

Propaganda

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IMAGE OF EUROPE IN RUSSIAN MEDIA: JOURNALISM OR CREATION OF ENEMY IMAGE?

Liubov Tsybulska

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The article presents a short analysis of the research “Image of Europe in Russian Media” done by the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Analysis of the Russian media context demonstrated that the way in which the Russian TV shows the Europeans to its own population has impact not only on the relations between Russia and other countries, but also on the Russians’ readiness to support the policy of their president. Six narratives (Horrors of Life, “The Declining West”, Protests, Terrorism, Refugee Crisis, Sanctions Imposed on Russia) are presented to confirm the propaganda agenda and manipulation aiming to form public opinion in Russia.

The Context

The launch of the official portal www.euvdisinfo.eu in September 2017 has been hailed as a big victory in the fight against Russian propaganda. Its creators, experts of East StratCom Task Force, analyse content produced by the Kremlin’s sources of information and provide recommendations directly to policy makers in European institutions. However, already in March 2018, the majority of MPs in the Netherlands’ Tweede Kamer, House of Representatives, call for closing the EU website, which is countering the Kremlin’s propaganda, saying that “civil servants should not be in charge of checking on journalists”¹.

The very possibility that this resource will be closed is worrying and demoralizing news. What is even more unexpected, this

proposal comes from the Netherlands, a country that has repeatedly become target of the Russian disinformation campaigns.

Is it true that Europe sees no threat in the Russian propaganda machine? Or does democracy harm itself, unable to counter new methods, undermining its cornerstone?

Four years ago, it was extremely difficult to talk about the Kremlin disinformation worldwide. Hybrid warfare and its toolkits yet needed to be exposed. Only few actors dared to call Russia an aggressor and social media were believed to be safe and free of propaganda. It seems a lot has changed since that time.

First of all, in the global politics. Mr. Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential elections

¹ Dutch MPs Want EU to Shut Anti-disinformation Site, “EUOBSERVER”, 06 March 2018, [<https://euobserver.com/tickers/141216> access: 12 March 2018].



the way in which the Russian state shows the Europeans to its own population has impact not only on the international and intercultural relations between Russia and other countries, but also on the Russians' readiness to support the policy of their president

and the uncompromising position of French President Macron brought conversations about threats of information warfare back to public discussion. American experts have gone even further, calling Russian operations in Ukraine a new, 21st-century form of conflict – *Fifth Generation Warfare*², when the full spectrum operations is being used (“running from low-level information operations, through economic pressure, peacekeeping, insurgency and conventional military intervention”) and the main aim is to create the situation of a permanent chaos, which is the best environment for achieving aggressor’s goals.

It would seem we should already have moved from revealing and collecting facts of disinformation to counteraction, and developed a mechanism for response, or, at least, to a wide public discussion about where the dividing line is between freedom of speech and informational aggression. On the contrary, we have to prove once again why at least these platforms for denouncing disinformation are necessary.

In Search of Arguments

Ukraine, undoubtedly, has been and remains the main “training field” where Russia

tests its information warfare technologies. But very few experts are raising concerns about the fact that the Kremlin’s biggest “test laboratory” is its own country with 150-million-strong population, and these experiments are a threat not only for Russians, but for other countries as well.

During the last six months, Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) experts, who have been at the forefront of the information war with Russia since 2014, have been analysing internal Russian propaganda within the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group (HWAG). To prove that Russian propaganda has a much wider scope than the information war between the two countries in conflict, UCMC initiated a project aiming to illustrate to the Europeans how Russian state-controlled media show Europe to Russian people.

The topic of the first research was the “Image of Europe in Russian Media”. It is obvious that the way in which the Russian state shows the Europeans to its own population has impact not only on the international and intercultural relations between Russia and other countries, but also on the Russians’ readiness to support the policy of their president. For instance, if Russian TV channels were not regularly demonizing Ukraine and Ukrainians, there would be far fewer Russian volunteers willing to join the ranks of the so-called LPR and DPR.

To understand why the issue is worth the attention of European countries, it is important to take into account the vulnerability of the Russian population to propagandistic content. According to a Russian social survey³:

² Modern War, “Strategy and Tactics Press”, No. 29, May 2017, [<https://shop.strategyandtacticspress.com/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=MW29M>].

³ *Media consumption in Russia survey by Deloitte, 2017*; Russian population census 2010; “Wikipedia”; “Kommersant.ru”.

- Only 5% of Russians can speak a foreign language (usually English);
- 6% watch/read news from foreign media;
- 7% sometimes travel farther than the countries of the former USSR.

This state of affairs, in combination with unprecedented public trust toward state-controlled media, leads to informational isolation of the society and results in high loyalty to the Russian president's policy and inability to analyse his actions critically.

According to the survey of the Russia Public Opinion Research Centre in 2015,⁴ the majority of Russians get news from TV channels. Among the channels which they trust most of all, the majority of respondents mentioned federal and regional channels. For this reason, we focused our research on the mass media that have the biggest share on the media market and are under the Kremlin's financial and political control. These are the three main Russian TV channels – *First Channel* (“Первый канал”), *Russia 1* (“Россия 1”), and *NTV* (НТВ). *Russia 1* is under the direct control of the Russian Government. The other two belong to Yuriy Kovalchuk, shareholder and chairman of the directors council of the “Russia” bank, a man from the “inner circle” of Vladimir Putin.

The research focused on news and key political talk shows of these channels, because they are the most precise demonstration of the Kremlin's political vision of events both in Russia and abroad. We analysed the content of a total of eight programs on the three TV channels in the period between July 2014 and December 2017:

Russia 1 – News (Вести), News of the week (Вести недели), News on Saturday (Вести в субботу), Evening with Vladimir Solovuyov (Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым);

First Channel: News (Новости), Sunday Time (Воскресное время), Time (Время);

NTV – Today (Сегодня), Majority (Большинство).

The research did not include entertainment programs, because their rhetoric about the Europeans is far more emotional and harsh. Take for instance the entertainment political program “International Sawmill” on NTV by Tigran Keosayan (husband of Margarita Simonyan, director of Russia Today), where the host allows himself to laugh at almost all Western countries, call Emmanuel Macron “a gay-gerontophile”, or threaten Estonia with military attack. That is why a selection was made in favour of programs that at least try to comply with standards of journalism.

In order to prevent accusations of political bias, it was important for us to make both qualitative and quantitative analysis of collected data, because only figures can prove that Russian propaganda is systemic and state-controlled.

The data was collected by a specialized Russian agency⁵ that provides services of media monitoring and analysis. News stories were collected automatically, searched by keywords that they contain (names of European countries and their leaders), and then manually categorized by the experts according to the topic they addressed. As a result, the experts received a collection of news about 28 EU member-states, as well as Norway, Switzerland, and countries of the Eastern Partnership.

⁴ *Mass Media in Russia: Popularity and Trust*, Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Press release No. 1730, 07 May 2015, [https://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1087].

⁵ The name of the agency cannot be given due to security reasons.

The Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group research revealed that during the analysed period in 2014-2017, the Russian mainstream channels demonstrated more than 45,000 pieces of negative news about Europe, the US, Ukraine, and countries of the Eastern Partnership. The biggest share of these is composed of news stories about European countries. Europe is mentioned in a negative context on average 18 times daily. By comparison, the Coca-Cola brand has only six advertisement videos a day on the same TV channels.



Europe is mentioned in a negative context on average 18 times daily

We assessed as “negative” the news with a distinct negative tone and expressive rhetoric about the object in question. Assessing the tone, we took into account the opinion of the author of the message and that of other commentators, but the author’s opinion prevailed.

In total, the average proportion of negative to positive/neutral news about European countries is 85% to 15%. One could object that this is a worldwide tendency of TV news, which usually focuses on negative stories. However, the HWAG figures prove that there is something more specific with the Russian channels than the general focus on the negative. Only two countries are shown in positive or neutral tone more often than others: These are Belarus (40% neutral/positive, 60% negative) and Switzerland (43% neutral/positive, 57% negative). According to the Russian TV channels’ agenda, only these two countries are more safe and stable. The reason is

rather obvious: Belarus is Russia’s old friend and a political ally, while Switzerland is neutral and, very likely, is home to banks where the Russian elite keeps its money.

Narratives

The HWAG categorized the collected pieces of negative news into six main narratives. These narratives form the Russians’ general beliefs about what Europe and European life look like.

Here they are:

1) **Horrors of Life.** The most widespread narrative of the Russian news is about life in Europe. This narrative tries to persuade Russian citizens that the life in European countries is insecure and full of dangers. The majority of such news items are stories about natural and industrial disasters, accidents, and crimes.

The peculiarity of this narrative is that it is usually based on insignificant events, which are shown as something large-scale, or even as a tendency. For example, this may be news about family fights in small provincial towns, or roads closed because of snowstorms, even if these roads have no strategic importance. There might be a lot of similar events in Russia as well, but they are not mentioned. It is done to form a belief that Europe is unstable, full of disasters, and dangerous to live in. It is remarkable in this context that according to a social survey by Levada Center (January 2016), 70% of Russians prefer avoiding travels abroad for security reasons.⁶

Local authorities in Europe are usually depicted as weak and unable to provide adequate response to challenges. The same refers to the police or armed forces of the

⁶ *Поездки за границу (Travels Abroad)*, Левада-Центр, 20 January 2016, [<https://www.levada.ru/2016/01/20/poezdki-za-granitsu-2/>].

European countries: If they are mentioned, they are usually shown by Russian TV as weak and inefficient.

This narrative mentions predominantly France (16%), Italy (13%), Germany (10%), United Kingdom (9%), and Spain (7%).

2) “The Declining West”. We consciously chose this combination of words as a title for the narrative, because it is very widespread in the Russian media. The phrase itself emerged still in the Soviet era. This narrative is built mainly on affirmations about lack of unity and decline of moral values in European countries, using expressions such as “Europe is going to break apart”, “the EU is an artificial formation”, and “European values do not exist”. Example:

All the talks about Europe in different gears will immediately turn out to be what they really are – a vain attempt to hide the total incapability of the United Europe of self-preservation. (First Channel, 19 March 2017)

The Europeans are depicted as persons with weak moral values: Hypocrisy among political elites, neo-Nazism, paedophilia, and incest are shown as if they were widespread, ordinary cases. What is strange, the Russian media in the same context mention the problem of LGBT rights and gender equality. The Russians, on the contrary, are opposed to the Europeans as “bearers of spirituality and real values” and those who have to fight for these values, sometimes aggressively, because the virus of the “declining West” can erode and ruin Russia as well.

Among very widespread types of such stories, there is a myth about “removal of Russian children from their parents in

Scandinavian countries”. There are dozens of examples of the coverage telling how child protection authorities seize children from Russian families living in these countries, “without any investigations and trial”. These and similar invented stories (creation of the Party of Paedophiles in the Netherlands, legalization of incest in Sweden) evoke a very strong emotional reaction, and, for this reason, spread very quickly.⁷

The constituent parts of the “declining West” narrative are stories about “rewriting history” and “renaissance of fascism”. The first is usually said about other countries of the former USSR – the Baltic countries and Ukraine, as well as Poland. According to the Russian TV, they try to sponge out the memory of common victories and “impose a myth” on young generations that the USSR was a horrible state. The Kremlin’s TV channels persuade the audience that the triumph of far-right forces throughout Europe is a direct consequence of the “inability to learn lessons from history”, and Russia in this situation has “a moral duty” to prevent a “renaissance of Nazism” and ensure order in Europe – even by force, if necessary. This narrative gave birth to a very popular meme in the Russian information space – “We Can Repeat That” (“We can come back to Europe as the USSR did during the WWII and restore order as we see it”).

Russia actively uses this narrative when talking about Ukraine in Europe. The arguments that Ukrainian far-right parties had not crossed the 5% barrier in the previous parliamentary elections and have no places in the acting parliament at all disappear in the flow of propaganda. Nevertheless, few Europeans notice that the same narrative is used against their

⁷ *Педофилия расцветает в Европе (Paedophilia Flourishes in Europe)*, “1TV.ru”, 10 November 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c8Lpi5ViNI].

own countries. "It seems, soon Europe will start behaving in the same way as if we were in 1938 and there was 'Cristal Night' in Hitler's Germany", says the host of program "Vesti" on one of the mainstream Russian state TV channels. Example:

The historical triumph of Europe ended by a union under the Nazi flag, and after this, it got a bash in the face by the Russian boot. (Vladimir Solovyov, program "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 01 June 2017)

3) Protests. According to the Russian TV, there are strikes and protests every day in European countries: yard-keepers, health workers, farmers, stewards, staff of the Eiffel Tower, etc. demonstrate their disagreement with government policy. Inefficient and weak management leads to discontent; voices of the people are not heard, and so they have to go to the streets to protect their rights. Example:

Paris is turning into a big dump, while janitors who announced the strike are storming the offices of the officials. (First Channel, 10 September 2015)

It is obvious that protests are not something extraordinary in a democratic country: They are one of the efficient tools in a dialogue with the authorities. In Russia, in contrast, protests are not multiple, usually useless, and after each of them hundreds of protesters are taken into custody.

The HWAG team created a chart displaying when there were protests in Europe, according to the Russian media. It turned out that there was no day during the research period when the Russian TV said nothing about strikes and protests in the European cities.

4) Terrorism is the fourth of the top narratives used by the Russian TV. Terrorist attacks are covered by all media worldwide, but the Russian media do it in a particular

way, trying to create the impression that for Europe, terrorism is a permanent impending threat. Sometimes even crimes that had no terrorist motives are shown as terrorist attacks. The story is almost always accompanied by comments about the weakness of the police and security services. The tragedies are often depicted as a "pay-off", a "punishment" of European countries for wrong policy, inability to cope with migration crisis, and unwillingness to cooperate with Russia. Example:

The police allowed the man, who in the church cut the throat of an 84-year-old French priest from the suburbs of Rouen, to leave the house only once a day, in the mornings. This indicates that he was under "strict", in quotes, observation – he even wore an electronic bracelet on his leg. Consequently, his movements were monitored. So he killed while being "under control". French authorities, in fact, knew the dream of 19-year-old Adel Kermisch – to go to Syria and fight for the terrorists. (First Channel, 31 July 2016)

5) Refugee crisis is yet another of the top narratives used by the Russian media. The refugee crisis is interpreted as "a result of Europe's fault", because Europe supported the USA when the latter became involved in the war in Syria. The overall picture shown to the audience is rather doom-and-gloom: Thousands of hungry and dangerous immigrants fill European towns, pushing out local people, committing crimes and terrorist attacks. Examples:

Indeed, the very first blow of the migration wave brought to the surface all the deep-seated contradictions inside the European Union. (First Channel, 09 June 2015)

At a time when the European Union struggles to remain a space of freedom, security, and justice, dozens of people are settling down in the barracks where the Nazis kept the Jews. (Russia 1, 24 September 2015)

6) Sanctions Imposed on Russia. The Russian media promote the message that sanctions imposed on Russia seriously harm the EU itself, and more and more countries would like to cancel them in order to survive.

The second part of the message is aimed to demonstrate Russia's strength and independence from trade with Europe. Russians are often depicted as people who do not need the famous European well-being, because they have a more valuable moral compass. It is remarkable that, according to our observations, this topic accounts for the highest number of coincidences in the content of various TV channels: Two mainstream channels may use literally the same phrases talking about the same events or phenomenon. Example:

Europe made an estimate of the economic damage from their own sanctions imposed on Russia. Their restrictions together with retaliatory actions of Moscow cost the EU more than 17 billion euros. (NTV, 01 June 2017; similar news on First Channel, 01 June 2017)

These topics and narratives encompass almost all European countries. However, there are narratives targeting particular countries. For example: "Baltic countries are a training field for NATO", "Britain is the US's puppet", and Denmark is "a centre of European zoo-sex tourism".

It is worth mentioning how the "opposing point of view" is presented in Russian TV programs. Formally, it exists. There are experts invited to defend the Ukrainian, or European, or American point of view. At the same time, they usually look repugnant and ridiculous. It is "normal" to shout at

them during the discussions and offence, often done by the host or other guests in the studio, is commonplace. There were a number of cases when opposition experts were physically attacked during a live broadcast. This is a sort of "playing democracy": The opposing point of view is formally present, but always weak, because usually it is imitated.

There are no people on any TV channel who would call things with their real names, who would call a crime "a crime", and a murder "a murder". It is worth mentioning the words of Hannah Arendt from her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil":


Among the worst epithets attributed to Hitler by his high-morale opponents were the terms "cheater", "dabbler", "a madman" (note that this was already on the final stage of war), and, from time to time, "demon" and "epitome of evil" – usually in Germany, these words are often used to depict a criminal. But no one called him a murderer. His crimes were that he "sacrificed with armies, ignoring advice of professionals", someone mentioned German concentration camps for political opponents, but the death camps and Einsatzgruppen were not recalled almost at all.⁸

This story has a lot in common with modern Russia. In the fourth year of war in eastern Ukraine with 10,000 victims, including passengers of MH17 of Malaysian Airlines shot down by Russian "Buk", and millions of displaced persons, after the destruction of Syrian Aleppo and thousands of civilian casualties, Alexei Navalny, the most famous politician of the Russian opposition, continues to call Putin "a cheater and a thief".

⁸ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 2006.

Conclusion

Russian media create an impression that Europe is a dangerous place to live and depict the Europeans as spoiled people without moral values. Watching this kind of news on a regular basis (and the share of international news constitutes up to 80%-90% of Russian TV newscasts), the audience can hardly doubt that Russia is a stable, safe, and prosperous country.



“Europeans are ‘the others’, they are amoral and dangerous, so should we treat them as our equal?” Russian TV says

The Russian media changed the very paradigm of news: The audience of Russia’s biggest media platforms has practically no possibility to receive news as pure facts about an event. TV channels offer a ready opinion on the issue, with ready assessment and comments, and this is visible even from the tone and general manner: The host of a Russian TV channel usually talks to his or her audience as a mentor.

One of the key conclusions of the UCNC HWAG research is that the Russian media actively dehumanize an average European in the eyes of their audience. “Europeans are ‘the others’, they are amoral and dangerous, so should we treat them as our equal?” Russian TV says. The history of the 20th century has multiple examples when dehumanization of one nation by another nation had horrible consequences. Finally, this tool was successfully used in recent history, and it was used against the Ukrainians during the last four years.

Permanent humiliation and mockery, depicting them as stupid, messy, and good-for-nothing in Russian TV programs resulted in Ukraine being in the “honourable” 2nd place in the rating of “Russia’s worst enemies” (after the US), according to a social survey by Levada Center⁹. The situation is additionally complicated by the fact that there is practically no political opposition in Russia at present.

The Russian domestic policy is exclusively Russia’s internal issue only at the first sight. While Europe attacks those few platforms that counter Russian propaganda, the Kremlin-controlled media continue to create the image of an enemy for Russian citizens. And this “enemy” is not only Ukraine, Georgia, or the US, which have always had strained relations with Russia – now this refers to all European countries. And, perhaps, this is the answer to the sceptical question that some Europeans still ask: What has this war to do with me?

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⁹ *Врагу России (Enemies of Russia)*, Левада-Центр, 10 January 2018, [<https://www.levada.ru/2018/01/10/vragi-rossii/>].