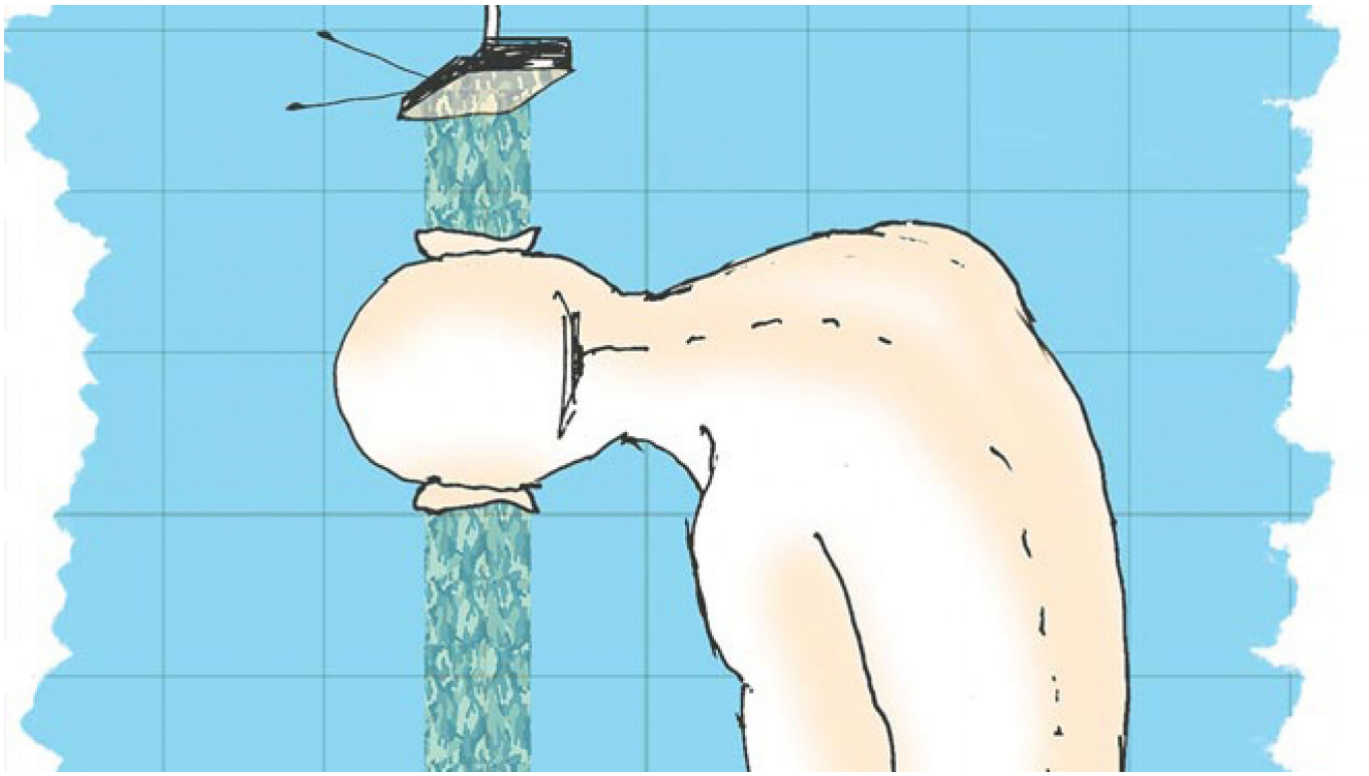
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The Kremlin's War Propaganda

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Several years ago, I traveled to the taiga in the republic of Altai with a former KGB officer who had worked in military propaganda during the war in Afghanistan. While we drank tea beside the campfire one night, he described in detail the principles of military propaganda. Today, I see that the Kremlin is implementing all of those principles in its information campaign surrounding the Ukrainian crisis.

In authoritarian countries like Russia, independent information is losing out to mass propaganda, and whole populations have become victims of brainwashing.

The main objective of war propaganda is to mobilize the support of the population — or in the case of Ukraine, an expansionist campaign. It should also demoralize the enemy and attract

the sympathy and support of third countries. Widespread support among Russians for the military operations in Crimea and its ultimate annexation indicate that the Kremlin has succeeded in its first two objectives but has gained little ground on the third.

Moscow accomplished this by using seven basic methods:

First, it is necessary to convince the general population that the government is acting correctly and that the enemy is guilty of fomenting the crisis. That is why the Kremlin places the full blame for the entire Ukrainian crisis on the Maidan protesters and what it calls the Western-backed Ukrainian opposition. Moscow conspicuously leaves out the fact that former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych himself provoked the crisis by ruining the country's economy, double-dealing with the European Union and engaging in corrupt deals while also permitting extreme corruption among members of his family and inner circle.

To incite hatred for the enemy and deflect attention away from Yanukovych's flaws, the Kremlin says the new government in Kiev, dominated by the main opposition groups, is linked to everything that is despised and vilified in Russia: fascists, extremists, the U.S. and the West in general. It is necessary to paint the Western enemy as the aggressor.

Second, the Kremlin created myths about the terrible persecutions of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, particularly in Crimea. Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko even came up with a story about victims of such aggression that nobody has been able to corroborate, saying there were casualties among locals in Simferopol from a Kiev-backed attempt to take over a police building. The claim was never verified.

The main idea behind such claims is to find just the right balance between truth and fiction. Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels once said that if you add one-fourth of the truth to three-fourths of a lie, the people will believe you. Hitler and Stalin applied the principles and techniques of war propaganda on a national scale.

Third, the enemy must be demonized. Just about anything will work, from alleging that one of the leaders of the opposition, acting Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, is a Scientologist, or showing medical records that another leader was treated for a psychological disorder. NTV and other state-controlled television stations have been at the forefront in spreading these smear campaigns.

If an actual radical or nationalist can be found among the enemy's ranks, such as Right Sector leader Dmitry Yarosh, this is like manna from heaven for propagandists. Although they represent fringe factions, they are turned into the face of the enemy. The entire opposition, which in reality includes a wide range of moderate forces, is presented as "fascist" and "neo-Nazi."

Fourth, the authorities always disguise their aggressive actions as a humanitarian mission. "We have to protect defenseless Russians at the hands of fascists. They are in danger of being beaten and killed," propagandists say.

Fifth, the Kremlin has attributed its own cynical methods to the enemy. For example, if Moscow intends to annex part of a brotherly, neighboring country, it must first accuse the U.S. and the authorities in Kiev of striving for world domination and hegemony, while

depriving Russia of its ancestral territories and its righftful sphere of influence in its own backyard.

Sixth, the authorities must present all of their actions as purely legal and legitimate, and the actions of the enemy as gross violations of international law. That is why President Vladimir Putin refers to the "legitimate and inherent right of Crimeans to self-determination" — the same right he strongly denied to the people of Chechnya and Kosovo.

According to this logic, the parliament's unanimous vote to strip Yanukovych of his authority on Feb. 22 was illegal, while the referendum for secession in Crimea — which violated the Ukrainian Constitution — is completely legal and legitimate.

Seventh, the success of war propaganda depends entirely on its totalitarian approach. The authorities must shut down every independent media outlet capable of identifying and exposing the propagandists' lies. That is why Ukraine blocked Russian television. It also explains why Moscow is cracking down on Dozhd television and why it recently replaced the head of Lenta.ru with a Kremlin-friendly editor-in-chief.

Information warfare is well known throughout the world and is used by all leading countries. The U.S. government successfully used the same principles when it bombed Yugoslavia and invaded Grenada, Panama and Iraq. The difference, of course, is that the U.S. government does not own mainstream media outlets, so their ability to manipulate the truth is less effective.

Take, for example, the Iraqi invasion in 2003. Within a relatively short time period after the invasion was initiated, leading Western media went the complete other direction by criticizing the U.S. government for misleading the public on the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that were never found. This self-correction process does not occur in Russia, where the main media outlets are state-controlled.

In authoritarian countries like Russia, independent information is losing out to mass propaganda, and whole populations have become victims of brainwashing. Politicians speak about the need for peace even while stirring up war hysteria. And that means the likelihood of war is far closer and more real than many might imagine.

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