

Kremlin Is Losing the Information War (Op-Ed)

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Pro-Kremlin media have bombarded the world with reports of fascists, crucified children and beheaded pro-Russian militiamen throughout the 18 months of the conflict in Ukraine. Many of those stories were proven to be fictions, or else peppered with facts that serve an extremely tendentious interpretation of events.

However, some Western analysts believe that at least a few of those Russian arrows — however bent and untrue — have reached their target, and that Moscow has managed to impose its vision of the conflict in Ukraine on the rest of the world. Seeing the apparent success of Russian propaganda, political scientists and media analysts sounded the alarm with the result that the West now takes Moscow's "information war" very seriously.

The European Union's foreign affairs department recently announced that it was launching a rapid response unit to combat the misinformation spread by Russian media, and BBC announced plans to expand broadcasts to the Russian-speaking audience.

Reporters Michael Weiss and Peter Pomerantsev have written in numerous publications about the information war and warned that the Kremlin is waging an attack against the West. And in a separate paper they write: "Feeling itself relatively weak, the Kremlin has systematically learned to use the principles of liberal democracies against them in what we call here 'the weaponization of information, culture and money,' vital parts of the Kremlin's concept of 'non-linear' war." But is the threat to the West emanating from the Kremlin really so great?

According to some analysts, improving Russia's image abroad has barely been the primary goal of an information campaign. Vasily Gatov, a Russian media researcher based in Boston, suggests that instead of promoting a positive image of Russia abroad, the actual goal of RT is to implement an "armed response" in the West and the Russian liberal media. Their goal is to create anti-Russian hype in the American and European press, and to use such an "anti-Russian narrative" in Russia's domestic policy.

Gatov argues that since 2007 Putin's Russia stopped trying to promote Russia's image internationally, instead using soft power wherever possible for the personal gain of the Kremlin elites. Other researchers, however, point out that Russia kept investing in its image abroad up until recently.

Andrew Foxall from the Henry Jackson Society claims that Russia invested in various instruments of public diplomacy throughout the mid-2000s, and the very term "soft power" came to prominence during the 2012 presidential election campaign, when Putin described it as "a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence" in one of his pre-electoral publications. Later the term was included in Russia's "Foreign Policy Concept" of 2013, being mentioned in an official document for the first time.

Russia has had an advantage over the West right from the start in prosecuting the information war. Any democratic government has far less opportunity to deliberately use information as a weapon. But just the same, Russia is losing its information war in the West.

One of Russia's main tools of influence in the West is the state-owned channel Russia Today — which recently decided to use the abbreviation RT. Founded in 2005, the channel was initially quite successful in winning a Western audience. In his book "Kremlin Speak: Inside Putin's Propaganda Factory," Wall Street Journal correspondent Lukas Alpert explains that RT attracted the American left and right by using strategies that combine skillful use of the Internet, conspiracy theories and a willingness to address issues that major U.S. media ignore.

The channel's popularity continued to rise up until the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, after which many viewers criticized RT for its biased coverage of the war. For example, in Britain in 2014 RT was found four times to be in breach of the broadcasting code for impartiality by the media regulator, Ofcom.

However, if the reported goal is to improve Russia's image abroad, it has hardly been achieved. As polls reveal, Moscow has managed to impose its vision of the conflict on its own citizens but has failed to persuade the people of Ukraine or the rest of the world. A Gallup poll in April 2014 showed that only 2 percent of Ukrainian respondents named a Russian state-

owned channel as one of their three main sources of information. That is partly a result of the ban that Ukraine had imposed on broadcasting those stations in March 2014.

The result is that Russian news channels reached only 9 percent of all Ukrainians in 2014, down from 19 percent in 2012. Two-thirds of Ukrainians are skeptical about the objectivity of Russian news programs, and even in the country's south and east, less than one-third of respondents believed that Russia's role in the crisis was "mostly positive." In the rest of Ukraine that figure was less than 3 percent.

Russian propaganda fails similarly in the West. As RuNet Echo associate editor Kevin Rothrock points out, "People cite the fact that RT is able to slip in some misinformation when a story breaks. Then it's proved wrong and Russia is embarrassed and vilified once again," he said. "I think the whole campaign is just to stay relevant and keep Western media pumping out the anti-Russia stuff. Then they can cherry-pick from all the rage and sell it back to the domestic news audience, where they have a media monopoly. But in the open market of journalism, in the West, Russian propaganda is worthless."

The RT strategy is probably focused more on selling its alleged "success in the West" to the Kremlin than on truly impacting Western public opinion. The low overall quality of the information campaign is also a contributing factor.

In Germany, the Russian information campaign aimed to exploit anti-U.S. sentiment and play on the German guilt complex over its treatment of the Soviet Union in World War II. However, it met with only very limited success.

Gemma Pörzgen, a German journalist who has published extensively on Russia's propaganda campaign, points out that the German version of RT hasn't been successful and is without substantive audience outreach. In Germany RT Deutsch only broadcasts on the Internet, and doesn't have access to main television channels, offering a professionally weak video show which resembles a kind of "trash TV."

German hosts and journalists working on RT Deutsch are not well-known in Germany. Press coverage about their programs has been very critical from the beginning and has created a very negative image. It is difficult for RT Deutsch to find serious interview partners.

According to Pörzgen, many RT Deutsch publications are perceived as purely propagandist, and hardly improve Russia's image in Germany. Another tool of the information campaign — Sputnik Deutschland news agency, previously known as Voice of Russia — provides information of a better quality, but is hardly known in Germany since it only broadcasts on the Internet and in very few digital local radio stations with nearly no reach (it failed to get access to radio frequency waves in German, and only constitutes a part of some regional digital radio programs).

A third element of the Kremlin information campaign, "Russia Beyond the Headlines" is now being distributed as a PR-supplement to the economic daily Handelsblatt. The more influential German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung, which previously distributed the same PR-supplement, produced by Rossiiskaya Gazeta in Moscow, with the title "Russia Today" stopped the supplement in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

Surveys reveal the failure in promoting Russia's image in Germany. According to a Pew poll conducted in June, only 27 percent, or less than one-third of Germans held a positive view of Russia's foreign policy position. Although that was eight percentage points higher than it was in 2014, it is far from the 50 percent who felt positively about Russia in 2010. Thanks to the actions of President Vladimir Putin and the country's leadership in the Ukrainian crisis, Germans now have a lower opinion of Russia than at any time in the past decade.

Why is the Russian information campaign in the West so unsuccessful, despite lavish government funding? Because Moscow has not managed to equip its effort with any new form or content. Its disinformation campaign concerning Ukraine is based on distorting information that is freely available to the "enemy," denying obvious facts, disseminating false or unverified information and generally following the principles of a Soviet-era military disinformation campaign.

According to journalist Luke Harding, "In fact, the 'little green men' — undercover Russian soldiers who seized Crimea — come straight from the KGB playbook. Putin's actions in Ukraine follow a classic KGB doctrine known as 'active measures.' The phrase encompasses disinformation, propaganda, political repression and subversion. The goal, then as now, is to weaken the West, create divisions between NATO member states, and to undermine the U.S. in the eyes of the world, especially the developing world."

Russia's information campaign lacks an original world vision or message that would make it attractive to a Western audience. The strategy of relying on the losers of globalization, the most marginalized and disaffected citizens of Europe, has so far failed to produce much success. Russia is acting from a position of weakness in constantly claiming that Washington is fomenting an Orange Revolution in Ukraine so that pro-U.S. forces can seize Kiev, or that it is trying to "provoke Russia into attacking China and hopes to split up Russia into pieces."

Such an informational picture of the world reflects Moscow's exclusively negative agenda and presents Russia to the West as a weak but embittered and aggressive country lacking any positive projects and incapable of offering anything constructive to surrounding countries. Is it any wonder that such "soft power" is unattractive to the rest of the world?

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