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Russian TV — Making War Great Again

This week in Russian propaganda reviewed

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Vesti Nedeli

Russia's Sunday news shows took a militant tone this week. Dmitry Kiselyov's propaganda flagship Vesti Nedeli (Weekly News) began with a feature on Russia's latest radar stations. Be wowed, Kiselyov told his audience. This radar kit is next generation, rapid response, and can track up to 500 targets as far as Cape Horn, he said.

Russia is surrounded by enemies — but, hey, at least you can feel safe within its borders

Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine drags on with lethal consequences. Kiselyov blamed Ukraine and its president, Petro Poroshenko, "who still expects a pat on the head from America for carrying on with the killing."

A grim segment follows. Separatist "marine" units of "Donetsk People's Republic" — some 90 miles from the coast — are shown dragging bloodied Ukrainian corpses through the icy steppe. The camera shows a close-up of a Salvation Army badge on one of the deceased men's uniforms. "The Salvation Army is a Western organization that helps prisoners and social undesirables," the reporter adds.

Regular viewers will have noticed a change in language. There were few caveats about separatist fighters this week, none of the usual disclaimers about "unrecognized republics," and Russia-supporting local activists. Instead, the programme's reporter refers to the insurgents as "we."

Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine is now, once again, O.K.

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Other segments reassured viewers, and emphasized the might of the country's military. Russia's Syria naval task-force might have been a resounding PR failure worldwide — with pundits mocking its technical problems and cost — but Vesti Nedeli instead laid out the red carpet.

Kiselyov littered his viewers with stats: this many hundreds of sorties flown, that many thousands of terrorist targets destroyed. The returning crews of the Admiral Kuznetsov and Peter the Great were depicted as heroes returning to their home port of Severomorsk.

All in all, war accounted for over 30 minutes of Vesti Nedeli's two-hour program. And it was a similar story on rival shows like TV Center's Postscriptum, hosted by hawkish senator Alexei Pushkov, and NTV's Itogi Nedeli (Weekly Summary).

A Warning for Trump

Mention was also made of Vladimir Putin's belligerent 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, which turned 10-years-old last Friday. The world media ignored the anniversary, but it was top news across all major Russian channels this weekend.

Kiselyov used this opportunity to attack the United States for failing to heed Putin's advice about the dangers of a "unipolar world." He criticized past U.S. presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama for "dragging their country into despicable wars." Donald Trump, Kiselyov added, had better study Putin's keynote speech if he's serious about keeping up good relations with Russia.

Related article: Russian State TV Praises Trump for Avoiding 'Democracy' in Inauguration Speech

Following weeks of unabashed praise, Russian TV took on a more balanced tone on Donald Trump this Sunday.

On the one hand, Kiselyov's Vesti Nedeli did again rush to Trump's rescue, shielding him from

attacks of his “numerous enemies.” America’s “militant” media were pounding Trump, the anchor said — without remorse or respect for the “100 days” honeymoon rule, where rival politicians and media are “supposed to refrain from criticism.”

Valery Fadeev, the host of another Sunday news show Voskresnoe Vremya (Times on Sunday) said Trump was being subjected to attacks by Barack Obama. In a segment punctuated with ominous music, Obama was portrayed as a villain who might have said goodbye but, in fact, has never left Washington D.C. for his native Chicago.

Over on Postscriptum, Alexei Pushkov pondered whether “assassinating presidents who didn’t toe the financial elite’s line” was a “cornerstone of American democracy.”

On another hand, there was some evidence Russia’s propaganda masters had begun to distance themselves from their new friend in the White House. Kiselyov treated his viewers to the best of Saturday Night Live’s Trump parodies. He mocked Trump’s handshakes too — a bit too vigorous for the Japanese prime minister’s liking. Meanwhile, Fadeev couldn’t hold back a little Trump-bashing and aired a segment titled “The Bathrobegate,” in reference to a Stephen Colbert skit lampooning Donald Trump’s supposed TV watching outfit of choice.

Allegations about Edward Snowden’s presumed fate took up a large part of the news shows. Kiselyov dismissed rumors that Russia was preparing to hand him over as a “gift” to Trump. On Twitter Snowden himself declared the rumors to be “irrefutable evidence that [he] never cooperated with Russian intel.”

Kiselyov declared that such a transfer was out of the question. “Russia does not deal in people,“ he said, barely hiding a grin. “Snowden is a free man in a free country and it’s up to him to decide whether to stay or go.”

But while Russian TV is already starting to feel the first signs of buyers’ remorse for Trump, its admiration for Marine Le Pen seems to be only growing. Kiselyov trashed Le Pen’s opponents Francois Fillon and Emmanuel Macron as corrupt womanizers — this, after last week declaring Macron a closeted homosexual.

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This was not the end of Kiselyov’s ideological gymnastics. After lining up in support of Putin and Trump’s machismo last week, Kiselyov this week pinned himself to the mast of feminism. What France needs most is a sex change at the top, he said: “France, beautiful France” finally has a chance of electing a woman to the Elysees Palace.”

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