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Russia and North Korea's Propaganda Partnership Is Taking Shape

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Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin share a hug at the meeting in Beijing in 2025. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

Narrative-shaping as a tool of geopolitics is at the core of the latest development in the North Korea-Russia strategic partnership, with the governments of both countries poised to collaborate on controlling the narrative about their relationship both at home and abroad.

On March 28, Russian state-run news agency TASS inked an agreement with North Korean government news outlet the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) aimed at coordinating information exchanges as well as cooperating to combat what the two sides considered "fake news."

Given the dependence of both Russian President Vladimir Putin and DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un on preserving their public legitimacy through narrative control, both countries' governments will increasingly rely on positive public views of their respective states, neither of which has particularly positive views of the other. The driving force behind this new

endeavor is turning inter-governmental ties into similarly warm relations between their publics.

Deepening collaboration between these two major state news organs is a natural development after a recent ministerial-level framework for media cooperation as part of the broader North Korea-Russia comprehensive partnership treaty.

For the DPRK, leveraging media to mitigate persistent mistrust among its own people rooted in negative memories of Russia's abandonment of the DPRK in the 1990s is of conceivable interest to a North Korean government deeply wary of anything that could harm its public legitimacy. Authorities in Pyongyang will need to justify its turn toward Russia to portray deepening North Korea-Russia ties as a deliberate act of will rather than a desperate about-face toward a treacherous partner in order to mitigate their own isolation.

North Korea's missile program was not always well-received in Russian discourse. Following the launch of North Korea's Hwasong-14 missile in 2017, Russian-language media in Russia and Ukraine spread competing narratives regarding each country's alleged role in the DPRK's missile program. Russian outlets asserted that Pyongyang's provocation was Ukraine's fault, due to lax control over Soviet-era nuclear facilities. Meanwhile, Ukrainian outlets highlighted accusations from both Russian and Ukrainian officials that Moscow supplied the DPRK with missile technology.

At the same time, Western governments suspected that Russia was assisting North Korea's missile program and doubted Moscow's willingness to implement — and later enforce — sanctions against Pyongyang.

Such perceptions of Russia, a country eager to portray itself as a responsible actor on the Korean Peninsula well after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, were unacceptable to Moscow.

Following the 2019 Kim-Putin summit, North Korea and Russia inked a bilateral agreement aimed at countering so-called fake news. That same year, Russian officials warned outsiders against weaponizing the arrest of Russians fishing illegally in North Korean waters to undermine ties between Moscow and Pyongyang.

Today, however, the Kremlin's primary preoccupation is likely fostering a positive image of North Korea among Russians themselves. Moscow's shifting policies toward the Korean Peninsula in light of the DPRK's increased strategic value for Russia means that Moscow is now interested in nudging public approval of North Korea in an overall more positive direction.

Related article: North Korean, Russian News Agencies Join Forces in 'Info War'

The most recent North Korea-Russia media agreement comes at a time when the domestic information space in Russia itself has become increasingly stifled.

But Putin himself is not all-powerful and must operate within certain constraints. As Russian opposition figure Maxim Katz said, it will be more difficult for the Kremlin to control

information access for generations of Russians accustomed to a relatively free internet compared to North Koreans, who have never known such freedoms.

Given these limitations, a partnership unlocking the tactics of North Korean state media arguably offers the best chance for the Kremlin to improve perceptions of the DPRK in a way conducive to Russia's great power ambitions.

At the same time, the DPRK stands to benefit by leveraging Russia's global media presence to improve perceptions of Pyongyang abroad. TASS publishes in several of the world's most widely spoken languages, giving North Korea a new tool to spread flattering news stories abroad.

Pyongyang is pinning its hopes on the TASS deal to solidify public understanding of the importance of its relationship with Moscow. Kim Pyong-ho, president of KCNA, described the March 2026 agreement as contributing not only to developing the DPRK-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership but also to deepening the friendship between the peoples of North Korea and Russia.

Given that mistrust of Russia remains strong in North Korea due to the collapse of relations in the 1990s, it is in both countries' interests to influence their populations to view the other more favorably. The families of North Korean soldiers deployed to Russia are demanding answers about their loved ones' deployments, despite the risks of questioning the government.

Related article: North Korea Gifts New Apartments to Families of Soldiers Killed Fighting for Russia

The latest stage of media cooperation between North Korea and Russia is inseparable from the DPRK's deepening integration into Russia's sphere of influence. Although the Korean Peninsula is nowhere nearly as strategically important for Russia as Ukraine, the DPRK's contributions to Russia's war efforts have already provided a platform for Moscow and Pyongyang to improve their mutual perceptions.

Leaving aside some historical grievances, Moscow and Pyongyang have much historical fodder between them to build a new public understanding of their relationship. North Korea and Russia have likewise used the DPRK's participation in the war against Ukraine as leverage to present Moscow and Pyongyang as friends united in Russia's time of need.

Deepening cooperation between the two state media organs to shape opinions both at home and abroad will make for a potentially powerful force affecting the Russian public's perceptions of the DPRK, potentially adding substance to what is largely seen as a stylistic, transactional relationship.

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