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“Bringing the Rebels”

European Far Right Soldiers of Russian Propaganda

by Anton Shekhovtsov

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INTRODUCTION

More than twenty years ago, a convicted German neo-Nazi named Ernst Zundel launched a weekly television programme in Canada. He described it like this:

This TV programme differs from the mainstream media, because we [...] bring you uncensored news, uncensored commentary. Also, commentary from few points that are seldom heard today in this world of political correctness. [...] We hope to be politically incorrect, uncorrect, [...] because we want to bring you the rebels.¹

Zundel's programme, "Another Voice of Freedom", ran for more than 30 episodes before it was closed by the Canadian authorities. Even tolerant Canada couldn't stomach a programme promoting Holocaust denial. And so Zundel took his business elsewhere. In 1996, he moved to Kaliningrad and began broadcasting weekly on the Voice of Russia (VoR).² From there, his "long monologues and quotations from the works of various Holocaust deniers" reached Germany, where Holocaust denial is a criminal offence.³ The public reacted, a scandal followed—and the VoR shut down the programme. The management pleaded that it had been unaware of the content of Zundel's broadcasts.

Nineteen years later, much has changed. President Boris Yeltsin has been replaced by President Vladimir Putin. A once relatively free Russian press is now almost entirely under de facto state control. Russian international broadcasting policy has changed too. Instead of promoting their country abroad, VoR, and RT, the Kremlin's international broadcaster, have adopted a new philosophy. In the words of one observer, they have "morphed into a platform for conspiracy theorists and other like-minded figures on the margins of debate—especially for those who espouse anti-American views".⁴

Since 2008, the Russian media have in fact been doing exactly what it shamefacedly stopped Zundel from doing in 1996: "bringing the rebels"—publicists and commentators coming from the far right and far left, including conspiracy theorists and committed racists—to the Western public. At the same time, they have deepened their relationship with European far right and far left activists, presenting them as legitimate commentators and even opinion-makers. This article examines the origins and development of that policy.

SUBVERTING THE WESTERN MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES

Even before the invasion of Crimea led to increased tension between Russia and the West, RT was pursuing a very distinct anti-Western, anti-American and anti-democratic narrative. In 2010, Sonia Scherr of the Southern Poverty Law Center, an American NGO, was already describing RT as reporting "with boosterish zeal on conspiracy theories popular in the resurgent 'Patriot' movement, whose adherents typically advocate extreme antigovernment doctrines".⁵ RT had been

regularly giving exposure to fringe figures who promoted conspiracy theories about the September 11 attacks being “an inside job” as well as Barack Obama being born abroad and the US being a “tool of the New World Order”.⁶

The September 11 conspiracy theories promulgated by RT were not limited to those voiced by US commentators. Also in 2010, Aymeric Chauprade, a top member of the Front National (National Front, FN) and contemporary advisor on international relations to the FN’s leader Marine Le Pen, appeared on RT’s show “9/11: Challenging the official version”.⁷ The TV channel introduced Chauprade as “a dissident voice in the French academic world” and “a critic of Western policies towards Russia”, and asked him to discuss his dismissal from a chair at the Collège interarmées de Défense following an accusation of supporting conspiracy theories around the September 11 attacks in his book *Chronique du choc des civilisations* (Chronicle of the clash of civilisations).⁸

There were earlier precedents too. In their attempts to justify Russian aggression towards Georgia, the Russian media turned to Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ). In October 2008, after the Russian-Georgian War, Strache took part in a conference, “Europe-Russia-Georgia: Peace Building”, held in Vienna under the patronage of FPÖ member Barbara Kappel. At this conference, he made statements critical of contemporary Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. The VoR and other Russian media picked up these statements almost immediately and were eager to quote Strache who “urged the EU countries not to take their lead from the United States in assessing the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict and take a balanced stand on Russia”.⁹

The Russian media also focused on trouble within the EU, whether with the Eurozone or with immigration, to prove that democracy and integration were failing. When discussing a meeting of Eurozone finance ministers in 2011, RT quoted three MEPs, none of whom could have possibly provided any optimistic or even neutral view on the future of the Eurozone: Nigel Farage and Godfrey Bloom of the Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP), and Morten Messerschmidt of the far right Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party).¹⁰

The coverage in the Russian international and domestic media of the riots in the Stockholm suburbs in May 2013, which broke out after police shot to death an elderly machete-armed man of non-Swedish origin, was also typical. Of seven people cited in RT’s TV report “They don’t want to integrate”,¹¹ four belonged to far right and racist circles: Kent Ekeröth, MP of the far right Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats); Ingrid Carlqvist and Lars Hedegaard, editors of the racist newspaper *Dispatch International*; and Gerolf Annemans, contemporary chairman of the far right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest). Such out-of-balance reports aimed at presenting the views of far right and generally fringe commentators as of equal value with the sober analyses of the problematic issues.

RAMPING UP THE PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN

The trend, which began in 2008, grew even stronger in 2013-2014 when Russian domestic and international media first campaigned against the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, and later in favour of the invasion of Crimea. In one of its shows, the VoR, discussing the prospective signing of the agreement, noted “some experts inside the EU” who said that Ukraine would “lose its economic sovereignty as a whole number of its economic branches [would] be governed directly from Brussels”. However, only one such “expert” was named in the programme: “prominent Polish geopolitical analyst Mateusz Piskorski”.¹²

Piskorski is a former member of the neo-Nazi Niklot movement and populist Samoobrona (Self-Defence) party, as well as the leader of the straightforwardly pro-Russian Zmiana (Change) party and founder of the European Centre of Geopolitical Analysis, a fake think tank that since 2005 has sought to legitimise unfair, fraudulent or illegitimate elections and referenda in the “post-Soviet space”.¹³ Piskorski became an important communicator of pro-Moscow narratives in the Russian international media—a status hardly commensurable to the limited significance either of Zmiana or the European Centre of Geopolitical Analysis in his home country, Poland. With a few exceptions, up until the second half of 2013, the Russian media mentioned Piskorski only in relation to his “election observation” activities. Later, however, they started asking him to comment on other issues, and he readily talked about how “a particular element of the ‘Ukrainian’ protest had been developed and prepared in a local US embassy”; how the Ukrainian opposition parties were “calling for major violations of human rights” during the revolution; and how the Americans would “continue to use the situation in Ukraine as a means of destabilising European Union countries and Russian Federation”.¹⁴

Piskorski is usually described in the Russian media as “a prominent geopolitical analyst” or “geopolitical expert”, but he is also pictured as a representative of a particular “nonconformist” trend in the EU. In a similar vein, presenting the narrative favourable to Russia’s foreign policy as part of this trend, the VoR aired an interview with the FN’s Marine Le Pen and introduced her by saying “not everyone in Europe believes that Ukraine made a mistake by refusing to sign an association agreement”.¹⁵

Le Pen has become a regular commentator for the Russian media since the end of 2013. It is worth noting that, before this, the media in Russia mostly mentioned Le Pen as a *newsmaker*. However, since the beginning of the pro-European protests in Ukraine, she has appeared in the Russian mainstream media sphere as a *commentator* and *opinion-maker*, offering her views on various international issues, mostly focused on Russia and its foreign policy. These messages were communicated by all the Russian state-controlled international media, such as RT, VoR, RIA Novosti, and, later, Sputnik. They readily conveyed her arguments that “the EU has lost control of its foreign policy to Washington”,¹⁶ “the Ukrainian crisis [was] all the fault of the European Union”,¹⁷ and the EU was “stupidly waging Cold War on Russia”.¹⁸

In 2014, the Russian media also invoked the “expertise” of Strache, quoting his “concerns” that the US allegedly intended “to complicate European relations with Russia”¹⁹ and that the EU sanctions against Russia were destructive for the Austrian economy.²⁰

Strache was not the only representative of the European far right who was allegedly concerned with the EU sanctions against Russia. Discussing these problems in a report on the impact of the sanctions in Italy, RT referred—of all the Italian politicians—to Matteo Salvini, chairman of the far right Lega Nord (Northern League, LN), who wrote in one of his Facebook posts: “Only fools, Brussels and Rome, could decide to impose economic sanctions against Russia, which now sends us back tons of Italian agricultural products worth more than €1 billion. Who will pay our farmers? [Matteo] Renzi? [Angela] Merkel?”²¹ Since 2014, Salvini has often appeared on RT, in both its English and Spanish versions. It hardly seemed mere coincidence that this process ran concurrently with the deepening of the cooperation between Russian structures and the LN: in January 2014, the party became involved in the foundation of the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, and, in October the same year, it launched the group “Friends of Putin” in the Italian parliament a few days after Salvini met Putin in person.²²

Arguably the most regular far right commentator and opinion-maker on RT has been Manuel Ochseneiter, editor of the German magazine *Zuerst!*.²³ RT first involved Ochseneiter, alternately introduced as a “political analyst”, “German journalist” and “Syria expert”, in 2013 to provide his opinion on “the German government [selling] the privacy of German citizens to the US government” and the US government and CIA’s alleged involvement in the “Syria conflict” which he called a “proxy war”.²⁴ In March 2014, like Piskorski and Chauprade, Ochseneiter illegally travelled to Russia-occupied Crimea to “observe” the “referendum”, and, on 21 April, he denied the Russian occupation of Crimea in an interview for the VoR,²⁵ despite the fact that Putin had himself already admitted the deployment of Russian troops in this Ukrainian republic on 17 April.²⁶

2014 saw a surge in Ochseneiter’s comments for RT. In numerous interviews, he expounded his views on the situation in Ukraine from a pro-Kremlin perspective and even went so far as to declare that Ukraine had ceased to exist: “The Ukrainian state, what we saw now on the map, when we put the map on the table, is not existing anymore; it is a failed state, an empty entity, which is in the west governed by a putsch gang of people who were imposed by the West, by NATO, as well as the European Union.”²⁷

Yet another issue is how audiences in one Western country perceive pro-Kremlin views expressed by far-right activists of another Western country. For obvious reasons, the ideological credentials of foreign politicians are not always known; moreover, the Russian international media tend to omit the political affiliations of fringe politicians and activists so that they appear more credible. This engenders a process that can be called “narrative laundering”, a term describing the movement of narratives in the media sphere, where the original source that produces these

narratives is either forgotten or impossible to determine. Social networking, with its general negligence towards the origins of shared information, insufficient public expertise on particular socio-political phenomena, and the unpreparedness of other media actors for aggressive propaganda and disinformation campaigns, facilitates narrative laundering. The Russian media that implant propagandistic narratives in the international media sphere are interested in the loss of origin, so that they cannot be traced back to Russia or to fringe commentators. If the process is successful, then propagandistic narratives become part of the mainstream media sphere.

CONCLUSION

Western politicians and activists—especially on the far right—who are inherently critical of the US, NATO, EU, Eurozone, liberal democracy, multiculturalism and human rights, stopped being simple newsmakers for the Russian media in 2008. Instead, they became commentators and opinion-makers actively contributing to the Russian propaganda efforts in the West. In other words, the Russian media have engaged with forces that are trying to undermine the West, in order to give them more credibility and visibility. The pro-Russian sentiments of some of them were added value.

From 2008 through to the second part of 2013, the Russian media turned to politicians from far right parties to let them speak out their grievances about the EU "bureaucratic monster", the Eurozone, immigration, multiculturalism, and gay marriage. The implicit message was clear: the West is in decline and failing; traditionalist Russia is stable and safe. Since the Ukrainian revolution and the annexation of Crimea, their demand for conspiracy theories, anti-establishment ideas and anti-American vitriol has only risen. As a result, the number of interviews with and comments by far right activists in the Russian media has also increased considerably.

How to evaluate the impact of Russia's propaganda? Judging by surveys of "perceptions of Russia", not much. For example, in Hungary, only 27% of supporters of Jobbik, a far-right anti-American and pro-Russian party, would prefer Hungary to maintain closer ties with Russia, given the choice, while 48% gave preference to the US.²⁸

But convincing the international audience of the legitimacy of Russian foreign policy may not be the main goal. Russian state-sponsored media now implicitly aim not so much at justifying the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policies, but rather at undermining the confidence of international audiences in the legitimacy of their own governments and, in more general terms, the liberal democratic consensus. Future research on the impact of Russian propaganda needs to focus not only on whether the Russian media succeed in convincing viewers of the "rightfulness" of Russia's actions, but also on whether Russian propaganda contributes to the audiences' declining trust in democracy and the current international order.

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