

## Russia's "Weaponization" of Information

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Audiences within reach of Russia's growing media empire are increasingly subjected to manipulation and rampant anti-Americanism.<sup>i</sup> This trend has intensified since the Russian annexation of Crimea and its invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Through its global network, *Russia Today*, (RT) the Kremlin broadcasts globally in five major languages, including on cable stations in the United States. Free Western media has no comparable presence in Russia.

Russian propaganda is corrosive to the image of the United States and to our values. Or as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland described it before this committee on March 4<sup>th</sup>, "the Kremlin's pervasive propaganda campaign, where is truth is no obstacle." And Russian propaganda is being spread aggressively around the world as we have not seen it since Soviet days. This is not just in Central Asia, and Eastern and Central Europe, but even here in the West. The daily content and commentary from RT and others is often polished and slickly-produced. And it's not like old-fashioned propaganda, aimed solely at making Putin and Russia look good. It's a new kind of propaganda, aimed at sowing doubt about anything having to do with the U.S. and the West, and in a number of countries, unsophisticated audiences are eating it up.

The unfortunate fact is that the United States government became complacent in the battle for "hearts and minds" in Russia and its neighboring countries after the end of the Cold War. For Instance, the administration's budget request for 2016 is \$751,436 million for U.S. International Broadcasting.<sup>ii</sup> Reportedly, RT has a budget alone of \$400 million for its Washington bureau.

Today, the U.S. government is scrambling to increase capacity to counter Russian disinformation. The relevant agencies in this information war are the U.S. government are primarily the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG, which oversees all U.S. civilian international broadcasting) and to some extent the State Department and the Department of Defense. The administration has requested for 2016 \$693 million for democracy promotion and public diplomacy for Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to help them withstand pressure from Russia, as Secretary of State John Kerry put it to the HFAC.<sup>iii</sup>

- Let me first describe the position we find ourselves in today.
- Then current efforts by the U.S. government to catch up to the Russians.

- And finally present my recommendations, important among them, the need to reform the BBG.

## Where We Are Today

### **BBG abandons broadcasting to Russia**

Motivated by budget constraints and the desire to recalibrate U.S. international broadcasting towards Internet and satellite television, the BBG has over the past decade shut down language services and radio transmissions, which today turn out to be critically important. This has turned out to be a huge strategic mistake.

In 2008, just before the Russian invasion of Georgia. <sup>iv</sup>Following the invasion, which shocked the world, the decision was not reversed, though a 30-minute news broadcast to Russia was salvaged by a persistent BBG member. Remaining were rebroadcasts of English-language programs through highly precarious contracts with Russian FM and AM stations, including the Kremlin's own Voice of Russia.

At present there is no Voice of America broadcasting to Russia, shortwave, AM or FM. Nor are there any television broadcasts to Russia. Shortwave radio was abandoned first after which, AM or FM broadcasts had to be negotiated with Russian local stations. These arrangements came with strings attached. The Russian government finally shut down any VOA broadcasting in 2014.

It has to be recalled that as the Kremlin put the chokehold on U.S. broadcasting, the United States has allowed Russian media to flourish within our own borders in the name of freedom of expression. Russia Today (or RT) has impressive television studios right here in the nation's capital and broadcasts on cable channels throughout the United States.

The conditions attached to Russian rebroadcasting of VOA material were heavy-handed. In one case I personally recall, I had been invited to participate in a VOA foreign policy discussion on an English language program. The program has a global audience and is not aimed specifically at Russian listeners. But it was contracted to be rebroadcast in Russia by Voice of Russia, a state owned service. It was right before the Russian presidential election in March, 2012, and the election would have been an obvious topic for discussion. However, in a particularly shocking example of self-censorship as a consequence of foreign pressure, employees of Voice of America were told by VOA managers to cancel plans for coverage of the Russian presidential election on the day prior to and the day of the Russian vote. The reason? Voice of Russia was threatening to tear up its rebroadcasting agreement with the BBG unless the U.S. government's broadcasters complied with limitations on election coverage imposed by Russian legislation. Russian demands were meekly accepted by the same VOA management that fiercely resists any interference from the U.S. government in the name of editorial independence.

So is there anything left of VOA's Russian presence at a time when Russia is surging in its propaganda war against the United States?

One television news show is broadcast by VOA in Russian into Ukraine. Other than that, currently the only content offered by VOA's Russian service is Internet-based: skype video and news podcasts, as well as VOA's Russian language website. It could be argued that the Internet offers the best outreach to educated Russians, students and opinion-makers. Russia after all enjoys one of the highest levels of Internet penetration of VOA's target audiences. Yet, VOA's Russian service website ranks 3,828 in Russia and 44,415 in the world, according to the Internet service Alexa.<sup>v</sup> (This compares to RT's website, which ranks 61 in Russia 443 in the world, and it should be added 1,007 in the United States.)

Russian propaganda has gone into overdrive in Central and Eastern Europe as well, while Voice of America shut down every language in the region in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – Czech, Polish, Croatian, Slovakian, Serbian. The assumption was that the Cold War being over, these were relics of the past and that as members of the EU or aspiring to be that, these countries already have a free press.<sup>vi</sup>

RFE/RL troubles in Russia RL/RFE has run into exactly the same rebroadcasting problems that beset VOA. Radio in FM and AM format has been dependent on contracts with local Russian stations, who are either under the control of the Kremlin or subject to its pressure. Some shortwave radio continues to exist, and RFE/RL continues to broadcast eight hours original content to Russia.

FRE/RL's presence and reputation in Russia, it must be added took a beating in 2012 when new management at FRE/RL's headquarters in Prague decided to fire most of the staff in its Moscow office, some of them veteran journalists who had worked there for decades and were true champions of human rights. The decision came after Russian legislation blocked any AM broadcasting by RFE/RL in Russia, apparently causing a reconsideration of the role of these broadcasters. The result was an international uproar, which eventually cost the RFE/RL director his job. After much bad publicity about the way the U.S. government treats its employees, a report produced for the BBG in March the following year recommended that the staff that had been fired be hired back for their former positions. By then, a lot of damage had unfortunately been done.<sup>vii</sup>

## **Ukraine**

Broadcasting to Ukraine had gone the same way as broadcasting to Russia when fate and Vladimir Putin intervened in March of 2014. As Russia annexed Crimea, started stirring trouble in Eastern Ukraine, and shut down independent media in the areas it controlled, it became clear that the United States (and Europe as well) needed to fashion a response. In the spring and summer of 2014, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe put four new programs on the air, aimed at Ukrainian and Russian audiences, though these amount to less than two hours weekly new original content. This is in addition to a daily 5 minute news show. These programs were produced with new congressional funding and are conditioned on continued budgetary commitments.

## **State Department**

On taking office last year, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Rick Stengel acknowledged the challenges presented to U.S. public diplomacy by the rise of Russian propaganda as well as the social media campaigns of Middle East terrorist groups like ISIS. He inadvertently made a troubling point. “We need to figure out what to answer when people talk to us,” he said. “We have to explain our policy. We should be the nation that listens.”

This reflects the Obama administration view of the Internet as the key tool for public diplomacy. It is a view that has caused a de-emphasis of other public diplomacy tools such as U.S. International Broadcasting, one of the largest accounts in the public diplomacy budget, but one that is constantly under stress even as countries such as Russia and China beef up their broadcasting capability.

Stengel acknowledged reliance on the Internet can be problematic. “We are seeing a closing off of the Internet and the information space by illiberal autocracies,” he said. “People can close off information space. We did not expect this.” He also said he was “amazed at the surge” in Russian propaganda “in the Near Abroad,” although growing Internet censorship and other similar Russian behavior have hardly been secrets.<sup>viii</sup>

Today, Russia has a rank of “Partially Free” as regards the Internet and “Not Free” as regards the press, according to “Freedom on the Net 2014,” published by Freedom House.<sup>ix</sup>

At present the State department’s most successful counter propaganda tool is the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication, whose work is currently aimed at the threat from terrorist groups like ISIS. Yet, the center grew out of the work of State’s Digital Response Team, which under President George W. Bush was more broadly based and directed also at propaganda in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

## **NATO**

A potentially promising development is the opening of a new NATO Center of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, a country with a large Russian speaking population. One of the Center’s primary tasks will be to counter Russian propaganda, which used to target Latvia’s population specifically, but now is a problem throughout Russia’s border states and indeed Europe. The Center was only stood up in October, will function as a type of NATO think tank. The United States is still negotiating its contribution, but is expected to conclude an arrangement by June. The Center’s new offices will officially open in September.

## **What Is Being Done?**

### **A new strategy**

Having dismantled a lot of the tools for reaching audiences in the post-Soviet space, the BBG has had to be creating about launching a media strategy. This is as difficult as it is critically important. The United States simply cannot walk away the war of ideas, as authoritarian regimes like the Russia (or the Chinese or the Iranian) surge in capacity.

The BBG's "U.S. International Media Strategy Paper FY 2015-16: Countering a Revisionist Russia," dated October 20, 2014, states the necessity to "shape responses that are asymmetric to the Kremlin's tactics," read we don't have the resources to meet the Russian propaganda avalanche head on. Quote:

*USIM lacks the massive resources that Russia is pouring into its media campaigns at home and abroad, and so must be precisely targeted, efficient, multifaceted and smart; also, because of Kremlin restrictions USIM is not able, with very limited exceptions, to reach audiences in Russia on television (broadcast and cable), by far the most popular sources of news and information." Please note that what used to be U.S. International Broadcasting is now known as USIM (U.S. International Media, reflecting the shift from broadcasting to digital media.<sup>x</sup>*

It took Congressional action to pump life back into the BBG's strategy towards Ukraine. A Congressional appropriation of \$10 million for countering Russian propaganda through Voice of America and Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. This was good news for Ukrainians. The main goal of this money is to inform mostly Europeans, including those in the states bordering Russia, what is going on in Ukraine. With the elimination of most radio broadcasts to Russia, U.S. broadcasting strategy has shifted to Russia's periphery – and as we have seen to social media.

Following Russia's annexation of Ukraine, and congressional pressure, the BBG created the show "Current Time," a 30-minute news program in Russian, aimed at Russian speakers in the countries along Russia's borders. It is produced by RFE/RL out of Prague, the show is being picked up by stations in Georgia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine, and Latvia.

Interest has been so great from Russia's neighbors that RFE/RL is currently developing a Central Asian version -- with Central Asian hosts and content -- to expand its reach. A new unit at RFE/RL is working to distribute "Current Time" content on social media as well. "Current Time" fights Russian propaganda and the countries are next to Russia are clearly asking for help in pushing back against the disinformation and misinformation coming out of Russia. The BBG's strategy document also includes plans for a North Caucasus version of the show.

Other elements of this strategic plan include ramping up to three to four hours of daily broadcasting by 2016 and in 2017, a 24/7 satellite television channel in Russian, as well as broadcasting aimed at Russian audiences in the United States, something that it now allowed under the revised Smith-Mundt Act.

It goes without saying that such a strategy would also include websites and a YouTube presence, as well as a social media response team. At this stage, that element is unavoidable, but it has to be recalled that Russia's Internet censorship is among the worst in the world

Given the aggressive nature of Russia's current international posture, United States should respond quickly to this demand and ramp up our efforts to fill it. While you cannot fight propaganda with propaganda, nor should the U.S. government sink to the level of sheer disinformation that characterize much Russian propaganda, you can fight it, as Current Time does, by focusing a light on the lies and contrasting them with the facts.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Reforming the BBG**

As a result of the widely perceived decline in the effectiveness of U.S. international broadcasting and of frustrations with the management of the BBG, several attempts have been made to legislate changes to the structure of the enterprise. Numerous independent reports have suggested this course of action, from the Heritage report in 2008, "Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,"<sup>xi</sup> which I co-authored with Tony Blankley, to a brand new report issued by the Woodrow Wilson Center, "Reassessing U.S. International Broadcasting", by Enders Wimbush and Elizabeth Portale.<sup>xii</sup>

Several pieces of legislation have been devoted to broadcasting reform. From the 2009 "Strategic Communications Act – H.R. 489," sponsored by Mac Thornberry to the "U.S. International Communications Reform Act of 2014 -- H.R. 4490," which passed the House of Representatives in July last year. Attempts at reform are invariably met with opposition by the management at the BBG. Yet, considering the challenges the United States is up against, it is imperative that broadcasting is improved. For instance, a newly hired Chief Executive Officer of International Broadcasting, Andrew Lack, on whom much hope had been pinned for better management, left the position after only six weeks in the job on March 4<sup>th</sup> and on April 7<sup>th</sup>, the Director of Voice of America, David Ensor, announced that he was leaving. The BBG itself, a nine-member part-time board, functions as an executive body, a management anomaly that has been questioned by many, including the State Department's own Inspector General in a scathing 2013 report.<sup>xiii</sup> To put muscle and focus into U.S. broadcasting strategy, the BBG must be reformed and I hope this hearing will persuade Congress of the urgency of doing so.

### **Additional recommendations:**

- Use public diplomacy to counter anti-American and pro-Russian propaganda by the Russian government. U.S. efforts should include international broadcasting, a new Russian satellite channel, the Internet, social networking, print media, and revamped academic, student, and business exchange programs.
- Respond publicly and vigorously to high-profile Russian falsehoods, while regularly emphasizing the regime's suppression of independent media in Russia.

- Launch a comprehensive audit, led by U.S. intelligence agencies and the State Department's International Information Programs office, of Russian information operations in the United States and its allies, to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of these campaigns and understand their strategic implications.
- Publicize overt and – as compatible with the security of intelligence sources – covert Russian support for Western media outlets to deprive them of credibility.
- Give the same visa treatment to personnel working for Russian state-controlled media that Russia gives to journalists from U.S. and allied nations.
- Recognize that nations such as Georgia, and U.S. allies in Central and Eastern Europe, are particularly vulnerable to Russian propaganda, and focus U.S. support for independent media and journalists on these nations, while, at the strategic level, continuing to back NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia.
- Launch more education programs for Ukrainian journalists particularly those who are involved in covering the situation on the ground in battle zone in Eastern Ukraine. Ninety percent of Ukrainian journalists who cover the conflict don't have any military experience. Many of them lack the necessary equipment like helmets or body armors to work in a battle zone.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kochis, "Countering Russian Propaganda Abroad," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4286, October 21, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/10/countering-russian-propaganda-abroad>.

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<sup>ii</sup> United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, “2014 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting,” U.S. Department of State, December 11, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/235008.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Russia Insider: “John Kerry Seeks Congress Funds to Counter RT,” February 26, 2015. [http://russia-insider.com/en/politics\\_opinion/2015/02/26/3898](http://russia-insider.com/en/politics_opinion/2015/02/26/3898)

<sup>iv</sup> Helle C. Dale et al., “Challenging America: How Russia, China, and Other Countries Use Public Diplomacy to Compete with the U.S.,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2698, June 21, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/06/challenging-america-how-russia-china-and-other-countries-use-public-diplomacy-to-compete-with-the-us>

<sup>v</sup> Alexa. Golos-ameriki.ru. <http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/golos-ameriki.ru>

<sup>vi</sup> Ariel Cohen, PhD, and Helle C. Dale, “Russian Anti-Americanism: A Priority Target for U.S. Public Diplomacy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2373, February 24, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/02/russian-anti-americanism-a-priority-target-for-us-public-diplomacy>

<sup>vii</sup> Ariel Cohen PhD, and Helle C. Dale, “How to Save Radio Liberty,” Heritage Issue brief #3804, December 13, 2012. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/12/how-to-save-radio-liberty>

<sup>viii</sup> Helle C. Dale, “What Should Be U.S. Diplomacy Strategy in a Time of Terrorism?” The Daily Signal, September 19, 2014. <http://dailysignal.com/2014/09/19/u-s-diplomacy-strategy-time-terrorism/>

<sup>ix</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2014.” Washington, New York, December, 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2014#.VSrdybBFCU1>

<sup>x</sup> Broadcasting Board of Governors, “U.S. International Media Strategy Paper FY 2015-16: Countering a Revisionist Russia,” October 20, 2014.

<sup>xi</sup> Tony Blankley, Helle C. Dale and Oliver Horn, “Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2211, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/11/reforming-us-public-diplomacy-for-the-21st-century>.

<sup>xii</sup> Enders Wimbush, Elizabeth Protale, “Rethinking U.S. International Broadcasting,” Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, April 22, 2015. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/rethinking-us-international-broadcasting-conversation-mission-strategy-and-organization>

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<sup>xiii</sup> U.S. Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Office of Inspector General, “Inspection of the Broadcasting Board of Governors,” January 2013, p. 1, <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/203193.pdf>