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Russia Gives Up On Burnishing Its Image in West

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Protesters hold a placards during a demonstration in support of Boris Nemtsov outside the Russian Embassy in London.

The "information war" against Russia makes any efforts to improve the country's image in the West futile, a Kremlin spokesman said Thursday after the U.S. public relations firm Ketchum said its contract with the Russian government had ended.

"The current situation of information hysteria and what is essentially an information war against Russia does not facilitate the activation of image-building efforts," Dmitry Peskov told the Interfax news agency.

Ketchum Inc., the top spin doctor employed by the Kremlin in the West, has ended its work with the Russian government and will no longer lobby for its interests in Europe and the U.S., the company said in a statement.

"Ketchum no longer represents the Russian Federation in the U.S. or Europe with the exception of our office in Moscow," the company's statement said. "Our partner in the consortium, GPlus, continues to operate under the terms of the contract."

Peskov told Interfax that the contract would not be extended.

The head of the firm's office in Moscow, Mikhail Maslov, confirmed the company's statement and said that Ketchum would continue working in Russia.

"Ketchum is not shutting down, and continues to work in Russia. We have more than 30 clients here," Maslov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

Maslov declined to comment further on the situation.

Top Spin Doctor

During the last nine years, Russia has paid more than $23 million for Ketchum's services, according to the company's obligatory disclosures. The company began its work by promoting Russia's presidency of the G8 in 2006 after the Kremlin was lambasted in the Western press over the gas dispute with Ukraine.

"We just looked at the top 10 companies in this sphere [PR] and went to talk to them. Ketchum made the best impression," Peskov told Kommersant business daily in 2012, explaining the decision to engage the company's help in its bid to boost Russia's image.

Subsequent projects included the promotion of Russia's energy security and foreign investment into Russia, as well as the country's ultimately successful bid to join the World Trade Organization. It also pitched multiple op-eds written by Kremlin-friendly Russia experts to leading western news outlets, including Bloomberg, The Associated Press and Reuters.

The real coup came in 2013, when the company successfully placed an op-ed by President Vladimir Putin in The New York Times on the dangers of U.S. involvement in the civil war in Syria.

Mounting Criticism

Over the years, Ketchum was continuously criticized by Western media for its efforts to burnish Russia's image, especially after it became seen by many as irreparable following the annexation of Crimea a year ago. The company resorted to issuing a statement saying it was not responsible for the Kremlin's foreign policy decisions.

"We are not advising the Russian Federation on foreign policy, including the current situation in Ukraine," the firm told The Washington Post one year ago.

At the same time, as Russia's conflict with the West over the Ukraine crisis deepened, cooperation between Russia and Ketchum appears to have decreased. According to its

disclosures, Ketchum received $773,670 from the Russian government for services rendered from May to November last year, compared to $1,536,875 in the preceding six-month period.

According to Alexander Gabuyev, a senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, it is highly likely that Ketchum felt pressured by its other high-profile clients to drop Russia from its portfolio.

"I think it wasn't a question of Russia's image, but a question of Ketchum's image," he said in a phone interview.

"This might be one of the first instances of a broader pattern among other foreign firms, including strategic consultants or auditors, ending their work with the Russian government and companies affiliated with it," he said.

Unfit Substitutes

Without Ketchum, Russia still has a plethora of other tools that aim at getting the Kremlin's message across to the Western public. These include the state-funded English-language international news channel RT and the Sputnik news agency that broadcasts in several different languages, as well as the government-sponsored Russky Mir foundation that promotes Russian language across the world and Rossotrudnichestvo state agency that aims to promote Russian soft power and brings together Russian speakers across the world.

While RT is powerful, it cannot bring anything positive to the agenda because it was designed as a propaganda tool and therefore fails to improve Russia's image abroad, said Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a think tank with close links to the Foreign Ministry.

"If you look at Western commentators, they are all apoplectic about RT's coverage, which means that they think it is important," Lukyanov said in a phone interview.

"At the same time, you cannot improve the image of an enemy; there is just nothing to improve," he said.

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