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Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation

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“This is war. You’re part of it.”

– Appeal of Ukrainian Civil Society to International Journalists

As international investigators attempted to piece together evidence of how Malaysian flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine, wild rumors ricocheted throughout the Internet. According to one of the early Russian versions, Ukrainian government forces downed the civilian passenger jet, believing it was Russian President Vladimir Putin’s plane. Another story claimed the Malaysian passenger jet had been filled with dead bodies, flown deliberately over the conflict zone in Ukraine, then detonated with explosives. The aim: to ignite a war with Russia. Some Russians, conditioned to accept conspiracy theories by decades of Soviet propaganda, believed it.

More sober theories, based on mounting evidence that the plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile launched by pro-Russian separatists, were dismissed by Moscow, which blamed the Ukrainian military. U.S. and Russian officials held dueling news conferences. Intercepted phone conversations between rebels and Russian security officials trumpeted by Ukraine were “falsified,” according to Russian experts.

In just a few days Flight 17 became embroiled in a massive and sophisticated propaganda war over the conflict in Ukraine which, in its intensity, rivals peak moments of the Cold War’s battle for hearts and minds.

Some of the methods employed are traditional, including disinformation, half-truths and labeling, but the battle is being waged with a dizzying array of modern weapons, including electronic media, digital communications, blogs and social media. “Previously, there was artillery preparation before an attack,” Dmitry Kiselev, Russian television anchorman and head of a new government information agency, says. “Now, it’s informational preparation.”

All sides are using propaganda: Ukraine, Russia, the United States and other Western countries. But, for Moscow, the conflict in Ukraine is accelerating profound changes already under way in the Russian media: the centralization and mobilization of information resources in the hands of the state, providing the

Kremlin—and President Vladimir Putin—the means to galvanize public opinion domestically and in the region, as well as forcefully assert Russia’s policies, views and—increasingly—values internationally.

Putin has succeeded in dominating the media landscape within his own country and parts of Ukraine. Now, the Kremlin has set its sights on a broader international audience and is rebuilding the media and propaganda structures that collapsed, along with the Soviet Union, two decades ago.

And it’s honing its message. By questioning, demeaning and attacking American and European moral “hypocrisy,” Russia is positioning itself as the “Un-West,” defining its own rules, and Putin believes his message is gaining traction: “Military-political, economic, informational competition does not subside but grows in the world,” he told his Parliament in December. “Other global centers follow Russia’s strengthening with attention.”

For Putin’s propaganda chief, Dmitry Kiselev, one battle already is won: “We’ve switched roles,” he says. “Russia is for freedom of expression and the West is not.”

The Stealth Strategy

The first lie appeared in late February, as men in green camouflage military uniforms carrying weapons took up positions in the Crimean Peninsula, a region of Ukraine populated primarily by Russian speakers. In spite of indications that the men were Russian security forces, Vladimir Putin denied it, telling reporters at a news conference on March 4, “the post-Soviet space is full of such uniforms,” and anyone could have bought them.

The next day the U.S. State Department took the extraordinary step of firing off a direct rebuttal to the Russian president, stating “the world has not seen such startling Russian fiction since Dostoyevsky wrote, ‘The formula “two times two equals five” is not without its attractions.’”

There was no question the armed units were Russian, the State Department insisted; they drove vehicles with Russian military license plates and, when questioned by the international media and the Ukrainian military, the men

“freely identif[ied] themselves as Russian security forces.” What’s more, it said, they were armed with weapons “not generally available to civilians.” Yet Russian officials steadfastly insisted the men were not Russian troops; Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told the media the reports were “complete nonsense.”

In the blogosphere the sparring reached epic proportions. Western reporters Tweeted photographs of Russian license plates. Pro-Ukrainian bloggers sarcastically referred to the uniformed forces as “little green men.” Pro-Russian bloggers and journalists used the catchword “polite men” and released pictures of them in camouflage, cradling automatic weapons, chatting amiably with little children.

Russia’s explanation for the “little green men” was a classic example of the Soviet technique of military deception called “maskirovka,” literally “camouflage,” but in April, during his annual call-in program, Putin finally “unmasked” the operation, admitting that Russian troops were on the ground in Crimea. “Of course, Russian servicemen backed the Crimean self-defense forces,” he said, but insisted they were needed to protect the lives of Russian-speaking Crimeans.

That life-or-death scenario—rescuing Russians and Russian-speakers from the depredations of Fascists—became the driving narrative in the Kremlin’s campaign to justify its incursion into Crimea, and it was broadcast relentlessly on all state-run media in Russia, especially television, which reaches more than 90% of the Russian population.

Russia’s main TV channels also reached large numbers of viewers in south and east Ukraine where many residents speak Russian; Vesti, Russia 24, Channel One, RTR “Planeta” and NTV Mir were part of the regular channel lineup. The broadcasts from Moscow were popular, so much so that the new Ukrainian government quickly banned them after Russia pulled broadcasts of Ukrainian stations off the air in Crimea.

For Moscow, controlling the means of mass communication was crucial; establishing a single, unchallenged narrative was essential. In several cities in eastern and southern Ukraine the first object pro-Russian groups seized was the

television tower. *The Wall Street Journal*, reporting on what it called a “covert effort by Russian intelligence officers,” described the seizure of a tower outside of the Ukrainian city of Slavyansk: “Well-equipped gunmen accompanied by specialized technicians disarmed the guards, allowing the technicians to connect sophisticated satellite equipment and replace Ukrainian channels with the pro-Kremlin Russian broadcasts.”

Russia’s state-controlled media presented a parallel universe: a “humanitarian crisis” was unfolding. Russian-speaking Ukrainians were under attack. Hundreds of thousands were fleeing, they said, an allegation that later was shown to be false. News anchors referred to Ukrainians protesting on the streets of Kiev as “radicals,” “extremists” and “nationalists.” Russian state television was filled with images of swastikas and bloodshed, fanning an atavistic panic that the bloody battle against Fascism from a half-century ago was back again.

The U.S. State Department assailed what it called Moscow’s “false and dangerous narrative.” “The Russian propaganda machine,” one statement said, “continues to promote hate speech and incite violence by creating a false threat in Ukraine that does not exist. We would not be seeing the violence and sad events that we’ve witnessed...without this relentless stream of disinformation and Russian provocateurs fostering unrest in eastern Ukraine.”

In April, as heavily armed pro-Russian groups took over a government building in southeast Ukraine, President Putin began referring to the region as “New Russia,” an historical term for the area of Ukraine conquered by Russia more than three hundred years ago.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined the rhetorical battle, tarring Putin with label of irredentism. “Now if this sounds familiar, it’s what Hitler did back in the ’30s,” Clinton said in March. “The ethnic Germans, the Germans by ancestry who were in places like Czechoslovakia and Romania and other places, Hitler kept saying they’re not being treated right. ‘I must go and protect my people,’ and that’s what’s gotten everybody so nervous.”

The United Nations debunked Russian allegations of widespread and systematic attacks on Russian speakers in Ukraine. A report by its human rights

monitors warned of “radically different narratives being exploited for political ends.” U.N. Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, Ivan Simonovich, in an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, confirmed there had been cases of harassment of Russian speakers who supported President Yanukovich but said they were “neither widespread nor systemic.”

“One of the problems that we faced in Crimea,” he said, “was first cutting off the channels, television channels, that were broadcast from Ukraine. So, in a way, it was an attempt to have a monopoly of information, and then information quite often consisted of some cases where some violations that did take place were exaggerated, and also there were some unfounded rumors that were spread about trains coming filled with extremists, well-armed, and wishing to prosecute [sic] the Russian population. That has contributed to create the climate of fear and insecurity.”

Several pro-Kiev websites sprang up, waging their own propaganda battle against Moscow’s media onslaught. In March, a Russian-language Ukrainian website, “Anti-propaganda,” suddenly appeared on the Russian social media platform, *Vkontakte* (“Incontact”). Who was behind it was unclear. “From the television screen comes a constant stream of information,” the site proclaimed. “They convince us, they indoctrinate us, they impose on us. In a word, they manipulate us.”

The website’s mission, it said, was to “separate fact from propaganda.” Employing the methodology of the British researcher, Robert Cole, and his book, *The International Encyclopedia of Propaganda*, the Anti-propaganda website studied daily news broadcasts of the main Russian TV channels, quantifying the percentage of what it deemed propaganda. The April 21st broadcast of the program “Vesti” on the Russia24 channel, for example, was listed as “66% propaganda.” Each program was described in detail, along with quotes by the anchormen or women and a list of propaganda techniques used, e.g. “demonization of the enemy,” “disinformation,” “oversimplification,” and “substitution of facts with opinions.”

Propaganda or not, viewers in Russia who watched the broadcasts were primed to accept the government's narrative that Nazis had carried out the uprising in Kiev. World War II—which Russians commonly refer to as the “Great War of the Fatherland”—elicits deep, patriotic emotions. In a 2002 poll by Moscow's Public Opinion Foundation, Russians were asked what one thing they were most proud of in their country's history. Forty-one percent surveyed cited the Soviet Union's victory in World War II.

Stirring up historical memories appeared to have a “rally ‘round the flag” effect: In another Foundation poll in late March of this year seventy-two percent of Russians questioned agreed that there are issues in society so important that media reports should be withheld in the interest of the state. Fifty-four percent said information can be distorted in the interest of the government.

In December Dmitry Kiselev met with journalists of the RIA Novosti news agency that was being restructured as part of the creation of the Kremlin's new international information service, Russia Today.

“Objectivity does not exist,” he told them. “There's not one publication in the world that's objective. Is CNN objective? No. Is the BBC objective? No. Objectivity is a myth, which they propose to us and impose on us.” Kiselev said he had “no pretensions” against the journalists “because, in our country, we have freedom of expression,” but he added, “Frequently, under the motto of objectivity, we distort the picture and look at our country as something alien. I think this period of distilled, detached journalism is over.” He ended with a warning: “If you are planning to engage in subversive activity that doesn't coincide with my plans, I'm telling you right now.”

Kiselev has publically described his “internal evolution” as a journalist. It wasn't the result of “Putin's efforts,” he insists. “I understood that our post-Soviet journalism is different from the West's...journalism is an instrument and resource for a country that allows values to be created...to define what is good and what is bad....I think that journalists in Russia have a big mission to create those values.”

The Home Front

Two days after voters in Crimea passed a referendum to join Russia, Vladimir Putin stood on a giant stage erected on Red Square, framed by a military chorus in crisp white uniforms, and looked out on a sea of joyous faces. “After a difficult, long and exhausting journey, Crimea and Sevastopol have returned to Russia,” he proclaimed, “to their home harbor, their home shores, their home port!”

“Glory to Russia!” the crowd roared. The strains of the Russian national anthem—a stirring blend of Soviet-era melody and post-Soviet lyrics—filled the square. “From the southern seas to the polar regions lie our forests and our fields. You are unique in the world, one of a kind—this native land protected by God!”

The TV cameras, broadcasting the celebration live on state-controlled networks, panned the audience, lingering on young, bright faces, then focused on the Russian Presidential standard, the czarist double-headed eagle on a field of white, blue and red, unfurling in the chill breeze. On a red, white and blue heart projected on a giant video monitor at the back of the stage glistened the words “Crimea is in my heart!”

The military incursion into Crimea and the referendum to join Russia sent Vladimir Putin’s ratings sky-high. In an April poll by Russia’s Levada Center, reported by *The Moscow Times*, 82% of Russians surveyed approved of Putin’s leadership and 58% said their country was heading in the right direction, the highest number in more than two decades.

Russia’s domestic mass media were key to this support. Since the end of his first term in office in 2004, President Vladimir Putin had pulled all national television networks under tight editorial control, a “one-way communication tube,” Carnegie Moscow Center’s Masha Lipman told me in April, “that it has used effectively to shape public opinion.” Non-governmental media still enjoy a degree of editorial freedom, she said, “but the trick for the Kremlin is to make sure they remain editorially irrelevant by keeping politics under control, to make sure they are not a political challenge.”

“I would not say the government has shut down every voice of dissent. We’re not there yet,” she explained. This limited freedom of expression works as a means to “let off steam” among those who don’t support the status quo. “There are outlets that still function, but it has always been at the discretion of the government, and the government has used that discretion recently in a very dramatic way.”

On the Wire

An example came in March, when one of Russia’s most popular news websites, *Lenta.ru* (“The Wire”) published an interview with a member of a Ukrainian ultra-nationalist group. The interview contained a link to the group’s leader, Dmitriy Yarosh, whom the Russian government had put on an international wanted list as a terrorist.

The Russian government’s Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications (*Roskomnadzor*), which licenses and supervises the media, officially warned *Lenta.ru* that the website itself could be charged with extremism for publishing the interview. The website’s long-time editor, Galina Timchenko, was replaced; the editor of a pro-Kremlin website took over.

The conflict in Ukraine has loosed a flurry of legislation restricting the media. A law passed in February allows the government to block any website, without a court order, if it contains “extremist” information. “Extremism,” however, is defined broadly. “Anything can be extremist,” a long-time Russian newspaper reporter told me, “So it’s a very useful tool for the government to shut down almost anything.”

In March the staff of *Lenta.ru* published an open letter to its followers: “Over the past couple of years, the space for free journalism in Russia has dramatically decreased. Some publications are directly controlled by the Kremlin, others by curators, still others by editors who fear losing their jobs. Some media outlets have been closed, and others will be closed in the coming months. The problem is

not that we have nowhere to work. The problem is that you have nothing more to read.”

The Web

The country’s most popular social networking site, Vkontakte, has been under pressure too, according to its founder and former CEO. Pavel Durov told the media that the FSB, successor agency to the KGB, ordered him to turn over personal information on activists who took part in the uprising in Kiev. Durov said he refused to comply and was fired. He fled Russia in April, claiming that Vkontakte was now under full control of Kremlin-friendly officials, an allegation denied by the new owners who accused him of trying to politicize the issue.

As Masha Lipman noted, the Russian government has developed a variety of tools to restrict online communication, including “Internet black lists” and an “anti-piracy” law. President Putin himself appears uneasy with the Web, and told a media conference in April that the Internet originally was a “special CIA project” and “this is the way it is developing.” Putin pointedly noted that Russia’s “special services,” in response, are “introducing special security systems,” dealing primarily with classified information of the Defense Ministry and government agencies.

The Russian blogosphere also presents a challenge to the government, and efforts to rein it in are growing. A new study of Russia’s blogs by Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society describes it as an important “alternative public sphere.”

“Given Russia’s limited and continually shrinking opportunities for meaningful participation in political and civic life,” the study says, “the blogosphere represents one of the few public spaces where Russians can decide what issues are of public concern and how to organize to act on them, in a bottom-up, organic manner.”

Early this year, in an effort to counter what the president called an “informational confrontation,” Russia’s Parliament passed a law requiring social media websites to keep their servers in Russia and to save all information about

their users for at least six months. Another law that has passed two readings, as reported by *The Moscow Times*, would restrict the content of all blogs and bloggers who have more than 3,000 “daily readers,” and they would be registered separately, along with their phone numbers and home addresses.

At the United Nations, Russia has been urging more international cooperation on legal aspects of the Internet. “The authorities are discussing a series of measures to tighten control of Internet providers,” the website of the business newspaper *Kommersant* reported. “Experts and media operators fear that the government will obtain unlimited possibilities for censoring the Internet.”

Rain Clouds

Dozhd TV—the word means “rain” in Russian—attracted viewers from the hip, young world of Moscow’s successful middle class, the group that the Kremlin has, essentially, given up on attracting to its political ranks. Until February, the privately-owned channel was broadcast on cable, private satellite and on the Internet; its news included criticism of the government and gave air time to well-known Putin critics, like Alexei Navalny. It reported on allegations of corruption and human rights abuses during preparations for the Olympic Games in Sochi and provided extensive coverage of the uprising in Kiev.

But in January *Dozhd* crossed the line. On the eve of the 70th anniversary of the lifting of the Nazi Blockade of Leningrad, the channel conducted an online poll asking its viewers: Should the Soviet government have surrendered Leningrad, during the infamous World War II Nazi Blockade “in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives?”

The question, for many Russians whose families had lived—and died—in those 900 days of starvation, was a sacrilege. The siege of Leningrad is a scarring, yet sacred event in modern Russian history. Vladimir Putin’s own parents barely survived the siege; their little boy, older brother to Putin, died.

The political uproar was immediate. The government’s media agency accused the channel of violating the law, noting that article 49 of the media law requires journalists to “respect laws and the legal interests of citizens.”

“Such questions and statements,” the agency said, “could be interpreted as insulting to veterans of the Great War of the Fatherland and to residents of Leningrad during the Blockade, who exerted all their efforts to achieve victory in the battle with Nazi Germany.”

Dozhd’s editor-in-chief Mikhail Zygar publicly apologized, but cable and satellite operators quickly dropped Dozhd from their lineups, severing the channel, it said, from ninety percent of its outlets and eighty percent of its income. The general director, Natalya Sindeyeva, announced that Dozhd had only enough money to survive another month. The staff resorted to Internet fundraisers to keep going.

In late April, however, a *deus ex machina* suddenly appeared in the unlikely persona of President Vladimir Putin. As he left his annual call-in “Direct Line” news conference, reporters asked him about Dozhd’s fate.

Putin, surprisingly, told them he would try to free the canal from “excess attention” from the “controlling organs” (of government). “It’s an interesting channel,” he added, “with a good, young collective, that made definite mistakes, insulting a great number of citizens.” Dozhd’s staff, however, he said, had admitted that fact and now “we have to see how to get out of this situation.”

Putin’s comments brought immediate results: The head of the Association of Cable Operators offered to help in negotiations to put Dozhd back on the air. “From the moment Putin interceded on behalf of the channel, just one day passed,” a report on the NEWSru.com site noted, “once again confirming the observation that interference by the president in any problem brings fruitful results with lightning speed.”

Echo Chamber

In March, access to the website of the independent radio station Echo Moscow, still a free-wheeling alternative universe of open debate and balanced journalism, was temporarily blocked. Internet providers had cut access to Echo’s site after the government media monitor banned access to the blog of a leading opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, accusing him of extremism. The station had a

link to Navalny's blog and, after deleting it, Echo was back on the web. But in February, Echo's longtime CEO was dismissed by the station's shareholders and replaced by the former deputy chairwoman of government's international radio broadcaster, The Voice of Russia.

Echo's long-time editor, Alexey Venediktov, is a fixture on Moscow's media scene. With his beard and mane of unruly gray hair, he has skillfully navigated the shark-infested waters of Russian broadcasting for more than two decades. He called the move a "totally political decision" but vowed "I won't change editorial policy. We are professionals, instead of civil activists. We will work in a genre of traditional journalism when each bit of news is verified."

In the 1990's Russia's media outlets were sometimes taken over at the point of a gun. At 3 a.m. on April 14, 2001, I stood in the hall on the eighth floor of Ostankino Television Center at the offices of NTV, Russia's cutting-edge, hard-hitting news channel, as armed men forced the station's security to step aside. NTV was suddenly under control of the state-owned energy conglomerate Gazprom. Today's NTV specializes in screeds against the opposition, and two years ago made waves with an ambush interview with the new American Ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul.

The domestic Russian media now are more likely to be brought under Kremlin control in "hostile takeovers" than in midnight raids by men in balaclavas and body armor. "All TV networks are either under control of the state or of state-affiliated companies that are headed by Putin's closest friends," investigative journalist Yevgenia Albats, chief editor of *The New Times* magazine told me in March. "All these current media are in the hands of the Kremlin."

In April I received an email from a Russian journalist in Moscow whose company, as many other Russian media companies, has, as she put it, been turned into a "propaganda machine."

"You understand how far back to my Soviet childhood we are now," she wrote, "unexpectedly rapid and unpredictably from the point of view of the consequences." It's like something out of George Orwell, she said, or *The Day of Oprichnik*, a novel by contemporary writer Vladimir Sorokin. The story is set in

2028. The Tsar is back, Russia is locked behind a new Iron Curtain, and police—the “oprichniks”—rape and pillage the country. “I try not to think about it and what happened, and I understand clearly, as never before, that in the coming five to seven years there will be nothing to do with the media in this country.”

Taking Moscow’s Message to the World

In countries that once were part of the Soviet Union, where many ethnic Russians reside and the Russian language still is spoken, Russian state media penetration has been effective. Projecting its message outside of Russia’s borders has been a bigger challenge for the Kremlin.

One problem is the language issue but government officials have candidly admitted to me that Russia has an “image problem” caused, in large part, by reports of corruption and a legal system unduly influenced by the government. In an interview in Moscow last year, Konstantin Kosachev, head of Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia’s key soft power agency, said: “Right now the image of Russia is, in some way, objectively negative. In some way it is discredited.”

To rectify that the Kremlin, for the past decade, has set about reconstructing the international communications and propaganda structures that had collapsed after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian officials, including President Putin, have stressed the need for Russia to use soft power and media persuasion as part of its arsenal of foreign policy tools.

In contrast to most Western concepts of soft power, however, in which attraction to a country is the key to a country’s getting what it wants, Putin has described soft power as a form of defense, an instrument of geopolitical control exercised primarily by government. In his view, other nations are exploiting their soft power in order to interfere in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation.

Putin’s *2013 Foreign Policy Concept*, for example, decried what he claimed are *illegal* uses of soft power: “Increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes creates a risk of destructive and unlawful use of ‘soft power’ and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states,

interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad.”

Vladimir Putin has urged his government and the country’s media to more forcefully and effectively project Russia’s message internationally and, when it comes to defining that message, he has become Russia’s philosopher-in-chief. In his 1999 article, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium,” he laid the conceptual groundwork for ideas that would reach fruition fourteen years later, during his takeover of Crimea.

“Russia was and will remain a great power,” he wrote. “It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence. They determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia, and they cannot but do so at present.” Russia’s “traditional values,” he said, include “patriotism, belief in the greatness of Russia,” social solidarity and, significantly, “statism”—the belief in a strong state.

In March, as his forces entered Crimea, Putin’s message hardened as he unleashed a litany of recriminations against the West, along with a firm insistence that Russia has the right to reject Western values and promote its own, alternative view of the world.

“They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner,” Putin told the Russian Parliament in March, “because we have an independent position, because we maintain it, and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything.”

Vladimir Putin has long insisted the West is waging a media war against Russia, and Kremlin officials are deeply cynical about the West’s “image management.” Human rights and democracy, they have told me, are nothing more than “branding” meant to “sell” a nation internationally. As Alexander Smirnov, the Kremlin’s public relations and communications chief, put it in a Moscow interview in February 2012: “If we are talking about democracy, it’s the

most expensive brand in the world that you (the U.S.) have created. It's a million times more expensive than Coca-Cola.”

The one bright spot for the Kremlin's efforts to re-brand itself is Russia's government-funded international television network RT, originally called Russia Today, which began with a soft-power mission of explaining Russia to the world, then switched focus to the United States, vigorously criticizing U.S. foreign policy and actively reporting on U.S. government violations of civil rights, at home and abroad. Its editor-in-chief is 33-year-old Margarita Simonyan, Russia's poster child for in-your-face international broadcasting.

Appearing on RT last year, President Putin praised Simonyan for providing “an unbiased coverage of the events in Russia” and for trying “to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.” A year ago, in an interview about RT, she told me the name, Russia Today, “was a mistake.”

“What is going to make me watch a TV station? Not too many people out there are interested in Russia so much that they really want to watch things about Russia and only about Russia,” she said. “How many people are there? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? Fifty thousand across the world? That's not nearly enough that it's worth spending so much money.”

Soon after its creation in 2005 the network shifted its editorial approach, forgetting about soft features on life across the vast expanse of Russia, opting for a steady stream of “alternative” news reports, heavy on conspiracy theories, criticism of the American government's “oppressive” domestic and international policies, and a diet of “what-about-ism,” a time-worn propaganda technique used by the Soviet government in which criticism is deflected by cries of “but what about?...”

As the Ukraine crisis exploded, RT suffered two public relations disasters: an on-air screed by one of its American anchors, Abby Martin, against Russia's military incursion into Ukraine, and an on-air resignation by another American anchor, Liz Wahl, who also lambasted Putin's actions in Ukraine.

Martin stuck with the network and later criticized Western media for ignoring her previous criticism of U.S. military action abroad. RT's editor-in-chief

Simonyan accused Washington-based “neo-cons” of staging a psy-ops campaign by setting up Wahl. RT’s website didn’t mince words: “Turns out things might not be as spontaneous as they seem—in fact, in the paranoid world of neo-con American journalism, things are very rarely spontaneous. They’re usually nasty, angry, ugly exchanges full of trolly self-righteous butthurt.”

In an interview with me in April, Wahl denied any psy-ops campaign. Working at RT, she said, she soon learned that it “doesn’t talk about Russia.” The network changed its name from Russia Today to RT, she believes, in order to create a disconnect, “to make it a hard-hitting, hip, young kind of image with a focus on domestic U.S. issues.”

“The point that we would return to over and over again was U.S. hypocrisy. Something would be news in Russia or a world event put Russia under the microscope and, instead of focusing on that, we would kind of turn the story around and shine the light on the West. Sometimes there was an element of truth there but it became increasingly strange to me that we always returned to that, to point out that the U.S. was hypocritical, almost as a way to justify Russia’s actions. It was almost like ‘Hey, you know what, West, NATO? You’re not any better.’”

For Moscow, however, RT was the first positive sign that the Kremlin was beginning to get its message across to the world. Although its claims about numbers of viewers are highly inflated, RT has increased its audience, broadcasting in English, Arabic and Spanish. The network says its ratings far outstrip those of many Western broadcasters, citing its own data that RT is carried by 22 satellites and more than 230 operators, “which allows some 664 million people to watch the channel in more than 100 countries worldwide.”

According to a source in the Western media familiar with international television ratings, however, the reality is the opposite. According to the Internet analytics company ComScore, in terms of worldwide digital numbers, in the fourth quarter of 2013 RT.com reached 5.8 million monthly unique users worldwide. In comparison, the CNN network, according to the same source, reached 109.4 million monthly unique users in the same time period.

RT's formula of slick videos, young anchors, "what-about-ism" and a mélange of conspiracy theories nevertheless seemed to be having some effect. When U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called RT a "propaganda bullhorn" promoting Vladimir Putin's "fantasy" version of the situation in Ukraine, the network demanded an apology. The State Department's Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Richard Stengel, in turn, blasted RT as a "distortion machine, not a news organization."

As proof Stengel, a former managing editor of *Time* magazine, cited several RT reports, including a leaked telephone call involving former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. RT "manipulated" it, he charged: "Through selective editing, the network made it appear that Tymoshenko advocated violence against Russia."

Stengel also laid into RT's "constant reference" to any Ukrainian opposed to a Russian takeover of the country as a terrorist. "They are false claims," he said, "and when propaganda poses as news it creates real dangers and gives a green light to violence."

RT's editor-in-chief shot that down: "Propaganda is the deliberate dissemination of information that you know to be false or misguided. And boy, does Mr. Stengel make a valiant attempt at propagandizing, because anyone would be hard-pressed to cram more falsehoods into a hundred words."

Simonyan, who studied in the United States and speaks English with an American accent, is a far cry from Soviet-style official spokesmen in boxy suits. Russia's robust rebound from its post-Soviet weakness has shocked some Western competitors and even Stengel, in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, conceded: "Since the annexation of Crimea, I've been really amazed by the power of the Russian propaganda machine, how well organized it is, how vertically integrated, how modern it is."

Late last year came the first indication that Simonyan's aggressive style and her network's focus on the soft underbelly of American foreign policy would serve as a template for a new information service with the dusted-off name Russia Today.

The New Russia Today

In December of last year, a month after protests began on the streets of Kiev, President Putin stunned the Russian media world with two decrees. RIA Novosti, Russia's leading news agency, founded in 1941 to report from the frontlines of the war against Nazi Germany, was ordered to be liquidated within three months, along with The Voice of Russia short-wave radio, founded in 1929 as Radio Comintern.

In their place Putin decreed formation of a new international information agency, Russia Today. Its mission: "To highlight abroad the state policy and public life of the Russian Federation." Russian officials provided few details but explained the step was being taken in order to more economically utilize government funds and to improve the effectiveness of state media.

In a second decree Putin named 59-year-old Dmitry Kiselev to head Russia Today. RT's Margarita Simonyan was to be its editor-in-chief, retaining her original position at the TV network.

The choice of Kiselev shocked a number of Russian journalists. Popular with average viewers, he specializes in sensational comments, reminding his viewers at one point that "Russia is the only country in the world realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash." He frequently excoriates "depraved" Western values, at one point saying "fining gays is not sufficient—they should not be allowed to give blood or sperm and, in case of a car accident, their hearts should be burnt or buried as useless."

When a CNN website story lampooned a monument to Soviet forces in World War II, Kiselev displayed a photo of the U.S. Marine Iwo Jima monument on his show, hinting that it looked like gay men having sex and smirkingly telling the audience: "It's easy to mock. A fevered subconscious could ascribe just about anything to it. Take a closer look: A very modern theme, isn't it?"

In February I called Kiselev and asked for an interview on his role at the new Russia Today. He said he remembered me from my years as CNN's Moscow Bureau Chief and would be happy to grant an interview. "Call me after March 8th when we will know more," he told me.

I rang him back in March but his mood had changed. “I will not give an interview to anyone from CNN!” he growled. When I tried to convince him that I had left CNN and was now on a fellowship at Harvard he cut me off. “I will not give an interview to any American!” he shouted. “But why?” I asked. “Because it is my right! I am sorry! Good-bye!!” and he hung up the phone.

In mid-February President Putin awarded Kiselev the Order for Service to the Fatherland Fourth Class for “many years of diligent work,” as well as “services in the humanitarian sphere, strengthening the rules of law,” and “protection of the rights and interests of citizens.”

Some Russian journalists I spoke with call Kiselev a “buffoon,” or, as one put it, “a classic example of absolute, unbelievable, unexplainable idiotism.” A journalist who knows him well described him as intelligent, but an “opportunist without values.” Millions of Russians, however, watch his broadcasts. In late March, in a sign of his important role in the Kremlin’s media wars, the European Union included him in a list of Russians to be sanctioned over Moscow’s annexation of Crimea. Kiselev called the action “a dangerous precedent”—a restriction in freedom of speech not just for one journalist, but for journalism around the world—a “betrayal of European values.”

RIA Novosti

Svetlana Mironyuk, one of the most powerful women in the Russian media, had transformed the Soviet-era agency RIA Novosti into a sophisticated, modern and influential digital behemoth—a network covering more than 45 countries, reporting in 14 different languages.

A few hours after hearing news broadcasts of Putin’s decrees, Mironyuk sat on a stage at RIA Novosti’s headquarters in downtown Moscow, looking out at her shell-shocked journalists, many of whom had fled from other Russian media outlets under pressure from the Kremlin. RIA Novosti, she said, would be “liquidated, that is, destroyed,” but as government employees, she said, they would not discuss the reasons or motivations for the president’s order. “We obey it, and we carry it out.”

As a member of the staff recorded her on a cell phone from the back of the auditorium the tall, striking blonde, normally self assured and in command, her voice quivering, said: “It was good to work with you for these past ten years. Thank you to those who believed in me. Forgive me, those whom I could not save. Truly, it’s very painful for me. I’m not embarrassed that I am brought to tears.”

What Russia Today’s mission would be was, on that Monday in Moscow, unclear. How many staff would be fired, how many retained, also was not known. What was the “real state of affairs politically,” as Mironyuk put it, was unexplained. Reporting on its own demise, RIA Novosti said on its English-language website: “The move is the latest in a series of shifts in Russia’s news landscape that appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily-regulated media sector.”

Ten days after his bombshell decree shutting RIA Novosti, Vladimir Putin, at his marathon annual news conference, left no doubt about his intent to bring government media into line. Watching him from a seat near the stage, I could see his face harden as a reporter from Bloomberg news agency raised the issue of Dmitry Kiselev’s appointment to head Russia Today, without naming him. “The person who has recently been put at the head of a new propaganda agency causes an allergic reaction in Kiev,” the reporter told Putin, “precisely because they consider Russia’s information campaign regarding their country as hostile.”

The president shot back: “There should be patriotically minded people at the head of state information resources, people who uphold the interests of the Russian Federation. These are state resources. That is the way it is going to be.”

RIA’s editor-in-chief Svetlana Mironyuk, several Russian journalists agree, was caught in a tenuous balancing act. She had hired a number of popular, influential journalists from liberal media outlets. Her website carried live reports from the anti-Putin protests in Moscow during the winter of 2012. Far-right Russian groups criticized RIA Novosti’s reports on the uprising in Ukraine as a “sewer” of pro-Western propaganda.

“Sometimes it seemed like she acted as, you know, as special embedded agent of the opposition in pro-Kremlin media,” Mikhail Zygar, editor-in-chief of Dozhd

TV told me. “She tried so hard to look very decent, to be not an opposition activist but at least a very decent and honest person.”

Mironyuk, other Russian journalists say, was highly respected by independent journalists, members of Moscow’s political opposition and human rights defenders. At the same time, Zygar says, Mironyuk was close—initially—to some influential Kremlin figures, allies of President Putin, men like his First Deputy Chief of Staff Alexey Gromov; Mikhail Lesin, adviser to Putin and his former media official credited with creating Russia’s international TV network RT; and Putin’s senior aide Vladislav Surkov.

In March, Gromov and Surkov, along with Kiselev, were slapped with U.S. sanctions over Crimea. Surkov quickly jeered: “The only things that interest me in the U.S. are Tupac Shakur, Allen Ginsberg and Jackson Pollock. I don’t need a visa to access their work. I lose nothing.”

In April, launching a Spanish-language news wire for subscribers in Latin America and Spain (the agency’s news wires are in English, French and Spanish), Margarita Simonyan said Russia Today will take a different approach from that of the “mainstream media.”

“Mainstream media journalists, especially in the United States and West Europe, prefer to ignore those problems in their own countries which they usually criticize in other countries, including in Russia,” she said. “Most mass media share the same stance on many world issues, including the situation around Ukraine and Crimea, Syria, Iran and the situation in the United States. They are the same. We are different.”

Who Are We?

With the new international information service Russia Today, the Kremlin now has the “medium” to reach audiences in other countries on a variety of platforms and, with Vladimir Putin acting as Russia’s philosopher-in-chief, it also has its “message.” The basic tenets of that message form the narrative that Russia has used to justify its actions in Ukraine, but they go further. As Spanish academic Miguel Vázquez Liñán describes it, “Right from the start, Vladimir

Putin...included restoring his countrymen's pride in being Russian among his propagandistic aims. In doing so, he chose a unified discourse similar to the one that had priority during several phases of the Soviet period. It focused on nationalism, patriotism, imperialism, respect for authority, and the idea of the uniqueness of Russian history development as its chief themes."

From the beginning of his rule in 2000 Vladimir Putin has been weaving together the strands of a unifying "national idea" for modern Russia, an effort that goes back to Czarist times. Under Communism Soviet leaders found their answer in Marxism-Leninism, an ideology that the U.S.S.R. "exported" to other nations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, rejected Communism—and even ideology itself—as the oppressive legacy of the past, but Russia still needed something to bind its people together.

In 1997 Yeltsin set up a commission under his aide, Georgi Satarov, to define the "national idea." Trying to distill common purpose from the chaotic mix of political views, however, proved an impossible task. A year later the commission disbanded, unable to define the principles that could unite Russians and provide an identity for the new nation.

Reviving elements from Czarist times, symbols (like Russia's national anthem) from Soviet times, and general concepts of statehood and patriotism, Vladimir Putin presents Russia as a unique civilization, as a "Russian World" whose members are united by a "genetic code" and whose values are superior to those of the West. In his annual call-in news conference in April, Putin told his listeners that Russians and members of the "Russian world" even think differently, orienting their lives on a "higher moral basis" in which success is not enough.

"Western values," he said, "mean that the person, within himself, is the measure of success—it's personal success, and society acknowledges that. The more successful a person is, the better he is." Russians, in contrast, he said "are less pragmatic, less prudent than other peoples, but we have a wider soul. Perhaps this reflected the greatness of our country, its vast dimensions. Our souls are more generous."

For the past several months, the Putin administration's Ministry of Culture has been developing the principles of what is being called the "Foundations of State Cultural Politics." The project is still in the developmental stages but Russian media reports describe the basic concept: Russia must be considered a unique and distinct civilization, not to be reduced to "West" or "East." In a word, "Russia is not Europe."

Russia, in other words, has become a moral center of gravity in its own right. "I think they are getting more definite about what we are NOT," says Ekaterina Zabrovskaya, editor-in-chief of Russia-direct.org. "They are opposing our beliefs to some Western ideas."

"Multiculturalism" and "tolerance," two words that have entered the Russian language with often negative connotations, are not acceptable, the working group's draft document insists. The task is to create a "single cultural policy" that will be promulgated in all spheres of society: "education, youth policies, migration policies and, especially, the mass media."

News of the Culture Ministry's project unleashed a firestorm among Russian commentators and even philosophers, with more liberal thinkers criticizing the working group's concept of a "single cultural-civilizational code," which they compared to the Soviet Union's state ideology.

The conflict in Ukraine exploded in the midst of this intellectual and societal debate and, for Vladimir Putin, it was a turning point, the moment in which the true state of events had suddenly become crystal clear: Russia is surrounded by enemies. "Like a mirror, the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades," he said in March. "We have every reason to believe that the notorious policy of containing Russia in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries is being pursued to this day."

Yugoslavia in 1999; the Western bombing of Belgrade; the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; the "color" revolution in Ukraine and Georgia; the "chaos" of the Arab Spring; the United States' missile defense system: "We understand what is happening," Putin said. "We understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration."

“Our Western partners, headed by the United States, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exceptionalism and their sense of being the chosen ones. That they can decide the destinies of the world, that it is only they who can be right.”

Traditional Values

Putin’s strong focus on “values” began in late 2011 when Russians in Moscow and other big cities took to the streets to protest his rule. In a preview of techniques that would be used in the Ukraine conflict, Russian state media and propaganda played a major role in efforts to not only suppress dissent but to denigrate the dissenters. “There was a campaign of defiling, discrediting the protesters as unpatriotic, as stooges of the West,” Carnegie’s Masha Lipman told me. “They also were accused of being immoral.” New legislation imposing constraints on rights and freedoms was rushed through the Duma, the lower house of the Russian legislature. The shift toward social conservatism picked up steam.

“Social conservatism was not part of Putin’s regime, nor was encroachment on people’s private lives,” said Lipman. “This was quite common in the Soviet days when everyone was the Communist Party’s business, but not during the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Then suddenly, beginning around the middle of 2012, the government started talking about issues such as sex and faith and culture and school curriculum.”

“Traditional values” became the Kremlin’s rallying cry. The protesters not only were too liberal, too Western, too decadent, but they actively were undermining Russia’s traditional values. “The goal of the new policy was to consolidate the conservative majority and pit it against the modernized majorities,” Lipman said. What began as a tactical move aimed at discrediting and neutralizing the excessively modernized trouble-makers gradually evolved as a new “ideological choice.”

As journalist Masha Gessen describes it: “Russia is remaking itself as the leader of the anti-Western world,” and Vladimir Putin is Russia’s chief proponent

of “traditional values” which, he argues, the West has abandoned. In September of last year he lambasted what he described as Europe and the United States’ anything-goes approach.

“We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization,” he railed. “They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.”

The new head of Russia Today, Dmitry Kiselev, has been frank about his mission to promote traditional values. His program “*Vesti Nedeli*” (“News of the Week”), he told the Izvestia.ru website, “propagandizes—I’m not afraid to use the word—healthy values, healthy patriotism.” Western media, in his estimation, are propaganda organs, too, forcing their views and values (or lack of same) on their audiences. “For example, Reuters or the Associated Press. They are, in reality, propagandistic. They formulate the dominant daily agenda; they say what to think...and how to think. They interpret history, the present day, the future, and they build a system of values, a world view, a political agenda.”

Is it Working?

Although President Putin’s world view is based on the belief that Russia is a unique civilization, he claims “more and more people in the world...support our position on defending traditional values,” and there are some indications that his message has resonance, especially in countries where conservative values rule. In February the President of Uganda signed a law imposing harsh penalties for homosexuality, including life imprisonment. In a statement that could have been crafted by Kremlin speechwriters, Yoweri Museveni said he wanted to “demonstrate Uganda’s independence in the face of Western pressure and provocation...there’s now an attempt at social imperialism, to impose social values.”

Putin has even found support among an unlikely constituency: American conservatives. In comments quoted by The Voice of Russia, American conservative Pat Buchanan praised the Russian president for “planting Russia’s flag firmly on the side of traditional Christianity” and opposing “a hedonistic secular and social revolution coming out of the West.” Conservative pastor Scott Lively, a staunch critic of LGBT rights, has praised Russian legislation outlawing “gay propaganda” directed at children and links gay issues to Ukraine: “I believe even the conflict in Ukraine is being driven to a large extent by this issue, at least on the part of the Obama State Department and the homosexualist [sic] leaders of the E.U.”

Kremlinologist Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that Western left-wing intellectuals and the leader of the French Right, Marine Le Pen, have defended the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine. *The Economist* cited the fact that radicals from Europe’s left—and right—served as “election observers” during the referendum in Crimea.

“So what does Europe’s far right see in Mr. Putin?” the magazine asked. “As nationalists of various stripes, their sympathies might have lain with their Ukrainian fellows fighting to escape Russian influence. In fact...many are attracted by Mr. Putin’s muscular assertion of national interests, his emphasis on Christian tradition, his opposition to homosexuality and the way he has brought vital economic sectors under state control.”

“A common thread is that many on the far right share Mr. Putin’s hatred for an order dominated by America and the European Union. For Mr. Putin, support from the far right offers a second channel for influence in Europe.”

David Ernst, writing in thefederalist.com, said Putin’s conservative “right hook” sets a precedent in the post-Cold War era: “A great power is challenging Western hegemony on ideological terms.” And, he says, it’s paying off: “It strengthens Putin’s hand in the former Soviet periphery, Eastern Europe and in the Middle East against the moral, legal and political objections of Western governments. Moreover, it establishes an entirely new ideological precedent for autocratic regimes who seek to challenge the American-led world order.”

Traitors

Lurking beneath the surface, however, is the Soviet legacy of repression of any dissent from a single government narrative. In March, addressing a joint session of the Russian Parliament, Putin told Russian lawmakers, “Some Western politicians are already threatening us with not just sanctions but also the prospect of increasingly serious problems on the domestic front.”

“I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly,” he mused. “Action by a Fifth Column, this disparate bunch of ‘national traitors,’ or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent?”

Four months later, under mounting pressure from the international community after the shoot-down of the Malaysian airliner over Ukraine, Putin’s tone hardened. “Attempts are clearly being made to destabilize the social and economic situation,” he told his Security Council, “to weaken Russia in one way or another or to strike at our weaker spots, and they will continue primarily to make us more agreeable in resolving international issues.”

“Special services” in those countries, he said, are using not only information and communication technologies, but are exploiting “dependent, puppet non-governmental organizations.”

The term “Fifth Column”—disloyal groups that undermine the nation—is, once again, part of the Russia’s political lexicon. So is the word “traitor,” in Russian “*predatel*.” This spring a Russian-language website appeared, *predatel.net*, listing “traitors,” along with their statements, most of which are critical of Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Crimea’s vote to join Russia. At the top of the list is opposition Russian blogger Alexey Navalny, who is quoted as saying, “I don’t support such actions (by Russia). It’s important that Russia in no way support such referendums.”

The main page displays a quote from the website’s sponsors: “We believe that Russian citizens who insult our soldiers and who cast doubt on the need to fight neo-Nazis are traitors, no matter whether they are talented journalists, writers, and directors.” At the bottom of the home page is a button that the user can click

on to “suggest a traitor”—a modern-day equivalent of the Soviet “stukach,” who “ratted” on his neighbors.

But then, much in the media war being played out in Ukraine has a “back in the U.S.S.R.” feel to it. President Barack Obama said in March, “This is not another Cold War that we’re entering into. After all, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia leads no bloc of nations, no global ideology.”

Technically, Obama is correct. The U.S.S.R. trumpeted the ideology of Marxism-Leninism to the world with the slogan, “Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.” Putin’s “national idea,” with its emphasis on Russians and the “Russian World,” falls short of a global ideology that Moscow can proselytize internationally. It is, instead, a mass media onslaught aimed at re-awakening images from the past, fuelling a renascent nationalism.

Exploiting a moment of geo-political crisis in Ukraine, the Kremlin is using its media and state propaganda to rally Russians—and Russian “compatriots”—to Moscow’s side. President Putin’s tone has hardened, with ominous hints that Russia might, if necessary, employ its nuclear weapons.

“Regardless of what our foreign colleagues say, we can clearly see what is actually happening,” he somberly told his Security Council. “Groups of NATO troops are clearly being reinforced in Eastern European states, including in the Black and Baltic seas. And the scale and intensity of operational and combat training is growing. In this regard, it is imperative to implement all planned measures to strengthen our nation’s defense capacity fully and on schedule.”

Two days after the Russian president spoke, RT television’s website claimed: “NATO Poland base may be prepared for blitz against Russia.”

“Moscow considers the build-up of NATO troops in Europe as part of a hostile policy aimed at placing the alliance’s military resources closer to its borders,” it reported. “Russia’s current military doctrine allows the use of all weapons in its possession, including tactical nuclear weapons, in response to a conventional force attack on Russia.”