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Kremlin's Domestic PR Campaign Is a Sad Farce

By Maxim Trudolyubov

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Russia's media and political bosses have managed to shift the nation's attention from Ukraine to Syria in the past few weeks. Damascus and Aleppo now fill the air waves in place of Donetsk and Kramatorsk. Kremlin-friendly "sociologists" and "political scientists" dutifully report that fewer Russians now follow events in Ukraine and that those who do are generally elderly.

According to state-run pollster VTsIOM, "Interest in the situation in the neighboring state is more often shown by the elderly (82 percent are 60 years or older) than by young people (44 percent are 18-24 years old). For more than a week now, the news reports on state-controlled television have focused on the migrant crisis in Europe, the Middle East and Syria.

Of course, the global audience has naturally shifted its attention to Europe and Syria: A real tragedy is unfolding there and sparking a deeply painful episode for European policy. At the same time, it is impossible not to notice how Russian media experts have recently learned to cynically combine Western news reports to promote the Kremlin agenda.

They quote a Pentagon spokesman as saying, "We have seen movement of people and things that would indicate that they plan to use that base there, south of Latakia, as a forward air operating base" then "spiced it up" by quoting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry saying that Washington is considering "different options that are available to us" — although Kerry was speaking of proposed talks between the two countries and not possible military action.

When President Vladimir Putin addresses the UN General Assembly in New York in late September, he will represent a country conducting a complex game in the Middle East, and not a country waging an undeclared war in Ukraine. The Foreign Ministry plans to link Russia's participation in the anniversary General Assembly session with the fight against terrorism, and not with Ukraine or Crimea as part of the "Russian world."

The Russian media machine is actively trying to erase the subject of Ukraine from the public mind in its attempt to "soften up enemy positions" prior to Putin's arrival in New York. It is not unlike the way Soviet authorities physically erased the photos of disgraced and executed commissars from the pages of books and removed articles about them from encyclopedias.

It is simply amazing how things that were ostensibly so vital for Moscow just two or three short months ago are now considered "a thing of the past." As former prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic Alexander Borodai said when asked about the downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine in his surrealistic interview with the Washington Post newspaper, "That whole story is ancient history for me."

Considering how long Russia's propaganda machine has been churning out "myths and miracles," it is a little surprising that it has taken media managers this long to master their craft. In principle, Russian policy is largely the practice of using various techniques to selectively focus people's attention. The authorities use simple language to explain exactly what people need to watch, when they should watch it, and most importantly, how they should interpret it. The spotlight picks out individual images from the surrounding darkness while all the viewers, as if on command, become enthralled by the latest spectacle, instantly forgetting about the previous scene.

That is why the masters of Russia's media policy are so successful. Of course, it is a bit of stretch to call them "masters" because they hold a total monopoly over the television audience, a monopoly on advertising and are awash in nearly unlimited funding from the state. Such complete domination of mass media cannot but lead to the rotting of the public mind.

The unspoken agreement between Russian leaders and citizens consists of a readiness to deceive and to be deceived. One is impossible without the other. The Kremlin very openly admits that it cannot influence key factors affecting Russia's economic well-being: the prices for oil, gas and metals as well as the interests of politicians and investors in both the East and the West.

It has been years since a Russian official seriously addressed the issue of how to increase the country's attractiveness to investors or how to develop domestic business in sectors other than raw materials. That is a question for insignificant pencil-pushers to debate at obscure academic conferences. The main task is to keep cranking out high-profile blockbusters that are fun for both the president and television viewers to watch.

Citizens sit side by side on their comfy sofas and tune in to watch the latest fight pitting honest and upstanding Russian dissidents led by "Powerhouse Putin" against the evil Washington minions led by "Obama the Ogre." The battlefield for this struggle shifts from Georgia to Ukraine to Syria. Moscow has managed to project the Soviet reality across the entire globe with a clever change of roles: The former executioners have quietly transformed themselves into the heroes of the resistance.

It is very reasonable to come up with scenarios that capture the audience's imagination and help lift society out of a difficult situation. Inspiring stories can help countries overcome crises. But such uplifting stories should be accompanied to some extent by financial policy in the form of investment, support for small and medium businesses, national projects or improvements to, say, health care and education.

Also, those stories must remain consistent, without changing every day like a kaleidoscopic image, or else they become false and devoid of substance. The fact is that Russia's nationwide televised PR campaign is not part of an actual development policy, it is merely a tragic and painful farce.

It is not PR that accompanies growth, as occurred in China in recent decades, or a story of postwar development as took place in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. Russia's PR campaign accompanies the country's degradation, decline, inability to produce something functional and constructive, loss of both its standing in the world and a sense of direction. Nothing but self-inebriation or self-deceit can accompany such a process.

The Russian state has continued almost uninterrupted as a single political entity since its inception in 1917, and there were many episodes during that time when the authorities could not cope with their task of governance due to poverty, illiteracy or ideological parochialism.

Citizens starved and died en masse, the authorities launched major projects that hit dead ends and they constantly made serious blunders. But they also found a solution: they lied, lied and lied without ever tiring. But most importantly, whenever they found themselves unable to complete their latest great construction project, they skillfully blamed the problem on saboteurs and enemies.

In fact, this is another form of media technique: When you cannot cope with your task, find a convincing excuse for your failure. In this sense, the ruling regime has undergone an interesting transformation. However, I do not believe that leaders have forgotten about saboteurs and enemies: they always hold that tool in reserve.

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