The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian TV to Trump: It's Over. We're With Kim Jong-un Now

State TV has executed a U-turn on Trump, and is now embracing North Korea. But don't equate media posturing with official policy

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April 19, 2017



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As tensions heat up on the Korean Peninsula, so too has Russia's newest television genre: anti-Trump propaganda. Once the golden boy of Russian television, the U.S. president has become its leading black sheep.

Now, the divergent approaches to North Korea's nuclear weapons program are exacerbating a divide that began in Syria.

Officially, the United States and Russia are not far apart on the issue of Kim Jong-un's nuclear ambitions. They're both opposed to his nuclear weapons program. They disagree on what

should be done: Trump may be considering a preemptive strike, while Russia insists that no actions should be taken that would violate North Korean sovereignty.

A U.S. strike on North Korea would put Moscow in an awkward position. After fawning over Trump for months, the Kremlin is increasingly clear that he is unpredictable and possibly detrimental to their interests. After spending months preparing the nation for a detente under President Trump, Russian television pundits and producers are now hurrying to demonize the U.S. leader.

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Reversing course so dramatically was no big deal for Russia's flagship news show, "Vesti Nedeli" (Weekly News) on state-owned Rossiya channel, a program that doubles as the Kremlin's main propaganda outlet. In his most recent broadcast, the show's host, Dmitry Kiselyov delivered a segment that was impressive even by his own standards.

Letter to Jong-un

Last weekend, the most watched news show on Russian television aired a brazen love letter to North Korea.

Kiselyov opened with a short introduction composed entirely of absurd understatements. North Korea, he said, has "a peculiar social structure based on strong centralization" and "an imposing public sector."

Next, the show featured a report from North Korea's capital, Pyongyang, where the correspondent showered Kim Jong-un and his military in praise. "Pyongyang," the reporter said, "is a city of skyscrapers." She then described bright, spacious apartment buildings, and sun-drenched streets, filled with smiling people going about their business. The country, she proclaimed, finds itself in a "new era of openness."

Embed:

> РоссТВ заливается репортажем об открытии "обычных супермаркетов" в Пхеньяне.
> Обратите внимание – "покупатели" выходят без покупок.
> pic.twitter.com/mrPzYZQ5Vc
>
> — ЗавПолит (@ZavPolit) 16 апреля 2017 г.

A separate news segment by the same reporter on the Rossiya channel praised Pyongyang's new "people's supermarkets." Note the "customers" on their way out without any bags in their hands.

North Koreans weep at the sight of their leader, the correspondent explained, as enraptured cries echoed behind her. Kim Jong-un, she said, is everyone's role model — all the men even want his haircut.

An Abrupt End

The Kremlin is no stranger to abrupt policy U-turns. Just a couple of months earlier, Dmitry Kiselyov praised Donald Trump so profusely that it prompted an unexpected backlash. Members of a fringe patriotic group picketed the offices of VGTRK, Russia's state media behemoth, demanding that Kiselyov abandon his "Trumpomania" and devote more airtime to domestic coverage.

But those days are gone, and today Kiselyov, the Kremlin's loudest, most visible mouthpiece, has turned on his short-lived idol. On his latest show, in a series of bullet points, the host laid out the reasons why Trump is actually worse than his North Korean counterpart.

Yes, Kiselyov said, Pyongyang's saber rattles, but none of its missiles has ever hit a sovereign nation — unlike United States' Tomahawks. Both are dangerous, but at least Kim is more predictable.

To really drive his point home, Kiselyov noted that Kim Jong-un's five-year-old daughter doesn't have her own office in her father's official residence, in a nod to Ivanka Trump.

But Kiselyov's show really jumped the rails when he all but openly threatened South Korea on Kim Jong-un's behalf. North Koreans won't admit this, Kiselyov suggested, but their ballistic missiles could deliver not just nuclear but chemical weapons. These rockets, he added, could be pointed at Seoul.

Embed:

> Russia's propaganda chief says Trump is now worse than North Korea's Kim Jong Un — and threatens to bomb Seoul with chemical weapons. pic.twitter.com/gN9jNKBhmF
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 18 апреля 2017 г.

After a dramatic pause, Kiselyov delivered a not-so-subtle warning: "North Koreans are asking for an end to these provocations, but they're also prepared to respond to total war with a total war of their own."

New Propaganda Policy

Georgy Toloraya, a senior Russian diplomat and the East Asia section director at the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, advises caution in taking these bold statements at face value. Realistically, he says, the only real recourse for Russia in dealing

with another North Korean crisis is to urge all sides to exercise restraint and carefully engage with both the Trump administration and South Korea.

The latter, Toloraya added, is on its way to becoming a major Russian partner in the region. The Kremlin has its own gripes with South Korea's leadership — namely, the U.S-South Korean joint exercises and THAAD anti-missile deployment — but the last thing Russia would want to do is to antagonize South Korea.

Of course, it would be shortsighted to assume that the Kremlin's propaganda directly reflects its own policies. Rather, what we see on TV is what the government's media managers want the population to believe. When asked about Kiselyov's claim that Donald Trump is more dangerous that Kim Jong-un, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, backed down.

Related article: Kremlin Reportedly Considers Overhauling State TV to Compete Better Against the Internet

The Kremlin doesn't necessarily agree with Kiselyov's remarks, Peskov explained. At the same time, he added, Kiselyov was entitled to his views "as an independent journalist."

This last statement is difficult to take seriously, given the amount of control over the state media that the Kremlin enjoys. Important domestic and foreign coverage is directly manipulated and coordinated from the presidential administration. Dmitry Kiselyov was appointed the director of a national news agency by Putin's personal order — and he can be removed just as easily.

On the other hand, there have been persistent rumours that the Kremlin is unhappy with its own propaganda machine. It may well be that it is choosing to disassociate itself with its most loyal employees.

Playing it this way, the Kremlin enjoys maximum flexibility: it can use the state media to cultivate a radical worldview, and then it can distance itself from these ideas later, if tensions with Trump subside.

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