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Russia's Propaganda War Will Backfire

By Mark Lawrence Schrad

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President Vladimir Putin's recent turn from confrontation toward accommodation with Ukraine has put not only pro-Russian separatists in Donbass in an unenviable position, but Russia's lapdog media, too.

Ideally, the return of electoral legitimacy to Kiev with the May 25 elections should wind down Russia's anti-Ukrainian hysteria and vitriol, but the damage has already been done.

May gradually be replaced by homages to the eternal kinship of Russians and Ukrainians, the memory of this vitriol will endure, writes historian Mark Lawrence Schrad.

For the past few months Russian state-run media and the pro-Kremlin blogosphere that takes cues from it has intentionally and systematically misrepresented developments

in Ukraine as part of the Kremlin's information war to foment discontent and instability there. Over that time, a number of discernible themes have emerged.

First, the interim government in Kiev was portrayed as illegitimate, having toppled the corrupt President Viktor Yanukovych illegally. Inconvenient details such as Yanukovych being formally removed from power by a supermajority of 328 on the 450-seat Ukrainian parliament — including a majority of Yanukovych's own Party of Regions — are conveniently omitted.

As an extension, the Ukrainian government has been portrayed in the media as either lacking broad public support or simply not legally existing. An illegitimate or absent Ukrainian government became a useful pretext for the Kremlin's illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea in the interest of protecting ethnic Russians there.

Second, to sharpen the good-versus-evil, us-versus-them distinction, purported Kremlin benevolence was contrasted with the malevolence of the protesters on Kiev's Maidan Square, which state-controlled media said consisted of Right Sector fascists, Banderites and neo-Nazis, intent on subordinating or exterminating ethnic Russians in Ukraine and beyond.

The subtle manipulations and outright lies have whipped their audiences in Russia and eastern Ukraine into a frenzy for an all-out battle for survival.

Sunday's Ukrainian election presented a formidable challenge to both of these propagandistic narratives. For one, a free and fair election endows the new government in Kiev with a domestic and international legitimacy that has been sorely lacking since government forces fired on Maidan protesters back in February.

Regardless of who would have come to power, it will be difficult for the Russian state-controlled media to continue the illegitimacy narrative, without concocting an even more elaborate and far-fetched conspiracy about the impact of low voter turnout in Donbass, or widespread electoral fraud even in the presence of international observers.

The "fascist" narrative will be even more difficult to sustain after May 25. Largely conforming to Ukrainian and international polls, as well as election-day exit polls, Ukraine's far-right candidates did not fare well: Dmytro Yarosh, leader of Right Sector, received only 0.9 percent of the vote. Oleh Tyahnybok of the Svoboda Party captured all of 1.3 percent.

With all of the Ukrainian candidates that could conceivably be labeled fascist receiving less than 3 percent of the vote, dramatically less than far-right parties elsewhere in Europe, Russia's "Nazi Ukraine" narrative will be difficult to sustain.

What is more, billionaire and political independent Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's new president with 55 percent of the vote, is hardly a right-wing fascist.

Indeed, Poroshenko was one of the founders of the Party of Regions, the pro-Russian political party that brought Yanukovych to power in the first place. Having served in both the Yanukovych government and the pro-Western Orange Revolution government of Viktor Yushchenko, the milquetoast Poroshenko is the exact opposite of the divisive nationalist required by Russia's media narrative.

While President Vladimir Putin has pulled back the Russian military forces looming on the border and struck a more accommodating stance to recognize and work with the new government, it will be far more difficult to bring his media attack dogs to heel.

Continuing to create outlandish yarns and farcical conspiracies will sacrifice whatever credibility Russian state-run media has left in the West; while recanting would be an implicit acknowledgement of the role Russian media played in intentionally fomenting international discord for the sake of Kremlin hubris.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, even before the results were tabulated, Russia's Channel One presented a screenshot of an official-looking website suggesting that the "fascist" Yarosh was — incomprehensibly — leading with 37 percent of the vote.

Whatever its genesis, the effect, along with baseless reports of low voter turnout and exaggeration of voting irregularities, is to continue to sow the seeds of doubt among its viewers about the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government.

Even a complete renunciation of this narrative by Russian state-run media would do little to dissuade the heavily armed, pro-Russian separatists in Donbass who have now long been primed for an all-out battle for survival with the alleged Nazis from Kiev.

Indeed, as research in social psychology tells us, when peoples' misconceptions are challenged by factual evidence, they do not just see the light and change their beliefs, but rather they double-down and believe even more in their misconceptions even more strongly.

This "backfire effect" does not bode well for a quick resolution to the instability in Donetsk. Of course, even if the Ukrainian situation stabilizes after the election, recent events will lead to many long-term political ramifications. Yet the Kremlin's instrumental use of state-run media to whip-up a militant furor for its own ends — both at home and in Ukraine — may be one of the longest-lasting implications precisely because it has cut the deepest.

Even though the labels of "Nazis," "fascists" and "Banderites" may gradually be replaced by more traditional homages to the eternal kinship of Russians and Ukrainians, the memory of this Russian vitriol will endure, especially when Ukrainians can easily revisit these narratives, enshrined in the eternal media archive that is the internet.

Future historians may one day write about how in 2014 Russia gained Crimea but lost Ukraine. The Kremlin's media war will play a large part in that story.

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