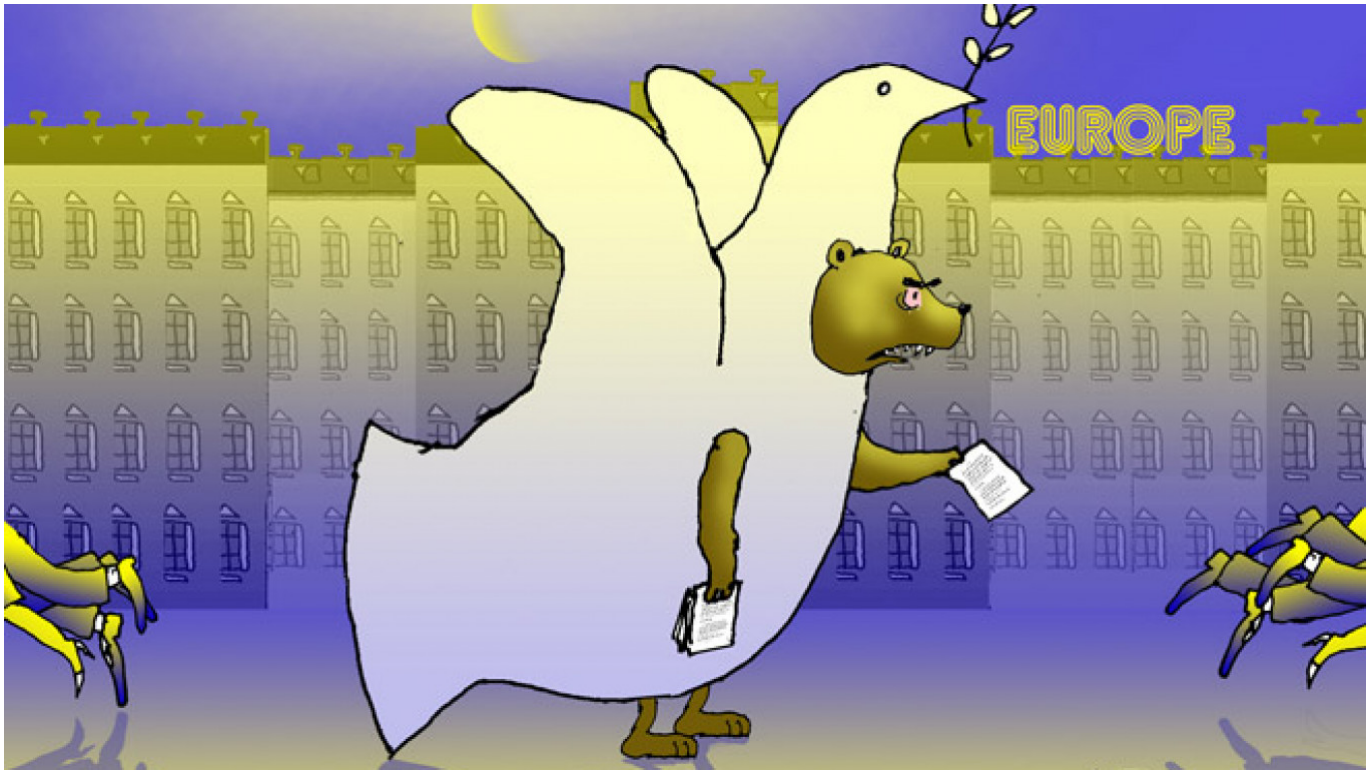
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

An American 'RT' Wouldn't Sway Russians

By Mark Adomanis

August 24, 2014



Russia is planning to substantially expand its propaganda operations in Europe, according to a recent report in The Wall Street Journal. This propaganda effort is expected to be particularly aggressive in France and Germany, where there is substantial popular anger directed toward both the United States and Europe's political and economic institutions as well as sizable minorities who express sympathy for Russian interests.

While some people think this is a cardinal change in policy, it's actually a slightly more aggressive attempt in a long-running Russian strategy to drive a wedge between Europe and the United States. The tactics are new and innovative, there's heavy use of social media tools like Twitter and YouTube, but the goal remains the same: exploit the fact that many Western policies aren't very popular among the European public.

These Russian efforts have deeply alarmed many of those U.S.-based Russia specialists who favor a more confrontational approach, and they have been increasingly vocal in demanding that the U.S. and Europe respond in kind. Consider, for example, what former U.S. Ambassador

Michael McFaul had to say about the need for a Western "information offensive."

"The West should disseminate accurate information about Russian actions and Western motivations, not only by providing more resources to traditional channels like Voice of America, but also by supporting new sources of reporting, like blogs and online news outlets."

When you take a step back, the argument advanced by McFaul and the other "info war" hawks is essentially the following: The Russians are wasting increasingly large amounts of their taxpayers' money to produce tendentious and biased media coverage. Therefore we need to do exactly the same thing.

Spending more money on government-run media, as McFaul recommends, is unlikely to be a very effective strategy or yield a significant return on investment. Americans should remember that, in today's world, government propaganda is almost useless at re-branding decisions that are unpopular in other countries.

The U.S. government spent untold millions of dollars trying to convince people that the Iraq war was a great idea: It "embedded" journalists with active-duty military units, it created and distributed all manner of reports detailing the "progress" being made under the new Iraqi government, and it even went so far as to create a brand new Arab-language media organization (Alhurra) to more effectively bring the American perspective to the Arab world.

But despite the considerable amount of time and money that was invested, global public opinion remained overwhelmingly unfavorable. Years later, the invasion of Iraq has done lasting damage to the United States' global reputation, and there's no indication that Radio Liberty or the Voice of America have done very much to repair it.

Depending on your point of view, Russia's actions in Ukraine might or might not be comparable to the United States' in Iraq — this is a debate in its own right, and I am therefore deliberately skirting it — but regardless of your opinion it is clear that the reality of Russia's actions is infinitely more important than their public presentation.

Polls have consistently shown that Europeans, even Europeans from countries with a generally positive inclination toward Russia, are opposed to the Russian government's actions in eastern Ukraine, since these actions are perceived as violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity. If, like most Europeans, you think that the annexation of Crimea was a blatant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, no amount of glitzy news coverage is going to convince you that it is actually something that should be celebrated.

People seem to be forgetting the simple fact that the content of Russian policy is of decisive importance to its perception and, more importantly, to its popularity. Much of the goodwill that Russia built up among traditionalist conservatives in Europe was due to its persistent support of the classical conception of sovereignty, the idea that each country had the right to conduct its affairs without interference from moralizing foreigners or nosy UN bureaucrats.

For many years Russia largely practiced what it preached, and it vocally opposed virtually all international, and usually U.S.-led, attempts at regime change. It wasn't the Russian-ness of this policy that caused it to become popular, but its relevance to genuine concerns. To put it

simply, people who didn't want the U.S. to intervene in other countries liked Russia's policy because it was in direct opposition to further interventions.

But if Russia's foreign policy, as currently seems to be the case, is becoming less about the defense of sovereignty and more about ethnicity — about the need to "protect" the millions of Russian "compatriots" living in the near abroad — its policies will continue to lose popularity.

An ethnic-based foreign policy, by definition, only appeals to people from that particular ethnicity. Regardless of what languages that Russia's state-funded international news channel RT broadcasts in, how many news anchors it hires, or how many fancy studios it constructs, only a tiny number of French or Germans can be expected to throw their support behind a Russia whose guiding principle is the defense of other Russians. There's just no connection between such a policy and any of the problems actually experienced by average Europeans.

The West already invests heavily in state-run news outlets with results that are — to put it charitably — rather mixed. A further increase in spending is unlikely to yield any marginal benefit.

And if the Russians want to throw good money after bad, if they want to spend tens of millions of dollars trying to sell a foreign policy increasingly grounded in conceptions of ethnicity that most Europeans find anachronistic and irrelevant, we should be mature enough to shrug our shoulders and respond simply: "Well, good luck with that."

Mark Adomanis is an MA/MBA candidate at the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/24/an-american-rt-wouldnt-sway-russians-a38665