



# Russia's info-war: the home front

by Cameron Johnston

The use and misuse of information is as important to today's Kremlin as it was to the Soviet Politburo. But if the ultimate goal is the same – to control the people from above – the techniques used to achieve it are strikingly different. Whereas Soviet leaders imposed strict censorship in an attempt to isolate the people from the 'heresies' of the West, Putin's government bombards them with fantastical stories designed to paralyse their critical faculties. And if Soviet propaganda was meant to contribute to the construction of a new society, modern Russian propaganda is wholly destructive. Rather than try, in vain, to persuade the people of the virtues of its rule, today's Kremlin disseminates lies and half-truths designed less to convince than to disorientate. In so doing, the regime cuts away the ground from beneath the people's feet, propelling them into a world where, in Peter Pomerantsev's words, 'nothing is true and everything is possible'.

On the home front of the information war, President Putin has scored a decisive victory. He has succeeded in persuading his people that the Kiev authorities are fascists and the Americans aggressors, while he himself is all that stands between Russia and total chaos.

## The heroes and their feats

On 22 April 2014, Putin signed executive order No. 269, honouring three hundred journalists

for their 'great professionalism and objectivity in covering events in the Republic of Crimea'. These journalists had helped to make the annexation possible and would soon lay the ground for the armed uprising in the Donbas. Vladimir Kulistikov – whose channel, *NTV*, had performed a hatchet job on the Russian opposition after the protests of 2011-12 – received the highest honour, 'For Services to the Fatherland, second class'. The channel of another prize-winner, Konstantin Ernst, later ran an interview with a woman who claimed – falsely – that Ukrainian troops had crucified her three-year-old son. Putin also honoured Arkady Mamontov, who has stated that the EU was building concentration camps in Ukraine, and Ernest Mackevicius, who used footage shot during an anti-terrorist operation in the North Caucasus in 2012 to illustrate the supposed savagery of Ukrainian troops.

The inclusion of the head of *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for the Supervision of Communication, Information Technology and Mass Media), Alexander Zharov, on the honours list showed that censorship remained an important weapon in the Kremlin's arsenal. On 13 March 2014, he ordered internet providers to block Russians' access to several opposition websites, as well as to anti-corruption campaigner Alexander Navalny's blog. Likewise, it would have been more difficult for the Kremlin to sell its narrative had Russia's independent media not first been hobbled. After the hollowing out of broadcaster *RIA Novosti*, the

removal of the celebrated editor of newspaper *Lenta* and the intimidation of radio station *Echo Moskvy*, Russia's liberal minority found it more difficult to make themselves heard.

## The philosophy

Nevertheless, the Russian leadership's approach to propaganda is different from that of their Communist forebears. They take globalisation as a given and appropriate Western principles, such as freedom of speech, in the service of a relativistic view of the world. The Kremlin's strategy rests on three key propositions: there is no such thing as objectivity; journalists are not critics but servants of the state and, in wartime, they are 'soldiers of the ideological front'.

Any talk of objectivity is just hot air according to Margarita Simonyan, the head of *RT*, a state-funded TV network. Aram Gabrelyanov, founder of the TV channel *LifeNews* agreed: "If [a journalist] is impartial, that means he is in his coffin." They argue that mass media should seek to entertain their audience by embracing subjectivity, rather than pretending to be objective like the BBC. This has led Simonyan to conflate journalism and propaganda: "If we were to say that any journalism that does not simply inform [the audience] about events in a dry manner but also carries with it an editorial opinion of some sort is propaganda, then propaganda is journalism...there is nothing shameful in propaganda."

If there is no truth, only a collection of competing narratives, it follows that journalists are not independent actors but merely mouthpieces for a given interest group. The role of journalists is no longer to speak truth to power but to speak on behalf of power. For Gabrelyanov, then, the true goal of the media is "to be patriotic and defend the interests of the government", while Kulistikov has declared that "We are part of the power machine".

Aleksei Volin, Deputy Minister for Communications and Mass Media, chastised teachers at the journalism faculty of Moscow State University for failing to prepare their students for the real world. Rather than encourage the idea that they can make the world better, teachers should remind their students that "[They] are going to work for the boss, and the boss is going to tell them what to write and how to write it...[he] has that right because he pays them." While echoes of Volin's cynicism may be heard in almost any country, the stridency of his attack on journalistic freedom is characteristic of Russia today.

With the war underway in Ukraine, journalists should advance the state's interests in the field of information just as soldiers do on battlefield. Andrei Kondrashov, one of Russian television's leading news anchors, said in May 2014 that "Soldiers and officers receive awards for combat. It is an absolutely identical situation for us, because war is now moving to the area of journalism."

Simonyan, meanwhile, explicitly defines information as a weapon: "The weapon of information...is used in critical moments and war is always a critical moment... [Information] is a weapon like any other... And to ask why we need it is a little bit like saying 'why do we need a Ministry of Defence if there is no war?'" She added, ominously, that *RT* has advanced so far since the Russian-Georgian war that "if 2008 were to happen now, the picture around the world would be different."

## The effects

Even if these 'soldiers of the ideological front' do not kill in person, they wage war by proxy. The extent to which propagandists can distort reality and inspire paranoia is exemplified by the case of Dorji Batomunkuev, a contract soldier who suffered severe facial burns during the battle for Debaltseve in eastern Ukraine. In a recent interview with the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Batomunkuev said that President Putin had been right to intervene in the Donbas, for if Ukraine had been allowed to join the United Nations, Russia would have been put in danger.

By marginalising Russia's true journalists and mobilising its propagandists, the Kremlin has succeeded in persuading the Russian people that they are encircled by hostile forces bent on their destruction. Abroad, it has been less successful in selling its narrative but, there too, its conspiracy theories sap civic activism and undermine trust in government.

With Russia suffering financially from sanctions and low oil prices, Putin might well attempt to step up the propaganda yet further. But if food prices continue to rise and real incomes to fall, how long will the Russian people keep believing in the beguiling myth of the good Tsar?

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