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Authoritarianism Goes Global (II)

THE KREMLIN'S INFORMATION WAR

Peter Pomerantsev

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“If Stalin was 80 percent violence and 20 percent propaganda,” Russian journalism professor Igor Yakovenko once told me, “then Putin is 80 percent propaganda and 20 percent violence.” Media are crucial to Vladimir Putin’s rule. When he was first appointed prime minister in the late 1990s, Putin was considered by many to be a bland nobody with few political prospects. But after a war in Chechnya and a massive TV-makeover that recast him as a strong military leader, Putin managed to win the 2000 presidential election and later cement his hold on power. One of his first moves after becoming president was to capture television and put it under his direct control. Russia’s media moguls—both those who had supported Putin’s rise and those who had opposed him—were arrested or forced into exile.

Russian television had begun spinning political pseudorealities as early as 1996, when oligarchs such as Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky helped to keep President Boris Yeltsin in power by broadcasting claims that the candidates running against him were part of a fascist-communist menace. Yet for most of the 1990s, Russia’s oligarchs opposed one another, creating a sort of perverse system of checks and balances among the various campaigns of disinformation. With power centralized under Putin, however, the Kremlin could run both television and politics like one vast scripted reality show.

At the center of the show was the president himself: Putin bare-chested, riding on a horse; Putin stroking tigers; Putin in leather, riding a Harley. The staged images of Putin as B-movie hunk were used to cultivate his image as superhero-czar and to set him above the fray of real politics (a regular set piece on Russian news has Putin scolding government

ministers and regional governors for failing the country). From 1999 to 2011, the man running this show was Vladislav Surkov. Officially the deputy head of the presidential administration, Surkov was actually in charge of everything from the arts to religion to political parties and civil society. Every Friday, Surkov met with the heads of the major news channels to tell them what the week's main stories should be and which political figures would be allowed on television.

This system has only become more stringent since the start of the war with Ukraine in 2014. According to "Messages of Russian TV: Monitoring Report 2015," an EU-funded study of Russian news channels conducted by NGOs from seven countries, the president and government receive mainly positive or neutral coverage from Kremlin-controlled channels, while opposition members are covered only rarely and usually negatively. The study reports that in March 2015 almost 32 percent of Channel One's coverage was devoted to Ukraine, compared to just 12.7 percent devoted to domestic politics, 4 percent to the economy, and 1.3 percent to social issues.¹

Television news has thus become grand theater, juxtaposing the "chaos in Ukraine" with Putin-guaranteed stability in Russia. Russian news has featured fake television items that were later exposed by journalists—for example, staged interviews with Russian "victims" (who were really actors) of alleged atrocities by Ukrainian "fascists,"² and an invented tale about a child being crucified by Ukrainian forces.³ A leading Russia media-studies professor told a European Endowment for Democracy project funded by the Dutch and Latvian governments that "the Kremlin has blurred the line between fact and fiction" with such efforts, "making news and current affairs [seem] like an engaging, sensationalist drama."

Surkov and his successors have run domestic politics much as they have television, turning the political process into pure spectacle. Surkov even had direct telephone lines to "opposition" politicians, telling them what to say and where and when to say it—always with the goal of making Putin look better by contrast. The Russian parliament thus became a place of choreographed speechmaking: "The Duma is not a place for debate," Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov declared in 2003. Surkov likewise controlled civil society, creating tame NGOs, cultivating liberal elites, and even sponsoring radical modern-art festivals, while simultaneously fostering nationalist youth movements such as Nashi that beat up modern-art curators and labeled liberals as traitors. This strategy gave the Kremlin ownership of all forms of discourse, allowing it to spin them to its own advantage and ultimately to render them toothless and absurd.

Under Surkov's successor, Vyacheslav Volodin, the discourse has been ratcheted up: Liberals are now described as a dangerous "fifth column," and the imperialist far right has been mobilized as a violent

avant-garde. But the Kremlin still guides all the narratives, allowing it to frame any argument in the way that best suits its needs at any given time, for any given situation. Thus political talk shows regularly feature nationalists attacking Kremlin-sanctioned liberals. This is what Andrew Wilson calls the “highly developed industry of political manipulation,” which in the post-Soviet world is commonly known as “political technology.”⁴

Are Russians buying the Kremlin’s narrative? This might be the wrong question. As Václav Havel wrote in “The Power of the Powerless,” the Soviet bloc was not sustained by fervent belief in the system, but by acquiescence in a common discourse that coopted the population—a case of propaganda signaling what was “correct” behavior rather than achieving ideological indoctrination. Likewise, the point of Putin’s “managed democracy” is not to convince anyone that Russian democracy is real, but to send a message to the population about how they should behave. Russia watchers are often puzzled by a seeming contradiction: Why does Putin, who is extremely popular, rig elections, when he would most likely win them anyway? Would he not gain more credibility by staging a closely fought runoff, “proving” that he was democratically elected? As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes explain, these questions misunderstand the role of presidential elections in Russia.⁵ Their purpose is to burnish the image of Putin as untouchable, an image that would only be tarnished by serious competition.

The Kremlin wants to show that it has total control over the script. This principle is also behind the regime’s use of show trials. The trials of independent-minded oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and opposition leader Alexei Navalny both were characterized by absurdity—Khodorkovsky was accused of having stolen oil from himself, and Navalny allegedly took part in corrupt business deals from which he made no profit. In both cases, the sentencing judge used the testimony of *defense* witnesses as proof of guilt. But this absurdity is the point—the Kremlin can say “black is white” and “white is black,” and no one can contradict it.

The underlying goal of the Kremlin’s propaganda is to engender cynicism in the population. Cynicism is useful to the state: When people stop trusting any institutions or having any firmly held values, they can easily accept a conspiratorial vision of the world. The state-television channels actively encourage such a vision—for example, by finding the hidden hand of the CIA behind all the world’s prodemocracy movements. In showing that democracy is so easily manipulated, that everyone and everything is for sale, the Kremlin is dashing people’s hopes for the possibility of an alternative politics while simultaneously insisting that the West is just as corrupt as Russia.

The Kremlin peddles conspiracy theories to get this point across. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is RTR’s weekly news show *Vesti Nedeli*, hosted by Dmitry Kiselev, head of the new Rossiya Sevodnya

(Russia Today) news agency.⁶ On the show, Kiselev offers a mash-up of truths assembled and interpreted in ways that rewrite reality: For example, a Swedish children's TV show about sex education must be a sign that Europe is mired in sexual perversion; and the fact that Navalny spent time at Yale must mean that he is working for the United States. Similarly, the online videos "Why America Needs a Big War in Europe" and "What Awaits Russia If Putin Puts Troops in Ukraine" purportedly reveal baroque conspiracies in which the Russian nationalists who are agitating for war in Ukraine turn out to be working for the West, which wants Russia to be pulled into war in the Donbas.⁷ This is not classic "agitational propaganda"; rather, it aims at producing apathy, distrust, and a vague sense of paranoia.

A final key element in the regime's continued control is corruption, which helps to keep the current vertical governing structure intact. By doling out financial favors and preferential treatment, the president keeps his cronies and other oligarchs in line. Preparations for the Sochi Olympics, which straddled the presidencies of Dmitri Medvedev and Putin, provide a good example. While Medvedev was president, "his" oligarchs were granted the top positions and won the most lucrative contracts. When Putin became president again in 2012, Medvedev's people were pushed out and Putin's oligarchs reclaimed the favors and top spots.

Courting the Left and the Right

The Kremlin uses this mix of political technology, fluid ideology, and corruption not only domestically but also in managing foreign relations. During the Cold War, the Kremlin cultivated ties mainly with ideologically similar leftist groups. Today, the Kremlin forges alliances with and funds groups on both the left and the right: European right-wing nationalists are seduced by Russia's anti-EU message; Europe's far left is enticed by the prospect of fighting U.S. hegemony; and U.S. religious conservatives are attracted to the Kremlin's stance against homosexuality. The Kremlin's fluid use of ideology allows it to ally with an array of actors and to promote a range of principles that foster divisions within the West.

The Kremlin retains deep institutional ties to former and current communist parties throughout Eastern Europe. Ukraine even banned its communist party, believing it to be a proxy for the Kremlin. The Left party (Die Linke) in Germany also has been outspoken in its defense of Russian positions. According to NATO, Russia has also managed to manipulate green movements by funding European ecological groups whose anti-fracking agendas coincide with the Kremlin's desire to keep Europe dependent on Russian gas.⁸ Yet at home, the Kremlin is clamping down on anticapitalist leftist groups and arresting ecological activists.

On the right, the Kremlin has built alliances with radical social conservatives and anti-EU nationalists. Right-wing political figures and

groups on both sides of the Atlantic—from U.S. conservative columnist Patrick Buchanan to French right-nationalist leader Marine Le Pen (whose party has received funds from Moscow⁹), to Britain’s anti-EU politician Nigel Farage, to Hungary’s anti-Semitic Jobbik party, to the U.S.-based anti-LGBT coalition World Congress of Families—have proclaimed their admiration for Putin, in turn receiving plenty of airtime on Russian-controlled airwaves.¹⁰ Far-right activists, white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and anti-Semites from across Europe and the United States have appeared with Kremlin-connected ideologues at conferences in Europe, while Kremlin advisors have presented lectures to European and U.S. far-right parties in Yalta.¹¹

In addition to ideological appeals, the Kremlin also wields financial incentives to draw in allies. For example, Jörg Haider, the now-deceased leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria, once accepted €900,000 in return for helping Russian businessmen to secure their residency permits. According to Anton Shekhovtsov, “Putin’s Russia cooperates with European far right parties partly because the latter help Russian political and business elites worm into the West economically, politically and socially, and . . . for them, the far right’s racism and ultra-conservatism are less important [than its] corruptibility.”¹²

Shekhovtsov also notes that the financial transactions do not necessarily need to be direct bribes. Businesspeople associated with far-right movements can also be given preferential treatment when dealing in Russia in return for their political support. For example, one of the first European businessmen to do business in Crimea after its annexation by Russia was Frenchman Philippe de Villiers, leader of the Euroskeptic party Movement for France, who will build theme parks in Moscow and Crimea.¹³ According to Shekhovtsov, Putin’s cooperation with Europe’s far right is driven only by the desire to achieve his economic and political aims, not by ideological kinship.¹⁴

Despite its relative weakness, the Kremlin has learned the art of what Nicu Popescu and Mark Leonard call “asymmetric interdependence”—advancing Russia’s interests by making other states reliant on its money, markets, and trade. Energy is often the Kremlin’s trump card. A Swedish Defense Agency study found that, between 1992 and 2006, Russia cut off energy to countries in Central and Eastern Europe 55 times. Officially, Russia claimed these cutoffs were caused by technical problems. Yet they almost always happened when there was an election that Russia wanted to influence or an energy deal that it wanted to promote.¹⁵

Controlling the Message

Russia’s international television broadcaster, RT, provides an international forum for uniting the various groups that the Kremlin works with. According to its own statistics, the channel now reaches 600 million peo-

ple globally and 3 million hotel rooms across the world. It boasts of having a billion hits online, making it one of YouTube's most popular news channels. It has an enormous budget (believed to be more than US\$300 million), and broadcasts in Arabic, English, German, and Spanish. Although RT's actual viewership is far lower than what it claims and its billion hits are not necessarily for political programs,¹⁶ the channel's programming is worth examining for what it reveals about the Kremlin's overall thinking.

Programming about Russia makes up only a small part of RT's output. Its schedule focuses on what it calls "other" or "unreported" news, which is the network's special niche. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has had a show on RT, as has left-wing Scottish politician George Galloway. Leftist U.S. political theorist and linguist Noam Chomsky is a frequent guest. The channel devotes generous attention to 9/11 conspiracy theories, and it won an Emmy for its reporting on the Occupy Movement in the United States. RT regularly features figures from the right, such as UKIP's Nigel Farage. Some of RT's right-wing "experts" have ties to extremist or fringe groups that would make them *personae non gratae* on other channels. For example, Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson has appeared on RT as a "human-rights activist," and neo-Nazi Manuel Ochsенreiter as a "Middle East analyst."¹⁷ Nevertheless, RT is not uniformly "antihegemonic." It also welcomes establishment figures such as former CNN host Larry King, who at one time had a show on RT and was widely featured in its advertisements.

Viewers that first come to RT for its anti-Western slant are then fed other programming that strays beyond even the wildest "opinion" television. Recently, Spanish-language RT featured a report that considered whether the United States engineered the Ebola outbreak¹⁸—a modern echo of 1980s Soviet *dezinformatsiya* about the CIA being behind the AIDS epidemic. RT contributors have called Ukraine's government a right-wing junta and claimed that Ukrainian nationalists are threatening Jews.

The channel edited an interview with Misha Kapustin, the rabbi of Simferopol in Crimea, in a way that gave the impression that he was leaving Crimea because of a wave of anti-Semitism from Ukrainian nationalists. In fact, Kapustin has condemned Russia's actions in the region, encourages Western sanctions against Russia, and told the *Times of Israel* that he was actually leaving Crimea because of Russian aggression. "There is no imminent danger to Jews in Crimea," the heads of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee said in a public statement; "the situation is being manipulated by the Russian government to make the world believe they are protecting us."¹⁹ It is not just RT that spreads such disinformation. As Adrian Chen reported in the *New York Times*, the Kremlin uses "troll farms" and bots to create and spread fake stories online—for example, that there were Ebola outbreaks in the United States and ISIS attacks on U.S. towns.²⁰

In and of themselves, such disinformation campaigns may seem farcical. Indeed, if their aim is to build classic soft power, which is all about attractiveness and trust, then they are surely counterproductive (Putin's approval rating has been falling in Western countries since the conflict in Ukraine began). But if their aim is less to convince and persuade and more to muddle the information space and sow doubt and confusion, then perhaps these efforts are succeeding in terms of Russia's vision of "information-psychological" warfare.

According to retired Rear Admiral Vladimir Pirumov, former head of the Directorate for Electronic Warfare of Russia's Main Naval Staff, information war means "securing national policy objectives both in peacetime and in wartime through means and techniques of influencing the information resources of the opposing side." The enemy's information systems are not the only targets of information warfare; it also aims to influence the psyches of enemy populations through "disinformation (deception), manipulation (situational or societal), propaganda (conversion, separation, demoralization, desertion, captivity), lobbying, crisis control and blackmail."²¹

Russia's Disinformation Campaigns

The 2011 edition of the "Information-Psychological War Operations" handbook instructs intelligence officer trainees to act like "invisible radiation," where "the population doesn't even feel it is being acted upon." Latvian scholar Janis Berzins, writing on the future of Russian warfare, foresees a move from "direct clashes to contactless war," from "war in the physical environment to a war in the human consciousness and in cyberspace." The weapons in this contactless, perpetual war might be TV channels, energy companies, banks, Internet trolls, Russian expatriate groups that can incite unrest abroad—in other words, a "combination of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns."²²

For an example of how this might work, we can look at what happened in Estonia in 2007. Ethnic Russians—the vast majority of whom are descendants of people forcibly moved there by Stalin to break Estonian nationhood—account for roughly 25 percent of Estonia's population. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia enacted a law requiring residents who arrived after 1946 and their descendants to pass Estonian-language tests to gain full citizenship. The ethnic Russian population did not see themselves as colonizers, however, and resented this requirement. They watch Russian TV, which broadcasts the official Russian line that Estonia had "voluntarily" given up its independence in 1944.

Every year in Tallinn, Russian nationalists and war veterans would meet at the statue of the Bronze Soldier, commemorating the Soviet vic-

tory in World War II. They would sing Soviet songs and drape the statue in Soviet flags. Some Estonians, however, considered the statue to be a symbol of Soviet occupation and took offense. Estonian nationalists began to organize countermarches, and one writer threatened to blow the statue up. In March 2007, the Estonian parliament voted to move the statue to a military cemetery.

Russian media and politicians went into overdrive. “Estonian leaders collaborate with fascism!” exclaimed the mayor of Moscow. “The removal of the statue is a fascist orgy,” argued the Russian Communist Party. “The situation is despicable,” claimed Russia’s foreign minister. Russian media nicknamed the country “eSStonia,” signaling that the country was dominated by Nazi sympathizers, and ethnic Russians camped out to protect the Bronze Soldier.

On the night of April 26, ethnic-Russian crowds started throwing Molotov cocktails at police. Riots broke out, there was mass looting, and one man died. Russian media claimed that he was killed by police (he was not). They also spread rumors that some Russians had been beaten to death at the ferry port, while others were tortured and fed psychotropic substances during interrogation. On April 27, Estonian government, newspaper, and bank employees arrived at work to find their computer systems down as a result of the largest cyberattack in history. Estonia was disabled.

Today, many Estonians are convinced that the media coverage, rioting, and cyberattacks were coordinated from Moscow, although this cannot be proven. “Patriotic hackers” with links to Kremlin youth groups and Russian MPs took credit for the attacks, but claimed to be working independently. Ethnic-Russian NGOs in Estonia claimed to have planned the protests. When I interviewed Estonian president Toomas Ilves last year, he said, “Sometimes we wonder whether the point of the attacks [was] to make us sound paranoid and unreliable to our NATO allies, and thus undermine trust in the alliance.”

The aims of such information operations are often opaque, as they are designed to produce second- and third-order effects. This strategy has kept the Estonians forever guessing at the Kremlin’s real intentions: “When Russian politicians make threats about being able to conquer Estonia, does that mean they would ever invade?” asks President Ilves’s former security advisor Iivi Masso. “Are they just trying to demoralize us,” he wonders, “or do they want Western journalists to quote them, which will send a signal to the markets that we’re unsafe,” causing investments to plummet?

It is not just in Russia’s near abroad, or even just in Europe, that Russia’s information war is being waged. In October 2014, Putin and Argentina’s President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner inked a deal to have RT news broadcast in Spanish on Argentine television. “Our peoples can communicate without any intermediaries,” Kirchner said in a joint

video conference with Putin, claiming that national media (that is, the media critical of her government) and international media do not show the *true* Argentina or *true* Russia.

The Kremlin's current strategy for keeping control has created a cynical citizenry, shaped by propaganda and conspiracy theories, that is bereft of hope.

Putin echoed this statement, noting that “the rapid progress of electronic media has made news reporting enormously important and turned it into a formidable weapon that enables public opinion manipulations.”²³ RT’s partnerships are not limited to Latin America. For example, the channel has also been pooling stories with Syrian state television, including a report of Syrian rebels gassing themselves in order to fake a chemical attack by President Bashar al-Assad’s forces.

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It is hard to say how effective the Kremlin’s approach is—or indeed even what its goals are. But another reason that the Kremlin’s thinking deserves attention and analysis is the fact that other neoauthoritarian regimes are adopting similar approaches. China’s use of the media to control its citizens, for example, has become increasingly supple. And just as the Kremlin’s use of ideology is fluid, so too is that of the ruling Chinese “Communist” Party (CCP). Today’s CCP manages to champion both Confucius and communism, and to support the Shanghai stock market while praising Maoist propaganda songs. Moreover, China’s propaganda, like Russia’s, is as much about signaling as it is indoctrination.²⁴ As a U.S. government report concludes, China’s information tactics are “guided . . . by the belief that whose story wins is more important than whose army wins.”²⁵

The Kremlin’s current strategy for keeping control—manipulating all facets of the political process, adopting whatever ideological stance is expedient for a given situation, and buying loyalty with money and favors—has created a cynical citizenry, shaped by propaganda and conspiracy theories, that is bereft of hope. It also leaves Russia’s international adversaries and allies alike uncertain of what to expect. Increasingly, illiberal regimes across the world are adopting similar strategies and uniting to create global networks of pseudorealities. The world’s liberal democracies must rise to the challenge by finding ways to counter these false narratives with true ones.

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