

Russia's information war Propaganda or counter-propaganda?

SUMMARY

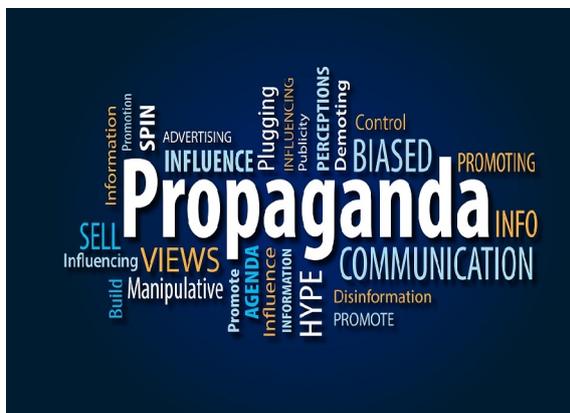
In the West, Russia is more often seen as an instigator than a target of propaganda. However, Kremlin documents and Russian media argue that Russia itself faces serious threats from external information activity. Allegedly, such threats could undermine political stability in the country, curtail its international influence, and jeopardise traditional values. Moscow therefore argues that it needs to take defensive measures.

The Kremlin claims that the USA and its allies are waging an information war against Russia. ISIL/Da'esh, which produces an increasing amount of Russian-language material, is another major adversary.

At home, the Kremlin has clamped down on media and civil society to exclude external influences. Internationally, it has launched media weapons such as news channel RT to compete with Western media, and bankrolled pro-Russian NGOs.

Critics of the Kremlin dispute its claims of a Western-led information war against Russia, and accuse it of conducting disinformation campaigns to justify aggression in neighbouring countries such as Ukraine.

In terms of meeting their declared goal of protecting Russia from information threats, Russian measures have succeeded in excluding most foreign influences from the country. The international impact is more questionable; Russia's image is still very poor, but that does not mean that the Kremlin cannot defend what it sees as the country's external interests.



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- Roles and responsibilities
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Definitions: 'information', 'information war', 'propaganda'

Russian official texts refer to 'information' rather than to 'propaganda'. For example, the [Russian Ministry of Defence](#) defines **information war** as 'a struggle between two or more states ... with the goal of damaging information systems ... [and] critically important structures, ... to destabilise a society and a state through massive psychological conditioning of the population, and also to pressure a state to make decisions that are in the interest of the opponent'. This definition makes it clear that for the Kremlin, 'information' means 'information technology' as well as content. However, this briefing is only concerned with the latter aspect.

Strategy and priorities

The Kremlin claims that its priority is to defend Russian interests from the information threats identified in policy documents. For example, the [2014 Military Doctrine](#) points to political and social destabilisation as one of the main external military threats to Russia. Meanwhile, the 2015 [National Security Strategy](#) notes that 'the USA and its allies' are exerting 'information pressure' to preserve their global dominance and prevent Russia from 'pursuing independent domestic and foreign policies'. The strategy also sees 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' under threat from 'the cultural and informational expansion' of alien values such as permissiveness and intolerance. While it is implied that most of these threats come from the West, 'destructive information actions' also originate with 'extremist and terrorist organisations'.

Similar claims of Western information threats are put forward by the Russian media. For example, Kremlin 'spin doctor' Dmitry Kiselyov, TV presenter and head of Rossiya Segodnya news agency, has [referred](#) to the 'aggressive [Western] propaganda that is now being fed to the world'.

Roles and responsibilities

Russia does not have a Ministry of Information. Nevertheless, Kremlin information activity shows signs of central coordination. For example, social media, state TV news reports and statements by Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, combined to spread the [story](#) of the alleged rape by asylum-seekers of a Russian girl living in Germany.

One of the main actors is Vladimir Putin's presidential administration, believed to coordinate state media from behind the scenes by means of a '[yellow telephone](#)' and [scripted news stories](#). Given the centrality of information in modern warfare (see Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine), the military also have an important role to play. Following the 2008 conflict with Georgia, Russia considered setting up [information troops](#) within the armed forces; while that idea was never followed through, it is likely that similar capabilities exist within intelligence agencies such as the Federal Security Service (FSB). Finally, [Roskomnadzor](#) is Russia's media and internet regulator.

Adversaries

The West accused of threatening Russia through media and civil society

Margarita Simonyan, head of pro-Kremlin international news channel RT, [claims](#) that a handful of powerful Western media conglomerates dominate international media space, promoting the geopolitical agenda of the USA and its European allies at Russia's expense. According to the Kremlin's view of the 2011-2012 post-election protests, social media and pro-democracy NGOs served Western interests by fomenting unrest, on similar lines to the 'colour revolutions' which toppled pro-Russian regimes in [Ukraine](#) and Georgia.

Terrorists and extremists

ISIL/Da'esh produces an increasing amount of [Russian-language materials](#); in 2015 media regulator Roskomnadzor identified [over 1 500 sites](#) directly propagating or linking to such materials. These have helped to recruit an estimated [2 500 jihadists](#), making Russia the third-largest source of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.

Main tools

Repressive measures on the home front to exclude alien influences

The Kremlin's main response to information threats within Russia is repression. The main media are in the hands of the state or Putin allies; the few dissenting voices in independent media have been [reined in](#), and a 2014 law curbs external influences by setting a [20% ceiling](#) on foreign ownership of Russian media organisations.

Until recently, the Russian internet was relatively free. However, vaguely worded [anti-extremism laws](#) are increasingly being used not only against legitimate threats but also to stifle dissent. The number of convictions for online extremism has [quadrupled](#) over the last five years, including for [criticism](#) of Russian involvement in Ukraine.

In the 2011-2012 post-election protests, the authorities also used more covert tactics, for example launching denial-of-service attacks on opposition websites and posting automatically generated messages to [disrupt online discussions](#).

In civil society, the Kremlin has targeted NGOs seen as channels of Western influence by forcing some to register as '[foreign agents](#)' and [closing down](#) others altogether. The 2013 '[gay propaganda](#)' law purports to defend Russia's spiritual values from the corrupting influence of '[Gayropa](#)' by banning materials promoting 'non-traditional sexual relationships' to minors.

Competing with the West in international media space and civil society

To project its influence outside Russia, the Kremlin has invested in its own international media by establishing Sputnik news agency and upgrading 24-hour news channel RT. Both outlets claim to challenge Western media dominance in defence of a '[multi-coloured world](#)', where 'Russia is Russian', as Kremlin media chief Kiselyov puts it.

In civil society, Moscow provides an estimated [US\\$130 million](#) a year to pro-Kremlin NGO projects outside Russia, mostly in former Soviet and Balkan countries. Among other things, these promote Russian language and culture, and carry out historical research supporting the '[Russkiy Mir](#)' (Russian World) doctrine.

Insights and criticism

Objectivity is not the aim of Russian information

Observers (for example, the [Disinformation Review](#) of the EU's East StratCom Task Force) accuse the Kremlin of a blatant disregard for the truth. Indeed, Russian media chiefs [Simonyan](#) and [Kiselyov](#) have both publicly admitted that objectivity is not their goal. The apparent intention is to create confusion by presenting a plethora of alternative versions of the 'truth' – for example, the [conspiracy theories](#) peddled by pro-Kremlin sources after the downing of a Malaysian airliner over eastern Ukraine.

Russian information is offensive rather than defensive

Russian policy documents and media claim that the country is under attack from Western propaganda and that it needs to defend itself. However, Western observers argue that criticisms of the Kremlin are based on its aggression against neighbouring countries such as Ukraine, in violation of international standards (for example, the

[Budapest Memorandum](#) guaranteeing Ukrainian territorial integrity), and do not threaten genuine Russian interests. Observers also dispute claims of '[Russophobia](#)' (the Kremlin's standard response to allegations of [military aggression](#), [human rights abuses](#), and even [doping in Russian athletics](#)).

[Russian information](#) typically follows an aggressive rather than a defensive approach, with the emphasis on denigrating countries seen as adversaries. For example, RT's coverage of Ukraine highlights problems such as [corruption](#), [fascism](#) and [desperate poverty](#) besetting the '[tragic country](#)'. Similar stories are spread on social media by an army of [Russian trolls](#). Kremlin-backed NGOs play their part too, for example by campaigning against the country's association agreement with the EU and denouncing human rights violations against Russian speakers.

Rather than refuting international criticisms of Crimea's referendum on unification, Russia sent election monitors to Scotland, where they denounced [electoral fraud](#) in the independence vote.

How effective are Russian information measures?

In Russia itself, the Kremlin's policies have succeeded in excluding external influences. A December 2015 [Levada Center poll](#) shows that (mostly state-controlled) TV is the main source of news for 85% of Russians, even if it only enjoys the trust of 41%; [fewer than 5%](#) read or watch foreign media. Despite the economic downturn, support for President Putin remains high and the democratic opposition has been [successfully marginalised](#).

By contrast, outside Russia, Pew Research Center polls show that the Kremlin was unable to prevent a dramatic deterioration in the country's global image [between 2013 and 2014](#). Despite a small recovery in 2015, respondents with a favourable view of Russia were in the minority in all but [three of the 39 countries surveyed](#).

Of course, widespread distrust of the Kremlin does not necessarily mean that its information activities are ineffective. Destabilisation is one of the goals of information warfare in the definition cited above, and stories promoted by pro-Kremlin media do not have to be widely believed in order to have such an effect. Examples are the above-mentioned rape story, which sparked protests in Berlin, and negative coverage of Ukraine by RT and Sputnik News, which may have [swayed](#) the Dutch vote against the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in an April 2016 referendum. Following Russian allegations of electoral fraud, a [petition](#) for a new vote on Scottish independence garnered over 100 000 signatures.

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