The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Foreign Propaganda Curbed by Recession

By Robert Orttung

February 04, 2015



The plunging value of the ruble is forcing even Russia's state-funded international television channel RT to face reality. Russia's economic difficulties are inducing the many-headed hydra of Russia's international propaganda machine to tighten its belt. Less money will force the Kremlin spin doctors to be more creative to push their message into the Western discourse.

Fewer resources will necessarily cut RT's reach through traditional media, but will not automatically reduce its capacity to disrupt the West's ability to respond coherently to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The Kremlin's overall goal is to insert divisions between the Western allies that have imposed sanctions against it and in doing so, erode support for continuing such measures. Successfully creating these divisions requires targeting specific content to niche audiences through local language content.

Such an effort is extremely expensive because it requires dedicated offices in foreign countries that are able to hire native talent who understand local contexts and can figure out how to convey Russian messages through homegrown slang and culture through broadcasts and websites.

RT's overall budget for 2015 is 13.9 billion rubles ($216 million at current exchange rates), which includes a 30 percent increase from 2014, but a 10 percent cut in the face of Russia's economic difficulties. The money goes to fund a multi-tentacled operation with multiple brands and subsidiaries throughout the world.

The latest addition to the overall Russian propaganda effort is Sputnik, funded under Rossiya Segodnya, which aims to produce 800 hours of programming per day, broadcast in 30 languages, across 130 cities in 30 countries. The service currently has newsfeeds in English, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese.

RT boasts that it is the "number one news network on YouTube." It was the first news network to reach both one and two billion views and it claims to have more than three times the viewership of CNN online.

RT has specific channels on YouTube for the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Spanish speakers, Arabic speakers and Russian speakers. Each focuses on a specific viewership. For example, RT UK was strongly supportive of Scottish independence. As a recent survey of RT's content showed, RT America and RT UK typically promote stories that are strongly critical of the two governments. However, RT France avoids such politicization and focuses instead on human interest stories.

The channels use a clever combination of entertainment and political messaging. Recently on the Spanish language channel, the top video discussed underwater pole dancing.

However, the second video quoted a leader of a left-leaning Spanish political party that opposed European Union sanctions on Russia and supported the position of the new Greek government that the measures have been ineffective and are causing problems in Europe due to the reduction in trade with Russia.

Analysts disagree over whether Russia's propaganda effort has been effective. Overall, respect for Russia and its president in the West are at a post-Cold War low. However, Russia's messaging has been effective in sowing doubt and confusion about how the West should respond to Russian activities in Ukraine.

RT measures its success with quantitative data on viewership in the West and the number of mentions in Western media. While it is not clear if Russia is winning hearts and minds, certainly it has gotten the attention of Western governments, which are now scrambling to come up with their own efforts on how to respond.

Leaders of the Baltic states raised the issue at the recent G20 summit in Australia, and British Prime Minister David Cameron and U.S. President Barack Obama discussed the issue at the end of 2014. They worried that Russia was putting out a distorted picture of events in Ukraine.

Russia has thrown a lot of money at these efforts, but it has probably had the biggest success

through less traditional mediums like the Internet, particularly through YouTube.

Creating viral videos does not always require a huge amount of money. In fact, the Kremlin might be able to reach a bigger, younger audience through YouTube than is available on cable television. Budget cuts are therefore less likely to impact some of the less traditional areas where RT has usually been most successful.

Much of what RT is doing is cribbed from the tactics of Fox News. However, the West cannot simply respond in kind. Rather, it should counter RT's sensationalism with clear-headed factual reporting. It should also support Ukrainian and Russian efforts to expose the myths broadcast by the propaganda machine and support local journalism efforts.

Some efforts already are showing results. Demand for BBC World Service output has increased dramatically since the beginning of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

The BBC's Russian-language service has reached 6.9 million listeners, more than double its audience before the crisis, and BBC's Ukrainian audience has tripled to more than 600,000 since last year.

These numbers show that a demand for unbiased factual reporting does exist, however much RT may try to crowd it out. Such success in Russia and Ukraine suggests that a focus on real news in the West will ultimately expose the propaganda efforts for what they are.

Robert Orttung and Elizabeth Nelson are researchers at George Washington University's Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies.

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/02/04/russias-foreign-propaganda-curbed-by-recession-a43559