



## **ISOLATION AND PROPAGANDA**

### **THE ROOTS AND INSTRUMENTS OF RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN**

Stefan Meister

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On the cover: 2015 Moscow Victory Day Parade. © Kremlin.ru

# ISOLATION AND PROPAGANDA

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TRANSATLANTIC ACADEMY PAPER SERIES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**W**estern scholars and politicians struggle to understand the elements of Russia's "hybrid warfare" and how to counter it. Means for "soft," non-military Russian influence in the post-Soviet sphere and the European Union includes export media such as the television broadcaster *RT* and the media platform *Sputnik*, the targeted expansion of informal financial networks, and funding and support for left- and right-wing populist political parties and organizations. The chief of the Russian General Staff described new rules of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare in a 2013 speech, where political goals are to be obtained through the "widespread use of disinformation... deployed in connection with the protest potential of the population." The Russian government claims it is merely copying the instruments and techniques that the West itself employs, and deems legitimate, to promote democracy in Russia and the post-Soviet states. It has also cracked down against foreign influence and dissent in Russia through restricting the work of Western NGOs and independent media. This information warfare is an approach born out of weakness that provides more flexibility against a challenger with much greater economic and technological resources.

The possibilities for directly influencing developments in Russia from outside are limited. Europeans, on the other hand, are vulnerable to Russian influence with their open societies, and Russian efforts can help fuel self-doubt in increasingly fragile and fragmented Western societies. The EU can protect itself by reinforcing its own soft power and improving governance within Europe, standing firm on sanctions, improving its knowledge base on Russia and the other post-Soviet states, and taking steps to improve pluralism in the Russian-language media space. It should also come up with a serious offer for its eastern neighbors including an EU membership prospect. If reform efforts succeed in Ukraine, the impact could spread to Russia and other post-Soviet states. Moscow encourages destabilization, corruption, and weak states in order to maintain relationships of dependency. The EU has something much more attractive than that to offer the societies of neighboring countries and should make greater use of its strategic advantage.

# 1 A WAR OF WORDS

Two years after the invasion of Crimea, scholars and politicians are still struggling to understand the elements of Russia’s “hybrid warfare” and how to counter it. Aside from the use of “little green men”<sup>1</sup> to covertly stage invasions and instigate conflict, a question of particular interest is whether Russia’s “soft,” non-military influence in the post-Soviet sphere and the European Union constitutes a further “facet” of hybrid warfare — be it in foreign market Russian media such as the television broadcaster *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) or the media platform *Sputnik*, in the targeted expansion of informal financial networks, or in funding and support for left- and right-wing populist parties and organizations in the EU. Of Russia’s non-military methods, Russia’s “information warfare,” the goal of which is to influence public discussion, especially in EU member states, is particularly interesting.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian government claims that it is merely copying the instruments and techniques that the West itself employs, and deems legitimate, to promote democracy in Russia and the post-Soviet states. The EU’s European Neighborhood Policy, for example, seeks to establish a “ring of friends” around the EU and encourages these countries to modernize their political, economic, and social policies in a way that harmonizes with the EU model and standards. To this purpose, the EU uses soft power to strengthen local civil society, support independent media, and help the democratic

transformation process expand to the east.<sup>3</sup> This policy is in direct conflict with the interests of the Russian leadership and its remaining post-Soviet partners who sit at the helm of authoritarian systems.

From the point of view of Russian security policy, then, the country’s expansion and implementation of non-military warfare and soft power is primarily a reaction to the West’s pressure on Russia and Russia’s position in the post-Soviet realm, one that makes use of Western tools and methods. Russia’s leadership understands that it reacts to this external threat from a position of military weakness, especially toward the United States and NATO and increasingly China. As a consequence, it avoids any direct military confrontation. Therefore, Russia’s information warfare is an approach born out of weakness that provides more flexibility against a challenger with much greater economic and technological resources.<sup>4</sup>

To understand Russian information warfare, it makes sense to look at the why, what, and how. Why is Russia employing non-military means? What exactly are its tools? And how can Europe respond? We can understand the “why” by examining how Russia itself perceives the expansion of its influence through non-military means, and the context of its actions. In term of the “what,” it is noted that the Kremlin’s information activities are defensive and offensive; misinformation campaigns and channels “protect” the Russian domestic audience from external

*Russia’s information warfare is an approach born out of weakness that provides more flexibility against a challenger with much greater economic and technological resources.*

<sup>1</sup> The term “little green men” has been used to describe unmarked Russian soldiers first deployed in Crimea in the context of the Ukraine conflict. On the terminology, see V. Inozemtsev, “Words Don’t Come Easy: ‘Vezhliyve Lyudi,’” *Berlin Policy Journal*, May 21, 2015, <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/words-dont-come-easy-vezhliyve-lyudi/>.

<sup>2</sup> See U. Franke, “War by Non-Military Means: Understanding Russian Information Warfare,” Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), March 2015, <http://www.foi.se/en/Top-menu/Pressroom/News/2015/War-by-Non-Military-means/>.

<sup>3</sup> Here the author uses the term “soft power” as Joseph Nye uses it, namely, to describe the power and influence that arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, economic prosperity, political values, and foreign policy (when it is seen as having moral authority).

<sup>4</sup> M. Snegovaya, “Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare,” Institute for the Study of War, September 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf>.

meddling while also mounting counter-offensives to stir discontent in Western societies. Europeans are indeed vulnerable to Russian influence, especially when they are already weakened by issues of equity and legitimacy. How can the EU protect itself against such an indistinct and diffuse threat? We can start by reinforcing our own soft power and standing firm on sanctions, but we also need to improve our knowledge base and take steps to improve pluralism in the Russian-language media space.

## 2 RUSSIA'S COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY MILITARY DOCTRINE

The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004-05) aroused particular concern in Russian political circles. The fear was that Russia was losing influence to the West in the post-Soviet countries. Preeminence in this region is key, for the elite and to Russia's status as a regional and major power. Even worse, a regime change in a neighboring country could potentially inspire the same in Russia. The theory gained traction that the West — and in particular the United States — was attempting to influence domestic developments in the post-Soviet countries by means of social networks, organized youth groups, and foreign-financed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — in order to destabilize and weaken Russia.

Many Russian officials argue that the West also deployed the same instruments in the Middle East, using the “Arab Spring” to destabilize the region. Social media, NGOs, and the like, they claim, ultimately exist only to expand the Western sphere of influence, weaken current legitimate leaderships, and replace them with governments sympathetic to the United States. They say this will contribute to the overthrow of constitutional order in Russia by means of violent protests.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq — an attack on a sovereign state that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime — was partly justified by bogus evidence is crucial to the Russian elite. In line with this view, Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian commentator, has argued that the West has “made a mess” wherever it has intervened. There is a direct connection between the Western failure in the

Middle East (Iraq and Libya) and Western support for Ukraine from this point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Russian General Staff held many debates on the new non-linear warfare and an appropriate solution for dealing with it. A particularly significant contribution was Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov's much-quoted speech of January 2013.<sup>7</sup> Talking at the annual meeting of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, Gerasimov described the new rules of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare. Political goals, he argued, are no longer to be attained through conventional firepower but through the “widespread use of disinformation, of political, economic, humanitarian, and other non-military measures deployed in connection with the protest potential of the population.”<sup>8</sup> The Iraq War and the “revolutions” in North Africa and the Middle East, allegedly instigated by the West, are, he claimed, proof that in a matter of months or even days, a flourishing nation could be transformed into an arena of bitter armed conflict, fall victim to foreign intervention, and descend into chaos, humanitarian disaster, and civil war.

Russian political and military leadership thus perceive non-military, “soft” means of influencing the domestic affairs of foreign states as threats against which Russia must defend itself if it is not to be weakened by the West and in particular the United States. It is hard to gauge how much of this is ideology and how much of it is opportunism, designed to distract from the shortcomings of Russia's own policy. Within the Russian power

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<sup>5</sup> See V. Putin, “Россия и меняющийся мир” [Russia in a Changing World], *Moskovskie Novosti* [Moscow News], February 27, 2012, <http://www.mn.ru/politics/20120227/312306749.html>. All translations from Russian are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> J. Sherr, “The New East-West Discord: Russian Objectives, Western Interests,” *Clingendael*, December 2015, p. 64, <http://www.clingendael.nl/publicatie/new-east-west-discord-russian-objectives-western-interests>.

<sup>7</sup> This speech was published in full in the journal of the Russian armed forces: V. Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении” [Value of Science and Foresight], *Voenno-promyslenyikurer*, No 8 (476), February 27, 2013, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*The shock of the mass demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg in late 2011 and early 2012 — before Vladimir Putin's reelection as president — further fed the paranoia of the Russian security elite around Putin.*

elite, however, the impression of living in an increasingly unsafe and unstable world is tied in with the feeling of being systematically “kept down” by the West. At the same time, Russia’s leaders interpret the processes of social transformation in the post-Soviet states and the Arab World as being externally inspired and orchestrated (by the West), thus denying those societies their autonomy. From a Russian ruling elite perspective, society is not an independent actor in politics but one that should support the regime. Even worse, Putin’s regime discredits “the very idea of rights of an individual and personal dignity as a value” as something alien to the Russian culture and inspired by the West.<sup>9</sup>

It cannot be denied that Western intervention in Iraq and Libya contributed to that entire region’s destabilization. The Russian take on the “Arab Spring,” however, ignores the fact that genuine popular protest played a crucial role in toppling the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other Middle Eastern and North African countries. These societies were by no means instruments of foreign powers with no will of their own; they were autonomous actors contributing to a process of social change. To confuse such events with the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is to misinterpret developments entirely and ignore social dynamics in a globalized world.

The shock of the mass demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg in late 2011 and early 2012 — before Vladimir Putin’s reelection as president — further fed the paranoia of the Russian security elite around Putin. Leaders in Moscow believe that these protestors, like all social groups, were manipulated by the targeted deployment of controlled media and propaganda and were incapable of acting on their own initiative. Similarly, the Kremlin

<sup>9</sup> O. Zakharova, “How to destroy human rights without a single protest,” *Intersection*, February 29, 2016, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/how-destroy-human-rights-without-single-protest>.

regarded the protest movement in Kyiv as an externally controlled movement to bring about the overthrow of the elected Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich. In a speech to the officials of the Russian ministry of the interior in March 2015, Putin stressed that “they” — that is, the West and particularly the United States — “use so-called color technologies, from organizing illegal street protests to open hate propaganda and hatred in social networks.”<sup>10</sup> The failure of Russian policy in Ukraine before the “revolution of dignity” in 2013-14, as before the Orange Revolution in 2004-05, has its roots in the ignorance of society as a factor in politics. The Russian elite’s perception of society as something to manipulate, rather than as an independent actor, applies to foreign and domestic policy alike.

This fear of Western-instigated protest is reflected in the current Russian military doctrine, from December 2014. By focusing on NATO as a key danger to Russia (Item 12a), it clearly shows the close link between domestic and foreign policy threat perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Under Item 13a of the doctrine, the destabilization of the domestic and social situation in Russia is described as an impending military threat. This includes actions that could influence young citizens to undermine the historical, intellectual, and patriotic traditions of Russia (13w). Under Item 15a, there is mention of the characteristics of modern military conflict, including the deployment of “political, economic, informational, and other non-military means,” implemented with the “widespread use of the protest potential of the population and special

<sup>10</sup> M. Ivanov, “Владимир Путин разглядел «цветные технологии» на улицах и в соцсетях” [Vladimir Putin Notices ‘Color Technologies’ in the Streets and Social Networks], *Kommersant*, March 4, 2015, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2679694>.

<sup>11</sup> Security Council of the Russian Federation, “Военная доктрина Российской Федерации” [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation], December 25, 2014, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/18/129.html>.



operations forces.” Once again, we are dealing with the description of a threat scenario in which external powers (the United States, NATO) destabilize Russia by manipulating its domestic policy and to which Russian security powers must respond. The message is clear: Russia faces enemies from within and without, and it must defend itself.

The Moscow power elite perceive the influence and activities of Western governmental and non-governmental institutions in the post-Soviet countries as instruments of war, whose goal is to weaken or even topple the Russian government. Moscow believes it has the right to react with the same methods to this non-linear warfare (which they perceive as being waged by NATO and the United States) and to respond with “little green men,” media manipulation, and exploitation of networks and NGOs. Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and Putin’s close confidant from the secret service, told the newspaper *Kommersant* that the United States “is not remotely interested in Ukraine. They are interested in Russia... [The United States] would prefer it if Russia no longer existed at all as a country.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> К. Руякова, “Крым угрожают коррупция и терроризм” [Crimea is threatened by corruption and terrorism], *Kommersant*, June 22, 2015, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2782652>.

This perspective is crucial for our analysis, though it is certainly not the dominant Western perception of EU or U.S. activities in post-Soviet countries. While we regard the support of NGOs and civil society as an appropriate means for promoting democracy, the Russian leadership considers such enterprises as illegitimate methods of meddling in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. In particular, Russia’s powerful intelligence and security elites have no trust for Western cooperative and integrative approaches to Russia because they see deeper U.S. scheming to weaken and undermine the Kremlin behind every such step. Furthermore, Putin’s inner circle of people from the security apparatus, most of whom were trained in the Soviet secret service, put their own perception of security and their own hold on power above the economic interest of the country. Stereotypes of the Cold War and Soviet propaganda still shape their way of thinking, leading to different interpretations of developments in the post-Soviet region and the policy goals of the United States and the EU. Anti-Americanism is closely linked with fears of being hemmed in.

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# 3 ISOLATION AND PROPAGANDA

Russian leaders have drawn two important conclusions from this threat analysis: 1) the need to protect themselves from outside influence and 2) the need for offensive counter-measures.

First of all, it is necessary to isolate those forces within Russia that are open to foreign influence and could thus become “agents” of Western politics or even of a “color revolution” within Russia. To this end, Russian legislation attempts to preclude foreign influence on Russian civil society and domestic structures. In 2004, the first laws were introduced to step up control over NGOs. These laws were gradually tightened at the beginning of Putin’s third term of office in 2012 and now impose strict restrictions both on the work of Western NGOs in Russia and on the foreign funding of independent Russian organizations. Unwelcome NGOs are stigmatized as “foreign agents,” their work is hindered by immense bureaucratic hurdles, and they find it nearly impossible to get access to funding that is independent of state-controlled sources. One current law threatens anyone collaborating with “undesirable foreign NGOs” with a prison sentence of up to six years. By March 2016, 122 groups had been labeled as foreign agents, and 14 groups shut down.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a blacklist (the so-called “stop list”) is being drawn up by the Federation Council to ban certain foreign organizations, particularly those from the United States, from working in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

The last fragments of independent media, such as TV channel *Dozhd* or weekly newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, which are only consumed by a negligible proportion of the Russian population, have been

under considerable pressure since independent editors-in-chief like Svetlana Mironyuk of the news agency *RIA Novosti* and Maxim Kovalski from *Kommersant Vlast* lost their jobs. Business owners or companies who advertise in critical media such as *Novaya Gazeta* and or *Grani.ru* are harassed. A law passed by the Duma requires Russian media to reduce foreign ownership shares to 20 percent share by February 2017. As a result, foreign investors are losing control of their Russian media investments and publishers like Germany’s Springer are withdrawing from the Russian market.<sup>15</sup>

In Russia itself, state control of television broadcasters (the main source of information for more than 90 percent of the population) has created a pseudo-reality operating at a considerable distance from the world as we know it. Putin takes center stage in day-to-day reports and appears omnipresent and irreplaceable. At the same time, the world consists only of crises, wars, and accidents — with Russian leadership providing the only stability. Controlled coverage is used to generate maximum public approval for the president and is most obvious in the total absence of reporting on unfavorable matters and the distortion of others through deliberate factual misrepresentation.<sup>16</sup> Media in Russia has become a core instrument of the regime, to manipulate and “educate” public opinion. Independent journalism in Russian mainstream media has lost all credibility, leaving in its place a cacophony of opinions, stories, conspiracy, and beleaguered journalists.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Russia: Government against rights groups,” March 13, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>.

<sup>14</sup> TASS, “Russia’s ‘stop list’ of undesirable NGOs maybe expanded to 20 - reports,” July 9, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/russia/807130>.

<sup>15</sup> F. Schmidt, “Springer lässt sich von Putin verjagen” [Springer flees Putin], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 20, 2015, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/russland-springer-laesst-sich-von-putin-verjagen-13808974.html>.

<sup>16</sup> V. Gatov, “How the Kremlin and the Media Ended Up in Bed Together,” *Moscow Times*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/how-the-kremlin-and-the-media-en-ded-up-in-bed-together/517323.html>.

# 4 PUTIN'S VERSION OF SOFT POWER

The policy of promoting lies, half-truths, and conspiracy theories in the media is also applied by Moscow externally, with particular focus on the EU and the United States. The tried and tested methods of Russian domestic policy are also being implemented in the country's foreign policy. This includes the growing ranks of Russian Internet trolls, who attack critical articles about Putin or Russian politics in European and U.S. online media, disseminate fake news items, and distort representation of events on heavily funded Russian export media such as *RT* and *Sputnik*.<sup>17</sup> Russia's leadership has also developed counter-measures to use targeted (dis)information to influence public opinion in other countries. In the above-mentioned speech, Gerasimov urged his audience to "learn victory from the victors" and to beat the opponent with his own weapons. An array of media outlets are consciously geared toward "revealing" the weaknesses of Western societies, thereby undermining their credibility. Moscow is equally concerned with weakening transatlantic relations and pushing the United States out of Europe. Its aim is nothing short of paralyzing and sabotaging the decision-making processes of EU and NATO, organizations that depend on consensus, by influencing politics within the individual member states. Bilateral negotiations with Hungary's EU-skeptic Viktor Orbán, for instance, serve on one hand to demonstrate that Russia has allies within the EU, and on the other to weaken common EU policy. The same is true of Putin's talks about investing in a gas pipeline to Greece and other infrastructure in the context of Greek loan negotiations with the

EU and the IMF in spring 2015.<sup>18</sup> Both Russian and Greek leadership used their meetings and bilateral relations to put the EU under pressure and to improve their bargaining position. Russia demonstrated it was not isolated, while the Greek government showed it had alternatives to EU money.

There have been debates about "soft power" and Russian politics ever since the end of the Soviet Union. Russian power elites, however, have always had their own understanding of the term. Joseph Nye sees a link between the exercise of political power and an attractive culture, prosperity, and moral values.<sup>19</sup> For Russian leaders, soft power is not about attraction; it instead refers to non-military instruments for manipulating, undermining, and weakening opponents, a supplement to Moscow's military power.

Thus Putin, in his programmatic 2012 article "Russia in a Changing World," defined soft power as "a complex of tools and methods for achieving foreign policy goals without deploying weapons, using information tools and other forms of intervention."<sup>20</sup> According to Putin, so-called "pseudo NGOs" could provoke extremism, separatism, and nationalism, and manipulate social perception, thus undermining the sovereignty of other states. For this purpose, the Russian leadership has, since the 2000s, established new institutions, such as the *Rosstrudnichestvo* (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) and

*An array of media outlets are consciously geared toward "revealing" the weaknesses of Western societies, thereby undermining their credibility. Moscow is equally concerned with weakening transatlantic relations and pushing the United States out of Europe.*

<sup>17</sup> ARD [Television Broadcast], "Was passiert in russischen 'Troll-Fabriken?'" [What happens in Russian 'troll factories?'], July 26, 2015, <http://www.daserste.de/information/wissen-kultur/tt/sendung/mdr/sendung-vom-26072015-104.html>.

<sup>18</sup> N. Savaricas, "Russia offers to loan Greece funds for infrastructure and transport works," *Independent*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-offers-to-loan-greece-funds-for-infrastructure-and-transport-works-10163340.html>.

<sup>19</sup> J.S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> V. Putin, "Россия и меняющийся мир" [Russia in a Changing World].

*By defying the United States, the West, and the “bureaucrats” in Brussels, Putin becomes a surface on which a possible alternative can be projected. In this way, Moscow plays on various existing fears and frustrations in Western societies, although it lacks an attractive alternative social model to offer those groups.*

the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation.<sup>21</sup> Rossotrudnichestvo was originally conceived to promote Russian language and culture in the post-Soviet countries but has since extended its sphere of operation to include a wide range of other countries. The institution’s re-establishment came in response to the activities of the internationally operating U.S. Agency for International Development. The main function of Russkiy Mir is to maintain the language and culture of Russian-speakers who live abroad and feel themselves part of Russian cultural circles.

In addition, massive expansions were seen in media directed at foreign markets such as the television broadcaster *RT* and the radio station *Voice of Russia* (now merged with *RIA Novosti* to form *Sputnik*). *Sputnik* has developed into a state-funded network of media platforms, producing radio, social media, and news agency content in local languages in 34 countries. The main goal of Russian foreign media was originally to provide the international dissemination of the Russian worldview as an alternative to the Western perspective offered by the likes of *CNN* and the *BBC*. Now, however, Russian foreign media focus on popularizing conspiracy theories and defaming the West, in order to create the impression that everyone is lying and that there are no unequivocal facts or truths. To give a different perspective or make foreigners “question [their governments] more” is the aim of *RT*. That means Russia has exported its internal media cacophony to the EU and its member states, using the pluralism of Western societies and media to feed our discourses with propaganda and conspiracy.

At the same time, Russian organizations have begun to cooperate with and support radical and anti-establishment groups in the West. This includes

<sup>21</sup> *Rosstrundnitshestvo*, <http://95.163.77.90/>; Russkiy Mir Foundation, <http://russkiymir.ru/en/>.

extreme right parties, such as the Front National in France or Jobbik in Hungary, but it also appeals to left parties like Die Linke (The Left) in Germany.<sup>22</sup> They not only offer financial resources to these groups as in the case of the Front National but also invite them into networks and use them for the legitimization of Russian policy.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Die Linke members of the German Bundestag were invited to tour the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk republics in eastern Ukraine. Members of the Front National, as well as of the more mainstream conservative party of France, Les Républicains (The Republicans), visited Crimea in 2015, and were accused by the French foreign minister of legitimizing the Russian annexation.<sup>24</sup>

There are no ideological and political barriers regarding with whom the Kremlin cooperates, so long as these partners can contribute to weakening the existing, liberal European (value) system, whether from the left or the right. Thus Putin’s Russia has become a partner to anti-U.S., anti-EU and anti-globalization groups in Europe. By defying the United States, the West, and the “bureaucrats” in Brussels, Putin becomes a surface on which a possible alternative can be projected. In this way, Moscow plays on various existing fears and frustrations in Western societies, although it lacks an attractive alternative social model to offer those groups. By 2011 at the latest — when Putin made his decision to return to the office of president — Russia’s leadership turned its back on any attempt to modernize the country’s economy or

<sup>22</sup> D. Hegedüs, “The Kremlin’s Influence in Hungary: Are Russian Vested Interests Wearing Hungarian National Colors?” German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), February 8, 2016, <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/27609>.

<sup>23</sup> L. Harding, “We should beware Russia’s links with Europe’s right,” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/russia-europe-right-putin-front-national-eu>.

<sup>24</sup> *Unian*, “French MPs visit Crimea despite condemnation,” July 25, 2015, <http://www.unian.info/politics/1104876-french-mps-visit-crimea-despite-condemnation.html>.

political system. Instead, today, the Russian head of state epitomizes the power of a small and corrupt authoritarian clique that draws its recruits largely from the security apparatus. Indeed, this group is systematically destroying their own country, both economically and morally, with revisionist, anti-liberal, and paranoid policies. The matrix of this policy is destructive, it creates enemies, it is always under pressure, and it claims a legitimate right to strike back. This is a very similar logic to populist movements and politicians in the West like Marine Le Pen or Donald Trump, which, beyond criticizing and undermining the existing order, have few ideas for a positive agenda except returning to a glorified and non-existent past.

The Kremlin's political technocrats and PR consultants have realized that Western weakness is Putin's strength. EU member states are now paying the price of having put off necessary reforms and allowing EU-skeptics to gain political clout. Key political areas such as financial, social, and foreign policy have not been sufficiently integrated. In political decision-making processes, a democratic deficit stemming from a lack of transparency in the negotiations between member state leaders is increasingly alienating citizens from the power centers. Populist — and racist — parties such as the Front National in France, the Jobbik party in Hungary, UKIP in the U.K., and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany are taking advantage of this trend to gain social acceptance, thus playing on the insecurity of many social groups and reinforcing the EU's credibility crisis in the member states.

The migration wave coming from the Middle East and Africa to Europe is also capturing Russian media headlines. It, too, is described as an example for the failure of the EU to deal with crises in other regions of the world and to protect its borders, which will destroy European society. The Russian media threatens its own society with the

image of an unstable world and creates scandals about refugees, portraying them as terrorists and rapists. This even influences the public debate in EU member states. Germany for example is increasingly the target of Russian propaganda and manipulation. Chancellor Angela Merkel's key role in leading the European Union in several crises and in uniting the different member states in favor of sanctions against Russia has encouraged the Kremlin to push to weaken her position, as domestic and European pushback against her refugee policies have already made her vulnerable.

For example, the story of Lisa, a Russian-German girl whom Russian media asserted had been raped by migrants, got huge attention in Russia, Germany, and beyond. This fake story was even pushed by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in an official statement in which he argued that German authorities failed to act against her assailants because of political correctness with regard to the refugees. The strongest reaction came from Russian-Germans, who demonstrated against refugees and the German authorities' lack of response to the attack. The Russian-speaking minority in Germany often get their information from Russia media, allowing the Kremlin to activate EU residents and citizens in support of its goals.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Lavrov's phrase "our girl Lisa" shows that even if Russian-Germans have German passports and have lived in Germany for many years, in the eyes of the Kremlin, they will always be Russians and should be protected by the Russian state whether or not they want to be. It took German police nearly two weeks to clarify that there had been no rape and that the girl, who had problems in school, had been staying with a friend during the 30 hours she had been missing. By then, the far-right National Democratic Party

<sup>25</sup> L. Kim, "Russia having success in hybrid war against Germany," *Reuters*, February 7, 2016, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/02/07/russia-having-success-in-hybrid-war-against-germany/>.

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*Russia's fairly successful propaganda in the West shows that political pluralism and open societies have some significant vulnerabilities compared to authoritarian states, with regard to speed of decision-making and action.*

of Germany had supported demonstrations by Russian-Germans, and anti-Merkel populist movement PEGIDA had used the case to press its claims that something is wrong in Germany.

While EU decision-makers struggle to agree on, let alone implement, their policy, Putin demonstrates action. The more weakly Western leaders respond to Russian aggression and provocation, the more Russian leadership feels stimulated to press forward. This is the case in propaganda as well as in testing out the responsiveness of NATO on its borders. That Lavrov brought the "Lisa case" to the top political level shows the impudence and cynicism of the Russian leadership, instrumentalizing an underaged girl, testing out how far it can go. This is in line with Moscow's overestimation of its own resources and with Russian military actions like in Syria, where consequences are not well thought through. Russian leadership lacks any long-term strategy but is much more willing to take risks to achieve its goals when it has the impression that the West is weak or that it can gain a short-term benefit.

All these instruments of manipulation, propaganda, and subversion are not new but date from the Cold War times. The difference is, while many NATO members have stopped acting like they did in the Cold War, the Russian leadership has doubled-down, improved their instruments, and upgraded with 21<sup>st</sup> century technology. Russia is not only one step forward but several.

Russia's fairly successful propaganda in the West shows that political pluralism and open societies have some significant vulnerabilities compared to authoritarian states, with regard to speed of decision-making and action. While authoritarian regimes have learned from each other in recent years about how to repel Western influences such as NGOs and undermine domestic pro-democracy actors, the West has lost clarity and belief in its own

norms and principles.<sup>26</sup> It is not the sophisticated instruments of the Russian regime that are the secret of its success in the West, but the lack of resilience of our own societies and institutions as well as our governments' lack of will to respond to the reality of Russian policies.<sup>27</sup>

The renaissance of history in Russia fits neatly into this schema, and it corresponds with the way Moscow exploits the remembrance of the World War II victory, memories of the Cold War, and the achievements of Stalin and the USSR. To this day, the old stereotype of the Cold War-era United States and its European allies continues to shape Russia's understanding of the U.S. role in the world. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's use of the terms "West" and "Cold War" at the Munich Security conference in mid-February 2016 should not only remind Russian society about who the enemy is but also promote Russia's role in today's world as the successor of the Soviet Union, one of the two great powers of the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the Soviet victory over fascist Germany plays an important role in presenting Russia as an important international player and reminds most Russians of the positive pictures of this great achievement promoted by Soviet propaganda. As this victory played an important role in Soviet identity building, it was and remains an instrument for the creation of identity and mobilization against outside enemies.

This is evident, for example, in an interview with Security Council Secretary Patrushev. When questioned about Ukraine's request to close the

<sup>26</sup> C. Walker, M. Plattner, and L. Diamond, "Authoritarianism Goes Global," *The American Interest*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/28/authoritarianism-goes-global/>.

<sup>27</sup> See S. Meister, "Russia's Return," *Berlin Policy Journal*, December 14, 2015, <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/russias-return/>.

<sup>28</sup> See S. Meister, "In Search for Lost Time," *Berlin Policy Journal*, March 11, 2016, <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/in-search-for-lost-time/>.

Russian border, Patrushev compared a potential blockade of the Donbas to the Siege of Leningrad.<sup>29</sup> The Ukrainian government is described as a fascist junta and its supporters as Banderites, referring to World War II-era Ukrainian independence movement leader Stepan Bandera, a sometime ally of Nazi Germany.<sup>30</sup>

Historical comparisons and Soviet symbolism play an important role in creating support from Russian society, linked with promoting a value system that is different from the Western liberal (and U.S.-dominated) one. On one hand, these narratives argue for Russia's uniqueness, while on the other, Russia is portrayed as the bulwark for traditional European values. This links Russian conservative society and elites with Western conservatives, as well as far-right and far-left populist groups through Europe. Even if this mix of historical pictures, traditional values, and ideology does not fit into one concept, it is able to confuse the opponent and unite parts of the Russian society behind the official position and Russian leadership with populist anti-establishment groups in Europe from former communists to neo-fascists.

Another puzzle of "soft power" in the ideological context is the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), which is not only an organization to promote Russian language and culture abroad but also an ideological

<sup>29</sup> Pyatakova.

<sup>30</sup> J. Cohen, "Vladimir Putin calls Ukraine fascists and country's new law helps make this case," *Reuters*, May 14, 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/05/14/putin-ties-ukraines-government-to-neo-nazis-a-new-law-seems-to-back-him-up/>.

concept to unite Russia with Russian-speaking minorities worldwide. In his Crimea speech on March 18, 2014, Putin justified the annexation with key elements of the *Russkiy Mir* concept.<sup>31</sup> He spoke about the Russians as a "divided nation" and emphasized the "aspiration of the Russian world, the historical Russia to restore unity." When the Russian government talks about minority rights of Russians in the Baltic States or Putin questions the existence of a Kazakh state, this is all about *Russkiy Mir*. The same is true when Lavrov describes Lisa as "our girl" despite her German passport; and in Germany, there is a Russian-German minority of several million people.<sup>32</sup> In the *Russkiy Mir* concept, those who speak Russian act Russian and think Russian at the same time. If Putin argues in his Crimean speech that the Russian state sees itself as a "protecting power" with regard to its compatriots abroad, it justifies a Russian intervention, hybrid or conventional, in any state with Russian minorities.

<sup>31</sup> V. Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>32</sup> This number, given as 2.4 million in a *Die Zeit* article describing them as the largest minority in Germany, involves Russian-Germans as well as ethnic Germans from post-Soviet countries (*Aussiedler*, or emigrants) and their relatives. U. Lachauer, "Die grösste Minderheit in D." [The largest minority in Germany], *Die Zeit*, March 11, 2004, [http://www.zeit.de/2004/12/Infokasten\\_Russland](http://www.zeit.de/2004/12/Infokasten_Russland). The number may well be higher: another article estimates more than 4 million Russian speakers in Germany, hundreds of thousands with Russian passports, noting the statistics are incomplete. K. Schlögel, "Stiefmütterchen Berlin," *Die Zeit*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/zeit-geschichte/2015/04/russen-in-deutschland-berlin-charlottenburg-russlanddeutsche-wuensdorf>.

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# 5 WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Russian export media outlets like RT have limited viewer bases, but their arguments and conspiracy theorizing are becoming part of the mainstream discourse in Western media as alternative opinions.

The possibilities of directly influencing developments in Russia from outside are limited. The “partnership for modernization” promoted in German foreign and economic policy broke down long ago, as did the decade-long propagated notion of promoting “change through rapprochement.”<sup>33</sup> Russia’s civil society and opposition groups are under immense state pressure, and their scope for action is set to be further restricted by repressive legislation like the foreign agent law and massive curtailments on demonstrations;<sup>34</sup> many oppositionists and advocates of critical media have already left the country.

Widespread patriotism also seems undiminished, as is clearly demonstrated by Putin’s high approval ratings, which stand at more than 80 percent since the annexation of Crimea.<sup>35</sup> Russian society is not liberal, pro-Western, or longing for democracy; Putin reflects a consensus in large parts of society that feeds off the experiences of the economic, social, and political recession of the 1990s and the authoritarian heritage of the Soviet Union.

Russian export media outlets like RT have limited viewer bases, but their arguments and conspiracy theorizing are becoming part of the mainstream discourse in Western media as alternative opinions. Arguments by former politicians on talk shows on major German TV channels are picked up by Russian and Western social and mainstream media. The plurality of our media system and openness of our discourse makes Western societies vulnerable.

<sup>33</sup> S. Meister, “How Russia Lost Germany,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 19, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/How-Russia-Lost-Germany-17365>.

<sup>34</sup> See “Amnesty Report Slams “Repressive Legislation,” *Moscow Times*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/amnesty-report-slams-repressive-legislation/480381.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Levada Center, “ДЕКАБРЬСКИЕ РЕЙТИНГИ ОДОБРЕНИЯ И ДОВЕРИЯ” [December Rating of Support and Trust], December 23, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/23/dekabrskie-rejtingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya-5/>.

Furthermore, lack of knowledge about Russian politics and media makes it easy for Russian “trolls” or “political technologists” to manipulate the debate on Russia in the European public.

While the West mainly focuses on the regime in Russia and has less and less access to Russian society, Russian policy is focusing more and more on European societies via propaganda, bypassing the governments. Putin gives interviews on *Das Erste* (channel 1 on German TV) or to the main tabloid *Bild* to reach out to the German public, not German policymakers.<sup>36</sup> The collapse of the traditional media model worldwide is accompanied by modern information technology that puts vast amounts of information, often either not checked for factuality or intentionally misleading, at the tip of citizens’ fingers. The free flow of information in open societies is enabling propaganda; Russian media and political technologists have learned how to effectively push narratives for Western audiences from Western outlets like *Fox News* in the United States. They have trained for years on how to use modern “infotainment” at home and now their skills are reaching Europe and other parts of the world. Helping fuel self-doubt in increasingly fragile and fragmented Western societies is the most successful strategy of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaign.

How should the European Union, its member states, and the United States react to these challenges?

Despite significant roadblocks, the West should attempt to maintain broad contact with Russian society and elites and to promote platforms for exchange. A key element could be facilitating visas for Russian citizens to the EU. To provide a

<sup>36</sup> N. Blome, K. Diekmann, and D. Biskup, “Putin: The Interview: For me it is not borders that matters,” *Bild*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russian-president-vladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html>.



positive agenda — in contrast with the tight travel restrictions placed on Putin’s entourage since the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine — the EU should facilitate entry into the EU for most Russian citizens. At the same time, German, European, and U.S. policy should prepare for the post-Putin era and different potential scenarios, which might include the destabilization of Russia or the rise of an even more nationalist and aggressive president. The West needs a long-term approach for Russia and the post-Soviet countries that takes the current challenge seriously, but is not only focused on demonizing Putin but also on an agenda looking beyond the current Russian president.

The EU should work on its image and continue to develop and reinforce its own soft power. The reform deficit and economic problems of many member states are currently giving free play to Russian propaganda, which means that national governments and the EU commission must come up with more convincing arguments to counter the anti-EU propaganda of the right- and left-wing populists in the member states. This involves reinforcing the basic values and norms of the EU. Sanction mechanisms are needed for those governments of member states that are attempting to undermine the basic rights and principles of the EU and weaken EU cohesion. Only then can the EU improve its credibility abroad and at home.

It is also essential to keep up the present policy of sanctions against Russia. These have hitherto demonstrated the cohesion of the EU member states and the transatlantic allies, and they represent the EU’s credible ability to respond to Russian aggression in Ukraine. After the EU prolonged its sanctions in December 2015 for a period of six months, Moscow has tried and will continue to try to undermine this common strategy in a variety of ways, for example by using incentives in the form of investments or low energy prices to try to persuade

individual member states to mitigate the sanctions or to do a tradeoff with the West on Ukraine with regard to other crises, for example Syria. Germany is one key target of this policy as the Lisa case and Putin’s *Bild* interview have shown.<sup>37</sup> If Russia is unwilling to defuse the crisis in Ukraine, EU member states must stand firm in order to preserve their credibility or even increase sanctions if it is necessary. Also thanks to the sanctions, Russia’s leaders may have been deterred from intervening in or seizing larger parts of Ukrainian territory or making similar moves in Moldova or Georgia.

In its attempt to respond appropriately to Russian propaganda, the West should not develop “counter-propaganda” but instead help to make Russian propaganda consistently visible by promoting responsible media and unmasking fakes. In this regard, it is right that the German federal government has provided stronger financial backing to the German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* and its Russian- and Ukrainian-language channels, and it is regrettable that the British government plans massive cuts to the *BBC* and its foreign channels, which offer a reliable alternative to *RT*. The *BBC* should in fact maintain its foreign channels at the same level at least, and considerably expand its Russian-language channel. The European Endowment for Democracy has published a comprehensive study on improving pluralism in the Russian-language media space, with several important suggestions for how to react to Russian propaganda and counter the trend of decreasing numbers of independent media outlets inside Russia.<sup>38</sup> Possible responses include creating regional Russian-language media hubs; developing a Russian-language media competence center to coordinate the work of NGOs, existing Russian

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> European Endowment for Democracy, “Bringing Plurality and Balance to Russian Language Media: Final Recommendations,” June 25, 2015, <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/>.

*In its attempt to respond appropriately to Russian propaganda, the West should not develop “counter-propaganda” but instead help to make Russian propaganda consistently visible by promoting responsible media and unmasking fakes.*

*The EU needs to come up with a serious offer for its neighbors in the east including a membership perspective. It is in the interest of EU member states to help Ukraine become economically and politically stable. If reform efforts succeed there, the impact could spread to Russia and other post-Soviet states.*

speaking media, and governments; and setting up a foundation to support independent media in this area. Without duplicating existing structures within EU member states, the coordination of all relevant media activities in the EU should be improved and adequately funded by EU member states and institutions. At the same time, leading European media should expand their permanent network of correspondents in Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states to enable them to report reliably on location, and to counter propaganda with facts. Quality investigative journalism is the right answer to propaganda.

For too long, the EU has come up short in its analysis of developments in Russia and other post-Soviet states. It urgently needs to remedy this. Greater knowledge of and transparency about developments in Russia are as necessary as the disclosure of Russian networks, financial flows, and economic relations in the EU itself. For this purpose, it is necessary to strengthen national research in think-tanks and at universities and to improve EU-wide coordination among research establishments. Academic funding in the area should be increased at the national and EU levels for this purpose. Furthermore, the EU delegations in Moscow and other post-Soviet capitals should strengthen their commitment to explaining developments in Brussels and the EU to the elites as well as to the wider public in those countries. There are, at present, significant information deficits about the EU and the United States in Russia, which make it easier for the political powers there to offer Cold War-era stereotypes as explanatory models.

In the long term, the EU must make reform efforts to provide consolidation in those areas where Russian propaganda currently has a soft target. It should continue to develop a common energy and foreign policy, reduce its own democratic deficit, tackle the economic problems in the southern EU states, and reinforce good governance not just in neighboring states but also within the EU itself. This includes strengthening minority rights in the EU. A tougher approach to corruption in the member states is crucial, as is greater transparency and law enforcement regarding, for example, the flow of Russian and post-Soviet money into the European Union and worldwide.

At the same time, the EU needs to come up with a serious offer for its neighbors in the east including a membership perspective. It is in the interest of EU member states to help Ukraine become economically and politically stable. If reform efforts succeed there, the impact could spread to Russia and other post-Soviet states. It is to the great advantage of the EU that Russia neither has the necessary economic power nor offers an appropriate political alternative to actually develop the countries in its post-Soviet neighborhood. Moscow instead encourages destabilization, corruption, and weak states in order to maintain a relationship of dependency. The EU has something much more attractive to offer the societies of these countries and should make greater use of its strategic advantage.

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