



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

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Lessons from the Soviet Era WHY WE MUST FIGHT THE KREMLIN'S NEW PROPAGANDA WAR

When the Soviet Union fell, the West mistakenly believed the propaganda war was over. With recent events clearly showing that the Kremlin is back in the propaganda business, it's time for the West to take up new weapons in the contemporary battle against Russian disinformation.*

Brian Lee Crowley

I will start with a disclaimer. I am no expert on Russian-language media and their impact on civil society anywhere, let alone in Eastern Europe. Yet, the occasion of this panel is the visit to Canada of our esteemed colleague and fellow panellist, Jerzy Pomianowski, one of the architects of a new paper by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). This paper, entitled *Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space*, is a thoughtful and muscular piece of work that deserves wide circulation.

I want particularly to recognize how the EED has been a pioneer in the development of approaches to strengthen independent media and civil society, and in this work it has rightly enjoyed the support of

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* This commentary is based on remarks made Oct. 20, 2016 by MLI Managing Director Brian Lee Crowley in a panel entitled "Shrinking Space for Civil Society? Importance of Media Pluralism for Democracy in Eastern Europe and the Middle East". The Macdonald-Laurier Institute lent a hand organizing the event, the main organizers of which were the University of Ottawa's Human Rights Research and Education Centre, the European Endowment for Democracy, and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Ottawa.

the government of Canada. Jerzy Pomianowski is well known to, and highly regarded by, my colleague at MLI, Munk Senior Fellow Shuvaloy Majumdar, for his extraordinary leadership in confronting Russian resurgence. It is an honour for me to serve with him on this panel.

Although I am no expert on Russian-language media anywhere, I think I have something to contribute in three areas.

The first area is why allowing one-sided propagandistic “news” from authoritarian states to take root and flourish unchallenged is dangerous to the interests of locals and the stability of borders, politics, and institutions in a critical and strategic part of Europe, as the invasion of Ukraine and annexation of the Crimean peninsula eloquently demonstrated.

Second, I want to discuss why it is in the interests of liberal-democratic states like Canada to counter Russian propaganda efforts. It is because their effects reach right into the heart of the cohesion of the Western alliance.

The third area is how the changing economics of media need to inform our reflections on how to counter Kremlin domination of Russian-language media in strategically important regions.

Let’s start with why Canadians should care about abusive Russian-language “news”, wherever it may be encountered. I approach this from the point of view of a think-tanker for whom ideas are the most powerful force in the world, *“plus puissantes que toutes les armées du monde”* as Victor Hugo put it.

Why? The human mind craves ideas. They are the software for our mental computer. When you put an idea in someone’s mind, you change their behaviour because you change the way they see and understand the world. But if people do not have access to good, sound ideas, the alternative is not silence and a void. On the contrary, ill-intentioned people rush to fill the space we have left unoccupied with bad, damaging, mistaken, misleading, and dangerous ideas. When they succeed in doing so, the people whose minds they have reached then become unwitting instruments of the malicious intent of the ideas’ originators. The very hunger of the human mind makes it a battleground for people’s sympathy and loyalty. Propaganda is the obeisance that demagogy and autocracy pay to the human desire to understand and to do the right thing.

Remember that after the fall of the Berlin Wall the greatest disarmament of the West was not in hard power, or in military equipment and personnel. It was in soft power, where it was almost total unilateral disarmament as we dismantled virtually all of the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other capacity to respond to Russian propaganda. In the Cold War, fiction was confronted with truth: Radio Free Europe/Liberty, the BBC, Radio-Canada International, and others projected credible facts in local languages to those behind the Iron Curtain.

We laid down those arms. Russia did not. If anything, the Kremlin has redoubled its efforts in recent years, with the result that in terms of ideas, the West is currently bringing a knife to a gun fight. Unsurprisingly, we are getting our heads handed to us on a platter.

The reason this propaganda effort is particularly dangerous if it goes unchecked in Eastern Europe is amply demonstrated by the events in Crimea and the Russian-dominated Donbass region of Ukraine.

If even just significant minorities of Russian-speakers can be recruited to the Russian cause, or if the position of Russian minorities can be portrayed as endangered, this can provide a cloak for Russian aggression and expansionism with local populations acting as fifth columnists. That danger is made more acute if the world view of those Russian-speakers is shaped in an unchallenged way by Kremlin-inspired propaganda.

My second point is that Kremlin-led propaganda is of significance farther afield among liberal-democratic states such as Canada. This was summed up for me by a conversation I had with a Soviet-bloc diplomat when I was a graduate student in London. At the time, Europe was wracked by the convulsions occasioned by American efforts to site nuclear-armed cruise missiles in a number of western European countries as part of Ronald Reagan's effort to force the USSR's hand militarily. European governments such as Helmut Schmidt's in Germany and Wilfried Martens' in Belgium were holding firm in support of this deployment in the face of very large and vehement public protests. These protests were often orchestrated by the Kremlin and its sympathizers, regardless of the undoubtedly good intentions of many of the participants.

The off-the-record and rather candid conversation I had went something like this:

Diplomat: You know, we are all very impressed in the Warsaw Pact countries by the solidarity of the West in the pursuit of its policy, even in the face of this vociferous opposition.

Me: Well, of course our solidarity is in part motivated by the collective commitment we see in the Warsaw Pact.

Diplomat: Ah yes, but the difference is that your solidarity is voluntary.

How is this relevant? Well, as my friend, Estonian-Canadian documentary filmmaker and author [Marcus Kolga](#), says, what the Kremlin does best is to sow doubt. And it does that by undermining facts with conspiratorial theories, which are rooted in anti-Zionism, homophobia, xenophobia, and a general mistrust of our established institutions.

By breaking down trust, Vladimir Putin breaks down established alliances and gains the upper hand. The West's solidarity, which ultimately led to the USSR's collapse, was based on trust in each other and the values we collectively represent. The most potent weapon the Kremlin possesses is the ability to sow doubt in the minds of Western populations about who is doing what to whom and why.

Putin's pretty clear attempts to manipulate the [US election](#), via Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, is just one current example. Presidential candidate Donald Trump's skepticism notwithstanding, the US government credibly suspects the Kremlin is behind the recently hacked [Democratic National Committee](#) emails as well as those of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Nor does the Russian government [deny](#) hacking the DNC email accounts. If Americans start to lose faith in the integrity of their political institutions and processes because of Kremlin-inspired lies, half-truths, and distortions, that could and almost certainly would have significant influence on the coherence and will of the Western alliance.

Other randomly chosen and representative recent examples of Russian media interventions clearly

designed to undermine faith in Western media and institutions through, for example, conspiracy theories include the following:

- An August 2013, Russia Today program, *Truthseeker*, claims the BBC had “staged” a chemical weapons attack for a news report, and digitally altered the words spoken by an interviewee;
- Russian state media frequently referred to the 2013-14 [Euromaidan revolution](#) in Ukraine as a “fascist *coup d’état*” which was orchestrated by the CIA;
- Fake news stories about Euromaidan appeared frequently online. Most recently, on Oct. 12, the state news agency, RIA Novosti, posted a fake story about [US snipers](#) operating in Donetsk;
- Russian media reported that [Muslim refugees](#) in Berlin abducted and raped a 13-year-old Russian-German girl. The story was later discovered to have been false and German Chancellor Angela Merkel has since ordered an [investigation](#) into Russian propaganda and disinformation;
- The Kremlin has long pushed its own narrative about the Soviet history of the Baltic States – stating that the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States is a “myth” and that deportations of nearly one-quarter of the populations of those countries never occurred. The Kremlin has enlisted the help of proxy propaganda agents in Europe to support this version of history – including [Kremlin-manufactured narratives](#) about Ukraine;
- Russian media tell Russians living in the Baltics that they are living in “[apartheid](#)” states and that democracy is [crumbling](#) there;
- A 2014 story about explosions at a chemical plant in southern US states proved to be a fake story planted by the Kremlin’s [troll farm](#), dubbed “The Internet Research Agency”.

I am proud to say that even my own institute has been the object of a disinformation campaign by Kremlin Internet trolls following our publication of [a paper by Kolga and Majumdar on the future of NATO and collective security in the West](#). Anything to do with NATO is a favourite target of Kremlin propagandists. Russia constantly accuses NATO of being a [war-mongering](#) and imperialist organization.

The US and NATO, and the West more generally, are always blamed for creating the problems in the Middle East. Canada is not, as so many of us so naïvely assume, immune to this kind of manipulation carried out right here. You can find the sort of messaging I am describing emanating on a regular basis from a Montreal-based outfit called [Global Research](#) which is run, I am sorry to say, by a professor at the University of Ottawa. And, of course, according to this narrative it is always the US and NATO that are taking the initiative to trouble the world’s peace by building military capacity and sabre rattling. Russia is only ever responding to Western [aggression](#).

It is important to underline how complicated it is to counter the current *dezinformatsiya* campaign being waged by the Kremlin. It’s not just a matter of presenting the truth via facts and fact-checking in a limited – print/radio/TV – environment, but adjusting our strategy to an entirely new media “ecosystem”, one where convenient fictions become reality, and debate can be instigated on fantasy issues. In a world in which conspiracy theories are hugely popular and no one seems interested in any philosophy that cannot be printed on a T-shirt, reason is increasingly scarce.

We must re-arm ourselves to fight this soft power battle on many fronts, and not just in the minority Russian-language regions of Europe, although that will certainly be one of the front lines.

So, that brings me to my third point: what might we learn about how to do this from the travails of the media in the West and the way communications have changed in recent decades?

Let's start perhaps by agreeing that if we want to fight this soft power battle we can't do it the way we did 25 years ago. One advantage of having laid down our arms then is that we have to start from scratch. That means we wouldn't build short-wave towers or distribute Gestetner machines.

Two things stand out for me from the media world as it exists now. One is that the old authoritarian push model on which the Kremlin depends, especially in TV, is dying and its place is being taken by a decentralized and more democratic pull model.

The push model was premised on the huge costs of getting into the broadcast business. That capital investment put those in authority in the driver's seat. They got to decide what ideas would be covered and what opinions would be given currency. That model is dying everywhere and it is why both newspapers and commercial TV in Canada, for instance, are in dire straits. In a complete inversion of the past, it is now state-financed media like the CBC and the BBC who have the brightest futures because their funding doesn't depend on the expressed preferences of actual consumers. So, they will continue to thrive but will enjoy ever shrinking audiences.

Now to be successful in attracting eyeballs it can be sufficient to own an iPhone, an Internet connection, and a YouTube account. That means push has been replaced with pull, where empowered consumers of information get to decide who has credibility and what opinions will be listened to.

One major question we face is: Do we create a corporate/NGO-type counterweight to Russian propaganda, brick for brick, deploying similar instruments? Or do we pursue an asymmetric approach – weaving together a constellation of local, regional, and global information outlets?

My own view is that the response to Kremlin-led propaganda efforts needs to be a lot more subtle than thinking about how to be as slick and high tech in your programming as Kremlin TV, for example. In fact, generational divides in taste, to pick one example, may be as much or more important.

If young people in the West are any guide, the Kremlin's fancy production values have not become an attraction, but are regarded with suspicion by young people who seek more authenticity and decentralized control of what they see and hear.

Put that together with the anti-authoritarian and often pro-Western stance of young people in the fault line regions between West and East. That suggests to me a strategy of ensuring that young people have the tools (laptops, smartphones, Internet connections, web sites, and appropriate training in their use) that are the modern equivalent of the short-wave tower, the Gestetner, and the samizdat press. Give them effortless access to information sources in the West that they are likely to regard as credible – mostly young people like themselves. They need to be given opportunities to travel to the West and inform themselves on the ground about conditions here. Where the necessary conditions of freedom do

not exist in some repressive societies, young people whose roots are there, but who are outside, need to be given the means to reach their peers who are still there.

This is not something which Canada must leave to others. As my good friend, Ian Brodie, wrote recently in [a piece for CDAI](#), “Canada’s previous government recognized unique Canadian resources like Toronto’s Citizen Lab, which works in many languages to liberate digital communications from authoritarian governments and their online Great Walls. That government was particularly concerned to use this soft power to free the press in Iran. The new government may have concerns in other parts of the world. And that is to the good since similar efforts are needed in many places.” The existence of so many powerful and well-organized diaspora communities here with language skills, knowledge of the mother country, and access to balanced and authoritative sources of information is a precious resource we must do our best to develop.

Finally, as my Institute’s Shuvaloy Majumdar has so eloquently expressed it, the challenge to which we are being called to rise isn’t just in the borderlands between NATO and Russia but right here at home. Our own democratic institutions are being exploited and subverted. It is naïve and dangerous to think otherwise.

Western governments still think about these issues the way they have for the last 40 years. That has to change if projecting our values and our interests is to be done effectively. The answer isn’t chiefly money – it’s agility and inspired creativity. We must be better than the Kremlin. Fortunately, that’s not too difficult. On the other hand, we have to decide that it is a job which must be done. We are not there yet, but the EED paper sheds welcome light on the path that will get us there.

And second, when manufactured fictions threaten to redefine national debates by improper exploitation of our own freedoms, we must come up with ways to inform those public debates with facts. In so doing we will effectively inoculate our societies from specious and spurious debates and insidious attempts to shape our opinions by people who neither share our values nor wish us well.

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