The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Reaction to EU 'Counter-Propaganda' Channel Hints at Fear

By Allison Quinn

January 13, 2015



Most of the Russians living abroad rely on Kremlin-backed media for news from home.

Russia's Foreign Ministry slammed the European Union's plan to create a Russian-language television channel in Europe as an attack on free speech, an official reaction that analysts say was tinged with insecurity.

"We've always taken a positive position on the freedom of speech. But the EU plans for creating a kind of counter-propaganda channel can hardly correspond to the concept of free speech," Russia's deputy foreign minister, Alexei Meshkov, said Monday in comments carried by state news agency TASS.

The creation of the channel — an initiative that has so far gained the support of Latvia, Britain, Denmark, Estonia and Lithuania — is set to be discussed at a meeting of the EU's foreign ministers on Jan. 19.

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics announced the project in an interview with BuzzFeed in late December, saying the channel would offer "very factually accurate news" to counterbalance the news offered by Russian television, which he described as "very aggressive" and "what can no longer be considered normal news or normal journalism. ... [It's] more information warfare and propaganda."

Alexander Morozov, a Russian media analyst based in Europe, told The Moscow Times that while such a channel is undoubtedly necessary, its prospects for success look grim: Even the well-established, independent news outlets now catering to Russian-speakers in Europe are struggling to expand their readership within the Russian diaspora.

Most of the Russians living abroad rely on Kremlin-backed media for news from home, Morozov said, and they "trust the depictions of the conflict with the West provided to them by Russia's state-run channels."

Those depictions have repeatedly been condemned as flat-out propaganda by many Western leaders. Moldova, Ukraine and Lithuania went so far as to block broadcasts of certain Russian channels.

The most notable propaganda blooper in recent months involved a Channel One report of a child crucifixion in the east Ukrainian city of Slovyansk in July. Relying on a single witness, the report claimed Ukrainian troops had nailed a 3-year-old boy to a cross and forced crowd members to watch as he bled out.

That report provoked enormous scrutiny, with several journalists finding discrepancies in the original report and a complete dearth of witnesses to the purported crucifixion in the neighborhood where it was said to have happened.

More recently, Alyona Berezovskaya, a Ukrainian journalist who heads state-owned Rossiya Segodnya's newly minted news site Ukraina.ru, released a 28-minute documentary focusing on the plight of children in conflict-riddled east Ukraine.

StopFake.org, an activist website established by Ukrainian journalists in March 2014 in what they referred to as a bid "to fight the rising tide of propaganda originating from Russian news outlets," claimed that some of the images used in the Ukraina.ru documentary were in fact photos of the 2004 Beslan massacre, a terrorist siege in southern Russia that claimed over 300 lives, including those of nearly 200 children.

Even Russian reportage of the EU's plan for a new television channel was full of the "strategic sloppiness" that has come to characterize the country's state-run media coverage, said investigative journalist Peter Pomerantsev, who has studied the transformation of these media outlets into propaganda juggernauts.

Russian media agencies toed the official line in reporting the EU initiative, playing up the supposed "counter-propaganda" aspect of the channel as if the EU ministers themselves had declared the channel as such. This was a move intended to "draw equivalence," Pomerantsev told The Moscow Times. "Just by saying, 'There's an information war,' it implies two sides doing equally naughty things, so it's OK for Russia to abuse information to spread disinformation."

Vasily Gatov, a U.S.-based media analyst, expressed a similar sentiment, saying he had his doubts about how accurate the term "counter-propaganda" was in the given context.

The EU's idea for a Russian-language channel was the "right move," he said, and necessary "so that instead of conspiracy theories provided by [state-run] RT and other Russian stations in the West, Russian emigrants can get facts."

But both Gatov and Morozov expressed skepticism about the project materializing, saying it was nothing more than an idea at this point. It might not even get off the ground, "since it has come from bureaucrats," Gatov said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry's harsh reaction to what is so far an abstract initiative revealed a deep sense of insecurity within the Kremlin's media machine, according to Gatov, who said the ministry's statement was "pretty telling."

"Any systematic resistance to Russia's propaganda machine abroad will be felt by the Russian diasporas immediately because the propaganda addresses weak myths about the imperial grandeur of Putin's Russia, spreads anti-Western conspiracies and lashes out at Western governments. It does not talk about the real problems of Russians living abroad," he said.

Simply offering a sane and informed discussion on the very same topics will inspire Russians living abroad to turn away from the propaganda channels' emotional invectives, Gatov said.

State-run media giant RT is already facing difficulties in Britain, where authorities have threatened the channel with sanctions over allegedly biased reporting.

"Russia's Foreign Ministry is evidently also worried that the appearance of an EU-channel will lead to problems and bans on the activities of RT — and in this regard they are simply reflecting the delusional thinking dominant in the Kremlin," Gatov said.

In November, British communications watchdog Ofcom warned RT that any breaches of impartiality rules could result in sanctions — which might mean rescinding the channel's broadcasting license.

The stakes are high for Russia's media machine, as the Russian government has dramatically increased its funding for state-run media targeting foreign audiences, even as its own economy struggles to stay afloat.

Last fall, the authorities nearly tripled the 2015 budget for state-run news agency Rossiya Segodnya to 6.48 billion rubles ($140 million at that time). The budget for RT television is also expected to surge by nearly 50 percent in 2015, from around $300 million last year.

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/01/13/russias-reaction-to-eu-counter-propaganda-channel-hints-at-fear-a42844