



RUSSIAN INFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA WAR: SOME METHODS AND FORMS TO COUNTERACT

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PREPARED BY THE
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the form of the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas has apart from a military also a powerful informative dimension. The latter is a planned, well-coordinated and well-funded disinformation campaign targeting different audiences.

From my point of view and that of other experts of the Centre for Russian Studies, to effectively counteract Russian's propaganda we must take into account three key factors. First, to clearly identify the audience we are talking about. Second, the messages that Moscow propaganda uses for each audience. Third, the tools the Russian propaganda machine uses for their spread.

Within the first factor the Kremlin targets three groups. The first – Russian's civil society (or what is called "civil society" in Russia). The second – the Ukrainian audience, with particular emphasis on areas occupied by Russians in Ukraine (Crimea and parts of Donbas). The third - the EU and NATO member- states.

Obviously, each of Russia's targets has its own specifics and needs different approaches, forms and methods of research. Only this would allow us to realistically analyze Kremlin's propaganda and offer practical countermeasures.

The limited scope of this article does not allow a thorough analysis of all the factors, hence I will focus only on some of them.

According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center in Moscow in March 2015, Russian citizens consider the following three countries (or unions) as main enemies of Russia: the US (73%), the EU (64%) and Ukraine (55%). Instead, "friends" of Russia are Belarus (85%) and China (76%).

50% of Russians believe that Putin acted correctly during his Crimea annexation speech mentioning a possibility to use nuclear weapon. Moreover, 49% believe that Russia's main foreign policy achievement was its return to the status of "a great power."

In the survey conducted by the same Center in May 2015 we have to pay attention to three striking figures:

“Only 6% of Russians believe that the “war in eastern Ukraine continues due to the interference of the Russian leadership in the of conflict, which supports the so called Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic with its military personnel, weapons and military equipment”;

38% - chose the answer: “Even if there are Russian troops and military equipment in Ukraine, to deny these facts due to the current international situation is the right policy for Russia”;

56%, that is, every second Russian, consider what is happening in eastern Ukraine, as Western aggression, supporting the war in eastern Ukraine in order to weaken Russia's influence in the world.

63% of Russians in March 2015 believed that the best form of political system for Russia is the Soviet system or the current Putin regime. Only 11% of Russians would like to live in a democratic society of the Western model.

Obviously, we hardly should take these opinion polls as a basis for far-reaching conclusions. At the same time, they clearly point out some important trends in the society and its general mood.

So, what can we talk about?

First. The public in Russia is excluded from unbiased information sources. You can easily manipulate and adapt any opinion the authorities want to.

Second. We can talk about the fact that a big part of the general mass consciousness in Russia accepts lies told by their leaders as such. So, a lie is acceptable for the public opinion and isn't seen as amoral.

Third. There is a permanent/ firm image of the West and western way of living as a hostile and not acceptable and applicable in Russia.

“Therefore a simple replacement of leaders of the system is not about to change the situation in general – Russian society needs an autocratic leader and system. These are the best suitable options in terms of being mentally acceptable.

I consider it naive to consider that these moods of the society are a consequence of 15 years of Putin in power. We are talking about a historic tradition of an autocratic system of thinking and acting in Russia since the Muscovite state in 13th century. The society has absorbed and developed traditions of Golden Horde despotism in ruling the country for centuries – in Russian and then Soviet empires.

Hence, we are talking about deeply rooted anti-democratic social views in the perception of the Russian society that has been supported for centuries by the vast majority.

Aspirations of western-countries leaders to change Russia into a legal democratic state after the collapse of the USSR proves their profound naïveté, ignorance of history and political myopia. Unfortunately, today a lot of western politicians have the same symptoms. And certainly you need time for rehabilitation.

The healing process started after the aggression towards Ukraine. An elaboration of an adequate political position on Russia give hopes in terms of countering its propaganda war.

One should understand that propaganda war is led not only against Ukraine, but against the western lifestyle itself. **It is a war of identities, a war of civilizations.**

Lets' focus on the aims of Russian propaganda war and how they differ for various audiences. The main aims are the following:

- for Ukraine – to destabilize the political system; to weaken European aspirations of Ukrainians.
- for the West – to mislead about Crimea and aggression in East of Ukraine; split unity in the EU and NATO
- for Russia – to isolate the public from objective and true information; grant great support for Putin's regime

In order to have this propaganda war there are a number of ideological clichés used for the needed audiences and circumstances.

They are:

- ethnic Russian minorities are suppressed in Ukraine and in EU-countries;
- Russia is an enemy for the West and its influence/ power on the world arena has to be limited;
- The USA and other EU-countries organized the colour revolutions in a few post-soviet countries that were anti-Russia oriented;
- Russia is a super power and has to have the right to influence. This “objective” sphere of her influence is the CIS;
- Russia is a stronghold in fighting modern fascism. Everything identified as anti-soviet or anti-Russian should be labelled as fascism;
- The western individualism is destructive. Collective consciousness is the traditional form of consciousness for Russians;
- The Russian Orthodox Church is the only right religion. Morality is dying in the West. Europe becomes Gay-Europe;
- The Russian World – is an alternative to Gay-Europe.

Obviously this is a set of absolutely manipulative and untrue facts and slogans. Nevertheless when using powerful instruments of influence (TV and radio, press, digital media, corrupt politicians or journalists) and having enormous almost unlimited budgets, Russian propaganda has achieved remarkable results inside the country and outside.

To achieve results in the West, the propaganda machine is using tools of the western democracy. I mean first of all the freedom of speech. The West has accessed Russia to work freely in their media without taking into account the danger for the population. Moreover, there are numerous facts pointing to Russia supporting both right- and left-wing radical parties in EU and NATO member-states that are engaged in active pro-Russia agitation. This again underlines the total political short-sightedness of western leaders.

“It is crucial for the European and American establishment to understand a simple truth: stop seeing Russian leaders as if they adhere to traditional and understandable European values and methods.

Do not tell lies, comply with agreements, obey domestic and international law, respect human rights, guarantee the right of every nation to self-determination – these and other principles that are obvious for the West are absolutely not essential for Russia.

European leaders and societies may find this hard to imagine, but we have to accept it and take into account while forming and implementing policies on Russia.

In this regard what are the effective tools to oppose Russian propaganda, in my opinion?

They have to be traditional, asymmetric, unconventional and target-oriented. For example, they don't have to be limited by a certain audience in EU and NATO-countries and be 'defensive', but go on the offensive. It's extremely likely to be successful.

First, **one should significantly increase the information pressure on Russia.** All possible channels to influence public opinion in Russia should be used. It is necessary to create special Russian TV channels that will work not only for the Russian-speaking population in the West, but in Russia too. Ukraine can be one of the proper places for it. The same applies to the re-launch of several powerful radio stations that could broadcast information to Russia, following the example of those that worked in the times of Cold War (e.g., Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Voice of the Vatican, BBC etc.)

Second, **this work will be effective only in case of having a systematic approach.** It is necessary to create a coordinating organization that will provide effective drafting and dissemination of relevant information both within the EU and NATO, and in Russia.

Third, **it is necessary to determine the most effective ways to deliver necessary information (television, internet, print media, public events, etc.) to influence target groups** (youth, pensioners, businessmen, intellectuals, academics, rural residents, etc.) and to coordinate this work.

Fourth, **limit by legal means Russian propaganda opportunities and their political influence in the West by adopting relevant legislation at national and European levels.** This should be carried out rapidly and in a coordinated manner. This move would be a serious stroke to Moscow's propaganda plans to expand its sphere of influence in the West. Having in mind the sensitivity of all the issues of freedom of speech for Western societies, it could be linked to the problems of national security and the need to counter defamation in media.

Fifth, when working with the Russian public we have to focus on sore points for it. This means **disseminating information primarily about Russian soldiers killed in the war in Ukraine, the falling living standards of ordinary Russians as a result of the policy of the Kremlin regime, the increase of poverty among the population, diminishing opportunities to travel abroad etc.**

Sixth, **contrast support for Ukrainian citizens (for example, on the issue of a visa-free regime) and absence of this prospect for Russian citizens (at least now) due to the senseless policy of the Kremlin regime.** The same can apply to the prospects for Ukrainian businesses, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to come to the European and later American markets, through the Association Agreement with the EU and rapprochement with the West in general. The Ukrainian example is much more convincing for average Russians than a comparison, for example, with Lithuanians, Poles or Croats.

Seventh, delicately, but in a consistent manner **it should be repeated that the present political regime in Moscow is not advantageous for average Russians.** Changes for the better can happen only when the system will change in the direction of universal human values. Emphasis should be placed on examples when government has to take into account the opinion of the community and need to accept public views could seriously stimulate the growth of civic activities in Russian society.

Clearly, this is only an indicative and not an exhaustive list of topics and means to be used in our work with Russia. It is also clear that we should not expect an immediate effect here. But at least they can stimulate the beginning of change in public consciousness that in a certain historic moment will play a crucial role for systemic changes.

Therefore, to get a positive effect, one should:

- by no means move to the practice of answering with one lie to another lie. The West should spread in Russia only information that it has verified as true;
- use all possible channels to deliver accurate information to Russian society;
- by legal means to reduce the presence of Russian propaganda in media space of Western countries;
- involve in this process all possible institutions and interested countries

and use all available forms and tools to deliver such information. Crucial for success is a proper coordination of this activity;

- it is important to use different kinds of narratives for different target audiences;
- understand that one of the key prerequisites for an efficient operation is proper funding. Proceed from the fact that a hot war is much more expensive than an information war.

Reconsideration of Russia's role and place in the world has already begun. From the status of a strategic partner of the West Russia gradually moved to another category: some experts and politicians have already assessed her as the main global threat. Therefore, one should immediately unite the efforts of the best experts and not waste time to start developing specific plans to neutralize this threat.

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