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Russia's Media Offensive Seen by the West as Real Threat

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Journalists gather at a media centre as they watch a live broadcast nationwide call-in attended by President Vladimir Putin in Moscow Apr. 16.

Western governments and institutions are scrambling to devise a commensurate response to Russia's state-run media offensive, analysts told The Moscow Times on Wednesday amid a wave of reports of Western governments seeking to beef up their own media capabilities.

When the Russian authorities moved to establish in 2005 the international television news channel that would come to be known as RT, the goal was to offer an alternative to "the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams," President Vladimir Putin said during a 2013 visit to the RT studios.

"It seems to me that you are succeeding in this job," Putin said at the time.

Putin emphasized, however, that the Kremlin had no expectation that the channel would toe

the party line.

"We wanted to bring an absolutely independent channel to the news arena," he told the journalists at RT.

Nearly a decade later, the channel has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the eyes of Western governments and institutions, among the Russian state's most powerful weapons that could pose an international threat if not adequately contained.

And indeed, RT has emerged as a global media powerhouse, with a 2015 budget of $275 million. The channel — which already broadcasts in English, Russian, Spanish and Arabic — is soon set to expand to the French- and German-language spheres.

Over the years, RT has provoked the ire of Western pundits and journalists who decry what they perceive as its pro-Kremlin bias and disproportionate disregard for U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

"Western governments and institutions believe that if the twisted view of reality RT projects to the world goes on unchallenged, eventually it will become effective," Vasily Gatov, visiting fellow at the University of Southern California Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy told The Moscow Times in an interview.

"The problem with RT is that it offers a completely skewed world view that is completely at odds with the rules and conventions accepted by the Western world," he said.

Responding to criticism of RT's content and style in a March op-ed, Margarita Simonyan wrote, "If you look at different polls with Russian people as a whole — you will see that one of the important things that we do not like in the existing world order is the desire of Western countries to make unilateral judgments about what is good, what is bad in the countries far removed from them, about which they know very little, and take military actions based on those unilateral judgments."

Looming Threat

Western policymakers have exposed their insecurities about Russia's media machine on several occasions since the start of the year.

WikiLeaks published an e-mail last week revealing that a senior U.S. State Department official had turned to the CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, one of Hollywood's leading film studios, to help respond to the challenges associated with countering Russia's narratives in central and eastern Europe, as well as the Islamic State's narratives in the Middle East.

Acting State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf confirmed the report, but emphasized that the department does not influence the content of Hollywood films.

Across the Atlantic, the European Union foreign service has begun recruiting experts tasked with helping to counter Russia's anti-Western propaganda, the EUobserver news website reported last week.

The experts will work on the "correction and fact-checking of misinformation/myths"

and the development of an "EU 'narrative' via key messages/lines to take, articles, op-eds, fact sheets and infographics, with an emphasis on communicating the benefits" of the Eastern Partnership, which aims to foster ties between the EU and post-Soviet states.

According to EUobserver, each of the two to five experts set to be hired will be paid at least 4,350 euros ($4,850) per month.

Overall, the EU is set to launch an operation to counter what it says is Moscow's deliberate misinformation over its policies in Ukraine and Europe, Reuters reported in March.

"The effectiveness of Russian propaganda is perceived to pose a greater threat to the EU and its member states than the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine," said media analyst Alexander Morozov.

"Kremlin propaganda aims to weaken Europe's political unity, and in this sphere it can be quite successful. The EU will have to somehow respond to this challenge," he told The Moscow Times in an interview.

Despite its geographical distance, the U.S. government has also made clear its concerns with RT. The Broadcasting Board of Governors, a U.S. government agency that oversees the country's international media outlets, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty said in a March statement that it was seeking "$751.5 million to increase global engagement, move more aggressively into television and digital media, and support high priority audiences."

Reaching Russian-speaking audiences was listed among its priorities, with $15.4 million hoped to be dedicated to Russian-language television programming, according to the statement.

RT a Real Threat?

Internationally, RT has become the most successful news channel online, with more than 1.4 billion views on YouTube and 1.5 million subscribers on the site. Still, its viewership in key countries has been limited.

For instance, 73,000 people watch RT in Britain daily, according to data provided by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board in April. For comparison, Al Jazeera English — another hit global news channel — is watched by 259,000 people daily, while BBC news has nearly 3 million viewers.

In July last year, RT reported that its weekly audience in seven of the largest U.S. cities has doubled in the past year, with nearly 3 million people tuning in each week from these cities combined, citing Nielsen report. At the same time, more than 8 million Americans on average watched the country's top television channel CBS each evening during prime time alone, the latest Nielsen survey showed.

According to Jonathan Auerbach, editor of the Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies and professor at the University of Maryland, propaganda is an elusive term that is difficult to define.

"To brand something 'propaganda' today is simply a way to quickly discredit information, and in that sense calling something 'propaganda' is a form of information management itself. Western officials might deem the Russian agenda or version of things effective precisely to justify their own alternative narratives," Auerbach said in an e-mailed interview.

"Propaganda can often work at cross purposes, effective in one context, but not in another. People tend to accept what they already believe, and therefore propaganda in many instances is not really about persuasion, either rational or otherwise, but simply a means to confirm or attest beliefs already held," he said.

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