

Russia's manipulation of information on Ukraine and the EU's response

SUMMARY

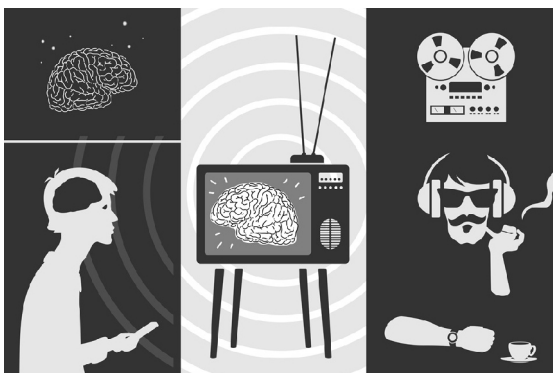
Information has become central to the Ukraine crisis, with some analysts even referring to an 'information war' initiated by Russia. Coverage in Russia's largely state-controlled domestic media displays bias, often amounting to disinformation, though it is also increasingly sophisticated. Internationally, multilingual news channel RT is Russia's main media tool, projecting the Kremlin's narrative to a global audience.

In Russia itself, the vast majority of people subscribe uncritically to the version of events presented in the country's media. The Russian media are also highly effective in neighbouring countries with large ethnic Russian populations such as the Baltic States. However, the global impact is more mitigated; while RT has garnered a huge international audience, Russia's image has deteriorated substantially in many countries since the start of the Ukraine crisis.

At the same time, existing wide-reaching European media outlets are under pressure, either due to financial cuts or – in the case of EU-subsidised Euronews – links to pro-Russian business interests.

Proposals to counter Russian disinformation include increased funding for existing western media broadcasting in Russian, like the BBC World Service, or the creation of new ones, such as a jointly operated Russian-language TV channel offering not only news but also entertainment in order to compete with pro-Kremlin media.

Some of these proposals are being discussed at EU level, with the aim being for the European Council to adopt an action plan on strategic communication in June.



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Information is key to the Ukraine crisis

Information has become central to the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin is using Russian media to shore up domestic support. Outside the country, the RT television channel aims to divide international public opinion and undermine hitherto largely united opposition to Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine.

The centrality of the media has been highlighted by [images](#) of pro-Russian soldiers capturing TV towers in eastern Ukraine, cutting off Ukrainian broadcasts and replacing them with Russian TV channels. It has also been confirmed by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu [describing](#) the media as 'weapons', and the Kremlin's '[chief propagandist](#)', Dmitry Kiselev, asserting that information wars have become '[the main type of warfare](#)'.

A sophisticated domestic media campaign

According to English-language daily the *Moscow Times*, the Russian presidential administration holds regular [political briefings](#) for media bosses, who also have 'yellow telephones' with direct hotlines to the Kremlin. Certainly coverage of the Ukraine crisis in Russian domestic media bears the hallmarks of a coordinated propaganda campaign. Reporting is relentlessly one-sided, always highlighting the death and destruction inflicted by Ukrainian attacks, never the other way round. Worse, there is strong evidence that many of the stories featured on Russian media are fabricated – not only the infamous story of the [crucified three-year-old](#) (the newsreader who presented the story subsequently [defended](#) it, arguing that while the facts had not been proven, it was an accurate reflection of 'hellish' conditions in Slavyansk) – but also of numerous other [children](#) killed by Ukrainian shelling. One actress is [alleged](#) to have posed for Russian TV in a variety of roles, including that of a Ukrainian housewife denouncing the 'fascist' government of her country and of a soldier's mother. Many similar stories have been documented by Ukrainian site [StopFake](#). This lack of concern for the facts is unsurprising given Dmitry Kiselev's [announcement](#) that the era of objective journalism is over.

Euromaidan protestors are '[neo-Nazi Banderites](#)' cold-bloodedly massacring unarmed opponents in the '[Odessa Katyn](#)'; their government is an anti-semitic '[junta](#)', perpetrating [pogroms](#) on Russians and Jews. The emotive language charged with historical allusions – to Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, who fought alongside the Nazis, and the Katyn massacre – is particularly resonant on the 70th anniversary of Soviet victory in World War II.

These characteristics were already typical in Soviet propaganda, but the new Russian media have gone a step further by [sugar-coating](#) the political message with Western-style entertainment. Some foreign news stories may be fabricated, but the media are careful to avoid losing credibility by contradicting viewers' everyday experiences – there has been little attempt to [downplay](#) the economic recession, for example. The presence of notionally independent media outlets such as [Moscow Echo](#) radio station or [lenta.ru](#) news portal – though in fact often owned by state-controlled companies such as Gazprom Media or pro-Putin oligarchs – creates an illusion of pluralism, not unlike the role of the opposition parties in Russia's [managed democracy](#). Even some criticism is allowed – provided it does not challenge Vladimir Putin's role as the country's saviour and [problem-solver](#).

Russia has proved equally adept at mastering the new media – trolls [allegedly](#) linked to pro-Putin youth group *Nashi* or from the Kremlin's '[troll factory](#)' disrupt political

discussions on online fora and social media, reiterating the official narrative on the Ukraine crisis and attacking critics.

Russia's instruments of international soft power

RT

The 24-hour news channel RT is Russia's main international media weapon. In order to draw in a broader audience and avoid being perceived as an instrument of Kremlin propaganda, the channel has shifted from its former emphasis on Russia-related stories to international news (and accordingly [renamed](#) itself in 2009; previously it had been *Russia Today*). RT brands itself as a platform for provocative and original perspectives (its slogan: 'Question More'), raising sometimes legitimate concerns – for example over [fracking](#), [austerity policies](#), the EU's [democratic deficit](#), [NSA surveillance](#) – that resonate with a heterogeneous mix of environmentalists, civil liberties campaigners, eurosceptics, far-right parties, and various disaffected groups. Its reports feature the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movement, Wikileaks founder [Julian Assange](#), [Scottish Nationalists](#) – precisely the kind of dissenting voices whose counterparts within Russia are ignored by the Russian domestic media.

While RT focuses on attacking the US and EU rather than defending Russia, the methods it uses are very similar to Russian domestic media. Like her domestic counterparts, RT chief editor Margarita Simonyan [admits](#) to having a hotline to the Kremlin, and she [echoes](#) Dmitry Kiselev's disregard for 'objective reality'. Conspiracy theories are a staple both on RT and domestic media – one Spanish-language RT [article](#) (since withdrawn) speculated that the US may have been to blame for spreading the Ebola virus.

RT, which broadcasts in English, Spanish and Arabic, is set to receive a 40% budget increase in 2015, enabling it to add German and French channels and expand its potential audience ([estimated](#) at 600 million) still further.

Other pro-Kremlin international media and organisations

Alongside RT, [Sputnik](#) and Russia Beyond The Headlines ([RBTH](#)) publish multilingual news stories; both are state controlled, whereas [Russia Insider](#) news portal claims to be a volunteer initiative launched by expatriates living in Russia and funded by readers. The [New York Times](#) and British daily [The Telegraph](#) post stories by Russia Insider and RBTH respectively, enabling these two platforms to pass off their own pro-Kremlin content under the names of the host publications. Meanwhile, Russian trolls are as [active](#) on Western online media as they are back home.

Pro-Russian NGOs such as the [Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies](#) (Czech Republic) and the [Eurasian Institute](#) (Georgia), some with [alleged](#) links to the Kremlin, also advocate sympathy for the Russian perspective.

How effective is Russian information policy?

In Russia – widespread acceptance of the official narrative on Ukraine

In Russia itself, the most influential media are owned or controlled by the state and its agencies, or by pro-Putin businessmen. News broadcasts on state-controlled TV Channel One reach [82%](#) of the population, and for [43%](#) television is their only source of information on current affairs. Media offering dissenting views such as Dozhd TV, *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper and Moscow Echo radio station have a much smaller audience, and in any case are increasingly being reined in. Meanwhile, vaguely worded

[anti-extremism laws](#) are among a range of legislative tools used with growing frequency to clamp down on online opposition.

Given the extent of state control and high levels of trust in the media ([70%](#) believe that national TV coverage of events in Ukraine is mostly or fully objective), it is hardly surprising that most Russians subscribe to the version of events presented by state media – according to a [survey](#) by independent pollsters Levada Centre, 83% blame Ukraine and Western countries for the Ukraine crisis, while only 20% believe that Russian soldiers have been sent to fight there (however, there is a certain ambivalence – in reply to another question in the same survey on Russia's support for Donbass militia, 38% agreed that 'even if there are Russian soldiers and weapons in Ukraine, it is right for Russia to deny their presence in the current international situation' – recalling the Orwellian concept of doublethink, the ability to believe simultaneously in two contradictory notions). Increasingly, Russians [associate](#) Ukrainians with negative qualities such as hypocrisy, secretiveness, envy, avarice, arrogance and violence, reflecting negative media coverage.

In other ex-Soviet countries – Russian media are highly influential

Russian media are also highly effective outside the country. In the Baltics, Russian TV – either broadcast directly from Russia or re-broadcast by Latvian-based [PBK](#), which reaches some 4 million viewers – targets Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in particular (in Estonia and Latvia, around [two thirds](#) and one quarter respectively of the total population). PBK is the [second most widely watched](#) channel in Latvia, and its influence is reflected in consistently stronger backing for the Kremlin among ethnic Russians than in the general population – in a 2014 [survey](#), over twice as many ethnic-minority Latvians expressed support for Russia as for Ukraine, with similar results from a 2008 Estonian [survey](#) on Russian intervention in Georgia. [Lithuania](#), Moldova and [Ukraine](#) itself have blocked Russian TV channels, to prevent them from exerting similar influence on their minorities.

In the rest of the world – public opinions on Russia remain divided

Beyond Russian-speaking minorities, RT in particular has garnered a huge global audience – it is estimated to have over [2 million viewers](#) in the UK, [3 million](#) in US urban areas, while in South Africa it is by far the largest European news channel. RT's [YouTube channel](#) has 1.5 million subscribers, far ahead of rivals CNN (800 000), Al Jazeera English (700 000) and BBC News (440 000).

It is true that RT has failed to prevent a general deterioration in Russia's image abroad, with record high disapproval rates of its government according to a global [survey](#) by US pollsters Gallup. On the other hand, public opinion is more favourable to Russia in countries to which it has historical and cultural ties, such as [Serbia](#), and within the EU, [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#). 'Some polls have found support for Russia to be surprisingly high in the UK, with various polls suggesting both that favourable and unfavourable opinions are closely [matched](#), and that Russia is more [popular](#) than the EU.

Who influences Euronews?

At the same time, there are growing concerns about the independence – or alleged lack thereof – of Euronews. The pan-European TV news channel, which also broadcasts in Russian and Ukrainian, currently receives around 36% of its funding from the EU. However, in April 2015 the European Commission opened [talks](#) with Euronews about its

future, following a March [announcement](#) that the Ukrainian Inter Media Group – owned by Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash – had [taken over](#) its Ukrainian service. Just days after the deal was announced, Kyiv decided to [revoke](#) Euronews' broadcasting licence.

Part ownership of Euronews by Firtash – known for supporting former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and his business [ties](#) with Russia – could enable him to influence Euronews' reporting to Ukraine and the rest of Europe. Just weeks before the deal, Euronews published a very favourable [interview](#) with Firtash. The significant absence of critical questions gave Firtash an opportunity to present his political views, which critics [claim](#) sounded 'as if they had been approved by Russian President Vladimir Putin'.¹

Countering Russian disinformation

Russian disinformation is nothing new – for example, its media carried [stories](#) on alleged genocide in South Ossetia during the 2008 conflict with Georgia. However, escalating disinformation on Ukraine has prompted numerous calls for an effective response.

Investing in Russian language quality media

Russian-language media broadcast from Western countries do not enjoy the same popularity in Russia as RT does in the West; for example, only [5%](#) of Russians watch the news on Euronews; fewer than 2% tune into Western radio stations such as Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle and BBC World Service. The latter's Russian service [stopped](#) broadcasting in 2011 and since then has only been available online; its former director Peter Horrocks has [warned](#) of it being 'financially outmanoeuvred', calling for extra World Service funding to counter the wave of pro-Kremlin information.

Apart from additional funding for existing outlets, several EU countries have suggested developing a jointly operated Russian-language TV station. For example, Latvia (the EU Member State with the largest ethnic Russian minority), in cooperation with several other EU members, including the UK, Estonia, Lithuania, Sweden and Denmark has [proposed](#) cooperating on the launch of an independent Russian-language quality TV channel. In contrast to existing news-only channels such as Euronews, this could also broadcast high-quality entertainment, thus enabling it to compete more effectively with popular Russian channels such as PBK.

Similarly, a May 2015 joint [statement](#) by the Foreign Ministers of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden expressed support for initiatives targeting Russian-speakers with 'alternative sources of information', to ensure a 'pluralistic media landscape, where all people have easy access to independent information'. Ministers agreed to look into a 'mechanism to counter disinformation' and expressed their support for the efforts undertaken by the European Endowment for Democracy (see below) with respect to supporting Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership States and beyond.

In the meantime, until such initiatives are developed, several Member States have already acted on alleged abuse of Western media freedom by Russian broadcasters. Citing disinformation and incitation of hatred, Lithuania has blocked Russian-language channels such as PBK and [NTV Mir](#), while UK media regulator Ofcom is [investigating](#) complaints of bias on RT.

Social media initiatives

In an effort to counter Russia on the social media, the United States has launched a UnitedForUkraine campaign on Facebook and Twitter ([hijacked](#) at one point by Russian 'trolls'); US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is [recruiting](#) social media specialists to produce Russian-language content, and the British army is [setting up](#) a special force of 'Facebook warriors'.

The EU's response

EU leaders at the European Council meeting on 19-20 March [asked](#) High Representative, Federica Mogherini to draw up an action plan on strategic communication before the June European Council, in order to counter Russian 'ongoing disinformation campaigns'. The initial findings were [presented](#) prior to the May 2015 Riga Summit by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), with the following recommendations:

- a pan-regional news hub to exchange news material among leading Russian language media;
- a regional content production centre and a content factory;
- a media excellence centre for the coordination of audience research and training, focusing on market research and business planning – skills that are often lacking in the region;
- a multi-donor basket fund, which would provide long-term demand-driven support to Russian language media initiatives and their partnerships;
- a coordination mechanism for these four initiatives to avoid duplication of initiatives and to fill existing gaps.

At the presentation of the EED's initial findings in Riga, Peter Pomerantsev – one of the authors of the report and an expert on Russian media – emphasised that 'people often don't trust any media, be they Russian, Western or their own. We need to rebuild trust in high quality journalism'.

The final version of the EED report – including recommendations about concrete initiatives and concepts – will be presented to the EED Board of Governors and other donors in late June 2015.

EP resolutions:

[on the situation in Ukraine](#) (15 January 2015): the EP accused Russia of 'waging an undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine, including information war', 'calls on the Commission and the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations to prepare and present to Parliament within two months a communication strategy to counter the Russian propaganda campaign directed towards the EU, its eastern neighbours and Russia itself, and to develop instruments that would allow the EU and its Member States to address the propaganda campaign at European and national level'.

[on Ukraine](#) (17 July 2014): the EP emphasised 'the importance of ... avoiding propaganda, hate speech and rhetoric including from Russia which may further aggravate the conflict';

[on the murder of the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and the state of democracy in Russia](#) (12 March 2015): 'is alarmed by the atmosphere of hatred directed against ... neighbouring nations, which has been growing in Russia in recent years, instigated by state propaganda and official media'; 'calls on the authorities of the Russian Federation to stop the shameful propaganda and information war against its neighbours, the Western world and its own people'.

Endnotes

¹ While the signing of the agreement was [reportedly](#) long opposed by Euronews' French shareholders (23.9% stake), the deal was eventually approved after 53% of the channel's shares were acquired for €35 million by Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris in early March 2015.

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