



BULLETIN

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What Lies behind the Anti-West Outburst in Russia?

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During 2014, Russian society underwent an unprecedented shift in perceptions of Ukraine and the West. This is the effect of a deliberate misinformation campaign by the Kremlin, facilitated by the government's practically full control of media messages inside the country, enhanced by a skillful appeal to the population's aspirations and grievances. Although the Kremlin holds a tight grip on the Russian public opinion, the West has to invest more in outreach activities targeting various social groups in Russian society. Given that Russia's information manipulation campaign spreads far beyond Russian borders, the West should actively create and develop tools to defend its information space and address the Russian speaking public in the Eastern Partnership countries.

A Dramatic Shift in Perceptions. Over the last year, Russian public opinion about parts of the outside world has undergone a shift unprecedented in more than two decades. In particular, the Russian public's views on Ukraine, the U.S. and the EU have experienced sharp reversals. According to Levada Center annual surveys, Russians' sympathy towards Ukraine fluctuated between 50% and 80% from the late 1990s until 2008. A more serious decline of positive attitudes towards Ukraine (below 50%) coincided with the Russian–Georgian war in August 2008, and following the Russian–Ukrainian gas dispute in early 2009. During the period of successive crises in 2008–2009, negative attitudes (62%) towards Ukraine overtook positive ones (28%) for the first time. Nevertheless, by 2010, when Ukraine elected the new president, favourable opinion towards Ukraine again reached over 70%. As Ukraine was preparing for the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius (2013) and the Kremlin was applying economic coercion to dissuade Kyiv from signing the Association Agreement with the EU, the public mood in Russia began to change. From the inception of the Maidan protests to the Russian–Ukrainian war in Donbas, attitudes changed rapidly. By January 2015, the Levada Center recorded a new all-time low: 64% of Russians perceived Ukraine in negative terms, and only 24% in a positive light.

Russian public opinion on the U.S. had fluctuated before this. During NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the U.S. military campaign in Iraq in 2003, and the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, anti-American sentiments were on rise in Russian society. Throughout the 2010–2012 U.S.–Russia reset, public perceptions on the U.S. improved relatively. Between 40% and 60% of respondents in Russia harboured sympathies towards the United States. Since late 2013, the mood has changed drastically. By January 2015, the Levada Center revealed that public attitudes towards the U.S. had hit a historic low: 81% voiced a negative stance, while only 13% held an amicable position (down from almost 50% in 2013). There were more revolutionary changes underway in Russians' perceptions of the EU. Previously, the EU was distinguished from the U.S. as a less threatening and a more benign player. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Russians (up to 70%) shared a positive outlook about the EU. Even in 2008, during the Russia–Georgian war, when EU–Russia relations cooled off, the percentage of EU critics (39%) did not exceed sympathisers (45%) in Russia. In 2014, the public mood took a dramatic turn when, for the first time, sympathisers switched place with critics. In January 2015, 71% of respondents expressed a negative view about the EU, while only 20% shared a favourable one. Although attitudes towards Ukraine, the U.S. and the EU had improved moderately by March 2015, such a high oscillation of Russian perceptions requires explanations.

The Craft of Manipulation. There are several factors behind public opinion fluctuations in Russia. Firstly, embracing the concept of “hybrid warfare,” Russian officials perceive information space as one of the battlefields in the war with the West over Ukraine. Thus, the Russian government relied on massive manipulation of public opinion to imprint its own narrative and prevent alternative ones from emerging. Compared to the previous information campaigns conducted by the Kremlin in 1999 (Kosovo), 2003 (Iraq) and 2008 (Georgia), this one has been much longer and more intensive. It started in late 2013 and still continues now. Secondly, the reach of the campaign is immense, as the Kremlin managed to establish almost full control over the main mass-media outlets and thus over its message. The recent leaks from Russian hackers, of correspondence between a Kremlin official and journalists, demonstrates the scope and scale of the Kremlin’s intrusion in the information field. According to 2014 public surveys, television is the main source of information for 90% of Russians. Moreover, polls reveal that Russians consumed more TV news in 2014 than in previous years. Although the internet does not have the level of influence comparable to that of television, it is nevertheless the information source for around 24% of the population. Use of the internet as a tool of manipulation was tested during the war in Georgia. In 2014, the Kremlin used the internet (via social networks and “trolling”) on a much bigger scale. *Novaya Gazeta* reported on the daily work of the “troll factories” in spreading pro-Kremlin messages not only in Russia, but also across the global social and traditional media. As a result of a concerted campaign, Kremlin-friendly internet content in the Russian language increased (for example, the overhaul of editorial policy at RIA *Novosti* and *Lenta.ru*), while independent critical online voices or platforms lost the preponderance they previously enjoyed.

Thirdly, such drastic shifts could have taken place only on fertile ground. Kremlin propaganda skillfully addressed popular emotions, aspirations, and resentments (for example, nostalgia for the past, former military glory, greatness, feeling of injustice, the memory of the turbulent 1990s, and perceived mistreatment on the part of the West after the Soviet Union collapsed). Thus, Russian policy in Ukraine was portrayed as a country “standing up from its knees” after years of being humiliated by the West. The annexation of Crimea was presented as a “reunion with the Motherland” and “historical justice,” made possible due to Russia’s regained power. Not surprisingly, 68% of Russians said in February 2015 that their country is a great power. This represents the highest percentage in post-Soviet Russia. Back in 2011–2012, Putin largely stimulated these feelings under the “conservative” label to win elections and later consolidate power. The 2014 manipulation campaign reinforced this trend, allowing the Kremlin to foster a comfortable majority. Last, but not least, such perception of the United States, the EU and Ukraine is the outcome of an effort of identity engineering designed to serve the political regime in the long run. In the process of shaping Russia’s identity, the authorities chose to emphasise allegedly negative actions of external players, and neglect critical self-reflection. On the metaphysical level, Russia is defined as an antithesis of the post-modern West, and a unique civilisation. On an operational level, the West was accused of instigating the crisis in Ukraine, and imposing alien values there, while Russian citizens were warned against a popular rebellion (or face post-Maidan chaos in Russia). This “blame others” approach helps to switch public concerns away from domestic problems (63% in 2011) to external threats (77% in 2014). With the economy starting to feel the heat of the fall in oil prices and of economic sanctions, demonisation of external players and exacerbation of external threats is being intensified to solve the Kremlin’s impasse. It seems that, due to the intensity of propaganda, the determination of the Kremlin, and popular sentiment, the process of shaping such a “negative identity” is not easily reversible. It will leave deep scars on Russian society’s psyche. The West cannot neglect this dimension of the conflict and its consequences.

What Could the West Do? The effects of Russia’s information manipulation campaign spread far beyond Russian borders. It distorts public perceptions in the Eastern Partnership states (EaP) and the EU Member States, in particular those hosting Russian-speaking minorities. There are some ideas about how to deflect the negative fallout of this campaign in the short and medium-term. NATO’s and the EU’s public diplomacy capacities must be enhanced in order to be able to dispel Russian misinformation in real time. EU Member States should invest more in expertise on Russia and their eastern neighbourhood. Such research centres should not only serve decision makers, but also participate in shaping well-informed public opinion. The EU’s communication strategy in the EaP countries should be bolstered and become more targeted. A broad Russian language media platform implementing various media tools (including TV) should be created for EaP states, and also for Russian minorities in EU countries (such as the Baltic States). More support for independent and high quality journalism in EaP countries (in the Russian language too) should come from the EU as well. However, efforts to contain the malign effects of Russian power abroad should evolve hand in hand with measures to maintain engagement with Russian society. The mass media and the internet can be the tool for such cooperation. But, as the Kremlin has the determination and the tools to block official media from operating in the Russian information field, another, more creative way of using internet that would be more difficult to track and block, and would carry the message dissolving the monolith of the information campaign, should also be taken into account (for example, short films, memes, or animations). The West should also keep existing channels open, as well as launching new avenues for dialogue and interconnection, involving a wide variety of social groups from Russia in different programmes, events, exchanges, and joint academic exercises in Europe and the United States. This might not produce a massive effect, but could at least contribute to a less toxic social environment when a new window of opportunity in West–Russia relations opens.