a Russian soldier.

As for Ukrainian armed forces, they have been described by Kremlin-friendly media as lacking morale and unwilling to serve their country.

Channel One and other Russian television channels reported earlier in March that 6,000 Ukrainian servicemen had defected and sworn allegiance to the republic of Crimea. No proof was presented for this, and the Ukrainian Navy said that not a single serviceman had defected, except for Denis Berezovsky, former commander of the Ukrainian Navy.

In a separate incident, after Russian authorities officially announced earlier this month that they could send troops to Ukraine, news agencies in Ukraine said there had been a mass military mobilization by Ukrainian men ready to fight for their country.

Many Ukrainian media, including Lviv Express, cited draft boards as saying that the number of those willing to enroll for the army had hit a record high since Ukraine became independent in 1991.

But RIA Novosti reported the opposite, saying on its website last week that those eligible to be conscripted had failed to show up at draft boards all over Ukraine.

A joke has since made the rounds on the Internet: "Ukrainian conscripts are now looking for draft boards, not the other way around."

Clamoring to Join Russia

As tensions grew between Russia and Ukraine earlier this month after troops appearing to be Russian surrounded military bases in Crimea, pro-Russian rallies were held in the Kharkiv, Donetsk, Odessa, Mykolayiv and Lugansk regions.

While the rallies received wide coverage in the Russian media, several pro-Kremlin journalists accused Western media of ignoring the pro-Russian rallies in a bid to play down support for Russia's actions.

But Russian state media have in turn been accused of ignoring numerous reports by Ukrainian media that thousands of people present at these pro-Russia rallies had actually been bused in from Russia's Belgorod region especially for the occasion.

In another Russian media report that seemed eager to highlight a flourishing pro-Russian sentiment in Ukraine, photos were shown of a Russian flag being hoisted on top of Kharkiv's regional administration building. However, the report failed to disclose that the flag had been installed not by a Ukrainian but by Mikhail Ronkainen, a former activist of Russia's pro-Kremlin Mestnye movement.

The picture that has been painted by various media of overwhelming support of Ukrainians for seceding and joining Russia has not been supported by official surveys.

According to a poll released by Ukraine's Democratic Initiative Fund and Kiev International Sociology Institute earlier this month, the number of those in favor of joining Russia amounts

to 25.8 percent in eastern Ukraine, 19.4 percent in the south, 5.4 percent in central Ukraine and 0.7 percent in the country's western part.

The Influence of the Far Right

Another topic subject to debate is the participation of far-right groups in Ukraine's Euromaidan protest movement and their influence on current Ukrainian authorities.

The Kremlin has accused Western news organizations of presenting the Euromaidan protest movement as essentially peaceful and playing down the influence of radical ultranationalist groups. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said the Ukrainian revolution was a violent coup and warned Western leaders not to be fooled by ultranationalists who had their own agenda.

Crimea-based political scientist Vladimir Dzharalla agreed with this assessment of the situation, dismissing the view that the current Ukrainian government had come to power legitimately as "propaganda."

Such a notion was based on the erroneous principle that "might makes right," he said.

Dzharalla said Ukrainian media were reflecting only one viewpoint and were being used to manipulate public opinion.

"They have ceased to be journalists and are now specializing in propaganda," he said by phone.

Dzharalla also accused Ukrainian media of spreading false information about violence allegedly perpetrated by Russian troops on the peninsula, though he admitted that a number of journalists had been beaten by unidentified men.

Numerous reports have been published recently on journalists and pro-Kiev activists being kidnapped in Crimea.

Konstantin Kostin, chairman of the pro-Kremlin Civil Society Development Fund, echoed Dzharalla's statements, saying that some Western media were promoting "romantic stereotypes" about the Ukrainian revolution while ignoring pogroms and violence allegedly unleashed by militants in Kiev.

Identity of Maidan Snipers

Russian state media have also accused their Western counterparts of failing to sufficiently cover reports that the snipers who shot at protesters during the Euromaidan protests may have been hired by some opposition leaders.

Last Wednesday, a telephone conversation between Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton was leaked in which Paet cited a certain "Olga" as saying that some snipers who had shot at protesters could have been hired by opposition leaders.

This became top news on many pro-Kremlin news sites and was reported as if it were a confirmed fact on RT.

It was also reported by Reuters and other Western media, though in more cautious terms.

Estonia's Foreign Ministry confirmed that the tape was authentic but denied the Russian media's interpretation of his words, saying that Paet did not view the opposition as being involved in the shootings and had just been citing Olga's words.

The Olga mentioned by Paet was later identified by RIA Novosti as Ukrainian doctor Olga Bogomolets, who in an interview with the Daily Telegraph denied that she had accused opposition leaders of being involved in the killings.

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