

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4286 | OCTOBER 21, 2014

Countering Russian Propaganda Abroad

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted a Russian foreign policy approach that integrates raw military strength with a myriad of soft power tools to pressure adversaries. A key element of Russian soft power is the use of state-sponsored media to influence foreign audiences. Russian propaganda, often masquerading as legitimate news, is disseminated through state-controlled media to confuse, obscure, and shift the debate about Putin and to legitimize Russian aggression abroad.

Russia has used propaganda to shape the battlefield and public opinion in Western democracies. American policymakers and the public should be aware of the pernicious effects of Russian propaganda and take steps to counter its impact.

Press Freedom Under Attack

In 2014, Freedom House's Press Freedom Survey ranked Russia "Not Free," saying the media environment "is characterized by the use of a pliant judiciary to prosecute independent journalists, impunity for the physical harassment and murder of journalists, and continued state control or influence over almost all traditional media outlets."¹ Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Survey similarly documented Russia's assault on press freedom.²

In September, the Russian Duma passed a law³ restricting foreign ownership of media companies to 20 percent. The law effectively forces foreign owners to relinquish control over independent outlets, further consolidating the government's control over the media. While most Russians rely on television for their news,⁴ younger Russians rely more on the Internet.⁵ In response, Russia enacted a "bloggers law," which forces most bloggers to register with the government and imposes onerous requirements on social media sites and search engines.⁶

Russian Media Abroad

Insulated from criticism in the Russian press, Putin has faced condemnation abroad, especially over the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine. Therefore, Putin has sought to export favorable coverage, obscure objective truths, and sap the resolve of Western publics to counter Russian aggression. Russia's 2013 foreign policy concept clearly outlines the important role that Russia's leadership expects the media to play in foreign affairs:

Russia will seek to ensure its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of Russian mass media in the international information environment providing them with essential state support, as well as actively participate in international information cooperation, and take necessary measures to counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security.⁷

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4286>

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Russian leadership disseminates propaganda abroad through state-sponsored media companies. RT, launched in 2005 as Russia Today, is a 24-hour English-language television news station, which claims to reach 700 million people in more than 100 countries.⁸ Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that RT was created to “try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.”⁹ RT opened RT America in 2010 and broadcasts in Arabic (Rusiya Al-Yaum) and Spanish (RT en Español). RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia¹⁰ were collapsed into Rossiya Segodnya, a radio and wire service in 2013, to further consolidate control. While formally separate, Rossiya Segodnya and RT are widely perceived as working with one another under the same editor in chief.

Putin is personally invested in the work of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, vetoing the Finance Ministry’s efforts to reduce RT’s funding in 2012.¹¹ In 2015, RT

will receive \$400 million in state funding, and Rossiya Segodnya will receive \$170 million—both significant increases.¹² Supplementing its news outlets, Russia has also been known to pay people to flood Internet comment boards with pro-Putin propaganda.¹³

Impact of Russian Propaganda

Russia hopes to use soft power to create discord in the transatlantic alliance. In France, “La Russie d’Aujourd’hui,” a pro-Russia supplement, is published monthly in *Le Figaro*.¹⁴ These sections are difficult to distinguish from the rest of the newspaper and put forth a particularly sanguine spin on Russian foreign policy and leadership. In Germany, Rossiya Segodnya plans a Berlin office of 30 people,¹⁵ and RT will begin German broadcasts in 2015.¹⁶ While unfavorable views of Russia are on the rise in the U.S. and Europe,¹⁷ Russian leaders are taking a long-

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2. Reporters Without Borders, “World Press Freedom Index 2014,” January 31, 2014, http://rsf.org/index2014/data/index2014_en.pdf (accessed October 16, 2014).
3. Paul Sonne, “Russia Moves to Restrict Foreign Ownership of Media Outlets,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/russia-moves-to-restrict-foreign-ownership-of-media-outlets-1411760000> (accessed October 16, 2014).
4. Broadcasting Board of Governors and Gallup, “Contemporary Media Use in Russia,” February 6, 2014, <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2014/02/Russia-research-brief.pdf> (accessed October 16, 2014).
5. Ibid.
6. Neil MacFarquhar, “Russia Quietly Tightens Reins on Web With ‘Bloggers Law,’” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/07/world/europe/russia-quietly-tightens-reins-on-web-with-bloggers-law.html> (accessed October 16, 2014).
7. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” February 12, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D (accessed October 16, 2014).
8. RT, “About RT,” <http://rt.com/about-us/> (accessed October 16, 2014).
9. RT, “Putin Talks NSA, Syria, Iran, Drones in RT Interview,” June 12, 2013, <http://rt.com/news/putin-rt-interview-full-577/> (accessed October 16, 2014).
10. Stephen Ennis, “Putin’s RIA Novosti Revamp Prompts Propaganda Fears,” BBC News, December 9, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25309139> (accessed October 16, 2014).
11. Ibid.
12. Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “Looking West, Russia Beefs Up Spending on Global Media Giants,” *The Moscow Times*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/looking-west-russia-beefs-up-spending-on-global-media-giants/507692.html> (accessed October 16, 2014).
13. Olga Khazan, “Russia’s Online-Comment Propaganda Army,” *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/russias-online-comment-propaganda-army/280432/> (accessed October 16, 2014).
14. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “How the Kremlin Wields Its Soft Power in France,” June 24, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-soft-power-france/25433946.html> (accessed October 15, 2014).
15. Anton Troianovski, “Russia Ramps Up Information War in Europe,” August 21, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/russia-ramps-up-information-war-in-europe-1408675046> (accessed October 16, 2014).
16. Ibid.
17. Pew Research, “Russia’s Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine,” July 9, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

term view of their soft power strategy, betting that it will eventually weaken and erode the transatlantic alliance. In the U.S., the Russian media has not been silent, supplementing the RT America news channel with paid sections in American newspapers such as *The Washington Post*.¹⁸

In Ukraine, Russia's propaganda efforts sought to confuse facts on the ground, even offering outlandish theories for how Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 fell from the sky. One London-based RT correspondent quit over MH17 coverage, saying, "It was the most shockingly obvious misinformation and it got to the point where I couldn't defend it anymore."¹⁹ The U.S. State Department accused the Russian government of having "repeatedly put out misinformation and propaganda throughout this conflict in Ukraine."²⁰ President Barack Obama described Russian justifications for its actions in Ukraine as "absurd."²¹

NATO's Front Line in the Crosshairs

While some coverage by Russian news outlets seems ridiculous to many audiences, Russian media has a disproportionate impact in nations with significant ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations, including NATO's front line members. In Latvia, more than one-fourth of the population is ethnic Russian.²² First Baltic Channel, which rebroadcasts news from Russian state-sponsored television, is the second most popular television station in Latvia.²³ Other neighboring states also have large ethnic Russian populations who rely on Russian lan-

guage television and websites, such as REGNUM, for news. Stirring up local ethnic hostility and division has been a key tactic of Russia in its invasions of Ukraine and its continued machinations in Moldova. Concern over Russian propaganda has prompted Lithuania's president to push for limits on Russian television broadcasts.²⁴

Countering Russian Propaganda

To blunt the impact of Russia's soft-power foreign media offensive, the U.S. should:

- **Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation.** The U.S. should immediately and forcefully dispute and rebut Russian propaganda and disinformation with factual evidence.
- **Strengthen alliances.** Robust transatlantic relations between the U.S. and its European allies provide the best bulwark against Russian efforts to use media to undermine Western resolve. Prioritizing training exercises, continuing military exchange programs, and maintaining a robust U.S. presence in Europe will help to keep the transatlantic link alive and strong.
- **Reinforce NATO.** Information warfare undermining legitimate state structures and fomenting civil war is one of the greatest threats to NATO as identified in the Wales Declaration.²⁵ The new NATO strategic concept should fully address the challenges of information warfare.

18. "WaPo Still Publishing Russian Propaganda," *Washington Free Beacon*, September 3, 2014, <http://freebeacon.com/culture/wapo-still-publishing-russian-propaganda/> (accessed October 16, 2014).

19. John Plunkett, "Russia Today Reporter Resigns in Protest at MH17 Coverage," *The Guardian*, July 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/18/mh17-russia-today-reporter-resigns-sara-firth-kremlin-malaysia> (accessed October 16, 2014).

20. Marie Harf, "Daily Press Briefing," U.S. Department of State, July 21, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/07/229550.htm#UKRAINE> (accessed October 16, 2014).

21. CBS News, "Obama: Russian 'Propaganda' About Ukraine Crisis Is 'Absurd,'" YouTube, March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X55tNY74ekg> (accessed October 16, 2014).

22. Damien McGuinness, "Crimea Crisis Sharpens Latvia Ethnic Tensions," BBC News, March 26, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26720549> (accessed October 16, 2014).

23. Eleonora Tafuro, "Fatal Attraction? Russia's Soft Power in Its Neighbourhood—Analysis," *Eurasian Review*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/29052014-fatal-attraction-russias-soft-power-neighbourhood-analysis/> (accessed October 17, 2014).

24. ELTA, "President Grybauskaitė: Democracy Must Be Able to Defend Itself," *The Lithuania Tribune*, October 15, 2014, <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/politics/president-grybauskaite-democracy-must-be-able-to-defend-itself.d?id=66117526> (accessed October 16, 2014).

25. Press release, "Wales Summit Declaration," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 5, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (accessed October 16, 2014).

- **Support NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (CCE).** The CCE in Latvia can help to counter Russian propaganda abroad, especially in the nations most susceptible to its effects.
- **Increase U.S. countermeasures.** The U.S. should increase the capabilities of agencies such as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which supports a broadcast network including the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Conclusion

Disseminating propaganda and misinformation through media is a crucial component of Russia’s integration of soft power and hard power tools, enabling Russia to apply greater force against its adversaries. The U.S. should take robust steps to counter Russian propaganda and to safeguard Western security and the transatlantic alliance.

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