

176
JUNE
2017

THE "TRUMP CARDS" OF THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION OPERATIONS

Sergey Sukhankin, Historian, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad. Associate Expert, International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS), Kiev; Visiting Research Fellow, IBEI (Barcelona), Contributing Author at the Jamestown Foundation (Washington DC).

The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in late 2013 has not only demonstrated the depth of the abyss between Russia and the West, there is another aspect to it: the quarter of a century that has passed since the dissolution of the USSR has not led toward the democratisation of Russia, nor has it witnessed Moscow abdicating from the neo-imperial ambitions of its historical predecessor. Today Russia and the West find themselves almost exactly where they were before 1991 – in opposing trenches, ready for a new lap of confrontation. Regretfully, the current situation might be even more complicated than in the times of the former Soviet Union. The level of spite, hatred and aggression coupled with the lack of hope for compromise and the absence of any drive toward constructive dialogue painfully resemble the ideological conformation in the heyday of the Cold War. But it has to be acknowledged that the outbreak of ideological confrontation is to a large extent due to aggressive Russian behaviour

based on the spread of disinformation and distortion – elements that have made the crisis as acute as it currently is.

Indeed, some might be tempted to explain Russia's incredulity toward the West through its arduous history. For a significant time the country was

haunted by a perpetual sense of fear and insecurity that in the end resulted in seclusion and mistrust toward the "foreign" and thus unknown, and this played an essential role in the formation of Russian national identity. Certainly this greatly affected the Russian stance on the culturally, economically and technologically superior Europe. Namely, it has framed the Russian perception of Europe within a peculiar combination of tacit adoration of the Western lifestyle, culture and technologies, mixed with ostentatious rejection of openly admitting this. Probably that is why in spite of some optimistic tones the majority of attempts to break the "vicious circle" of mistrust and bridge the gap between the two sides have ended unsuccessfully.

At a time the vast bulk of negative sentiments and propagandist escapades were levelled against the US and its European allies, whereas Germany, France and countries of Southern Europe were either subjected to a very mild form of criticism or portrayed as "victims of American domination".

The mass protests in Moscow and other cities in 2011 were construed by Moscow as the most despicable Western attempt to ignite the process of regime change in Russia following the templet of "colour revolutions".

The notorious pro-Kremlin journalist, zealous anti-Semite, open xenophobe and homophobe Dmitry Kiselyov (deputy director of Russian state TV holding company VGTRK) became the living embodiment of anti-European propaganda.

The pillars of Russian trolling are identified as follows: 1) defence of Stalinism; 2) praising of personalities of Vladimir Putin, Sergey Shoygu as well as Russian Armed Forces; 3) aggressive militarism; 4) fascist-style anti-Semitism and xenophobia; 5) sacred-sanctity of the Chechen war; 6) loyalty to KGB/FSB and hatred toward the "fifth column", "deserters" and independent journalists; 7) anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments; 8) Soviet nostalgia and rejection of perestroika; 9) blaming dissidents and liberals for Russophobia.

One such episode was the brief “honeymoon” between Russia and the West after the collapse of the USSR. The great expectations associated with *perestroika*, “new political thinking” and the Common European Home – ideas that lured in many Soviet citizens and progressive intellectuals – did not materialise.

The economic hardships that hit Russia severely during the 1990s and the painful transition resulted in growing resentment, discontent with reforms and nostalgia for the Soviet period when “everything” was planned for the people by the state without their direct participation. At the same time, numerous social malaises (that existed and flourished in the late USSR and were skilfully concealed by Soviet propaganda) that became particularly visible after 1991 turned

The so-called “patriotic core” gathers illustrious public figures, sportsmen and intellectuals as well as war veterans and Cossacks.

public ire against the “liberals” and those forces that had allegedly supported them – the Jews and the West. These stereotypes/prejudices had for decades (and even centuries) dominated the mass consciousness of Russian society during uneasy times.

The “liberal experiment” was practically finished by 1996 when Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev (along with a number of like-minded politicians) was replaced by hardliner Yevgeny Primakov. Kozyrev was vilified and accused of “capitulating to the West”. What followed next was a direct road toward increasing tensions and rebukes that were destined to break out into open confrontation.

Building a new ideological foundation

The changing vector of internal development associated with the declining popularity of liberalism demanded the elaboration of a new ideological foundation. On March 15th 1999 the TV programme “*Odnako*” was aired for the first time. Anchored by Mikhail Leontiev this project became an outlet for xenophobia, spite and anti-Western/European sentiments emanating from Russian TV screens. It needs to be underscored however that the outbreak of anti-European/Western frenzy in Russian society would have been impossible without the following developments:

- A Russian economic collapse (1998) that was widely associated not with the weakness of domestic economists, but was largely ascribed to the Western economic prescriptions;¹
- NATO’s involvement in the war in Yugoslavia (1999) without consultation with Moscow, and its eastward enlargements (1999–2004) as a “traitorous violation of a

promise” given to Gorbachev in the late 1980s;

- Stern criticism of Russian policies in Chechnya by the Europeans. This “convinced” public opinion that the ultimate goal of the West was to fragment, weaken and humiliate Russia to an even greater extent;
- The “colour revolutions” (in Georgia and Ukraine in particular) that were construed as an openly anti-Russian move. Many years later Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov characterised the “colour revolutions” as a “new form of Western warfare” whereas President Putin read it as a “warning to Russia”;
- The “Big Bang enlargement” of the EU (2004) that brought three Baltic states and Poland – countries that were (and still are) traditionally perceived as the main source of European Russophobia – in the “European family” of nations.

However, the main activities in the 2004–2008 period tended towards the preparation of the “turf” in the domestic theatre.

Thus, Moscow made steps aimed at the consolidation of domestic anti-democratic forces. Among the most noticeable should be mentioned:

- The creation of various “anti-fascist” and “patriotic” organisations (such as “Nashi” (2005), “Young Russia”, “the Locals” and “the Young Guard of United Russia”) of openly anti-Western orientation;
- The emergence of two new pro-governmental ultra-conservative TV channels – Spas (pro-Orthodox) and Zvezda (military-oriented) – as well as Russia Today (RT);
- The establishment of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (2007) with branches in New York and Paris, headed by noticeable Russian conservative nationalists Andranik Migranyan and Nataliya Narotchnitskaya;
- The launch of the “Russian World” Foundation (2007) headed by ultra-conservative Vyacheslav Nikonov (a grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov).

Nevertheless, for a time the vast bulk of negative sentiments and propagandist escapades were levelled against the US and its European allies, whereas Germany, France and the countries of southern Europe were either subjected to a very mild form of criticism or portrayed as “victims of American domination”. This misunderstanding inspired Russian propagandist forces that attempted to create an artificial rift between members of the EU and undermine transatlantic solidarity. This was seen in 2003 (the outbreak of war in Iraq), 2005 (the 750th anniversary of Kaliningrad/Konigsberg) and 2005/07 (the first concrete steps related to the Nord Stream project), when pro-Kremlin propaganda made several efforts to pit countries of the so-called “old” Europe against the “new” members. This however brought only limited success and caused vexation and disappointment among the Russian elites. Consequently, Moscow opted to switch from mostly benign criticism of the EU to the rhetoric of ultimatums and blackmail.

The central element that convinced Moscow of the “rightfulness” of this approach was a distorted vision of the EU as an agglomeration of countries bound together by economic

1. Incidentally, the same line of argument is now being used in Ukraine by pro-Russian forces, where rising prices and the consequent growing poverty are correlated with the economic “prescriptions” of the international financial institutions.

ties that is unable to put up serious competition to Russia in terms of military power.

Russian confidence (along with a sense of impunity) grew even stronger when the EU failed to provide an adequate response to a series of gas wars with Ukraine (2005/6) that violated the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances (1994), cyber-attacks against Estonia (2007), aggression against Georgia (2008) and the initiation of remilitarisation of Kaliningrad Oblast (2009). Sensing its military superiority, Moscow came up with the idea of “collective security”, with a key role to be played by Russia at the expense of NATO’s presence on the continent. Yet, after aggression against Georgia and massive military build-up on the Baltic aimed at harassing and intimidating regional players, this project seemed more of a diplomatic distraction than a sincere instrument of security building.

The final break with the remnants of affinity to the West/Europe was accomplished in 2012. Events in Bolotnaya Square were construed by Moscow as the most despicable Western attempt to ignite the process of regime change in Russia following the template of the “colour revolutions”. Aside from strengthening anti-protest legal regulations, Moscow consolidated anti-European/Western forces under the umbrella of the “**Iz-borsk Club**” (2012) – an agglomeration of the best-known Russian conservatives and reactionaries.

It seemed that by 2012 Russia had become ready to challenge the West on the battlefield of information and propaganda. It merely needed a spark to let the battle begin.

“The Year of the Great Turn”: Russian anti-European propaganda after 2013

The Euromaidan in Kyiv (late autumn 2013) became a watershed that dramatically changed both the course and essence of Russian anti-Western/European propaganda. The new era in the history of Russian disinformation was ushered in on December 9th 2013 when Vladimir Putin signed an executive order giving birth to the Rossiya Segodnya multilingual news agency that was to become the main outlet of Russian propaganda for external audiences. In 2014, the Sputnik news agency (operating in more than 30 languages) comprised of news websites, radio broadcast services and directly controlled by Rossiya Segodnya, was introduced. In 2013, another Russian news website LifeNews (consisting of a news website and 24-hour television channel) emerged. It has been repeatedly accused not only of being extremely biased, but also suspected of being connected with Russian security services.

These three information outlets, which appeared within a very brief period, are a stupendous example of very smart, flexible and sophisticated disinformation targeting an external audience. This predetermines both methods of delivery and further dissemination of (dis)information. Unlike that

used for domestic consumption, this pattern of propaganda extensively relies on quasi-argumentative discourse, refraining from outright distortion, fighting rhetoric or threats to turn other countries “into radioactive ash”. Instead, the main idea is based on “soft” discrediting of both the US and the EU by providing an “alternative opinion” and tacit accusation of the “other side” for not disclosing the entire truth. This stems naturally from the main slogans: “Telling the untold” (Sputnik) and “First in breaking news” (LifeNews).

Aside from employing multilingual content (which frequently varies on a country-to-country basis) the aura of “objectivity” is created by the appearance of foreign journalists and TV anchors. This sharply contrasts with European mass media, which tend to rely on domestic resources.

Both “trolls” and “bots” (operated by automatic processes) became a powerful tool of opinion-making and generating of anti-European/American feelings among both domestic and external audience.

Besides, these media do not shy away from citing foreign politicians and experts. The obstacle, however, is that these “independent” opinions are collected from either open (or tacit) supporters/admirers of Vladimir Putin. Moreover, these media have been repeatedly **decied** for collaborating with “experts” of rather dubious reputation, many of whom are not specialists in the topics they discuss. Regrettably, these are details that remain unknown to non-specialists and external spectators.

A totally different turn is visible in propaganda for “domestic consumption”. The notorious pro-Kremlin journalist, zealous anti-Semite, open xenophobe and homophobe Dmitry Kiselyov (head of Rossiya Segodnya and deputy director of Russian state TV holding company VGTRK) became the living embodiment of anti-European propaganda. His weekly media appearances on the Russia-1 television channel were filled with misanthropic ideas and hatred amply permeated with anti-Ukrainian, anti-European, anti-American and **anti-Jewish** sentiments. In his allegations Kiselyov extensively relied on pseudo-historical and quasi-scientific facts and data. For instance, his anti-EU rhetorical escapades resulted in a wild revelation about an existing anti-Russian “alliance” between the “European Russophobes”. **According to Kiselyov**, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden “are still dreaming of taking revenge on Russia for the Poltava battle in 1709”. This and other numerous preposterous allegations completed the overall atmosphere of obscurantism and paranoia to which the Russian audience is being subjected.

Anti-Western/European sentiments among the Russian audience are also inflamed by pseudo-historians and writers such as the neo-Stalinist Nikolai **Starikov** and ultra-conservative Alexander Prokhanov (an **apologist** for the Stalinist USSR and North Korean model) who apparently enjoy full and unconditional support from the Kremlin. The same pool could be supplemented by Russian neo-fascist thinker Alexander Dugin, one of whose main tasks was to establish

close ties with European far-right and neo-Nazi groups as “European allies” of the Kremlin.

In her **analysis**, the Russian journalist Kseniya Kirillova presented the following tasks pursued by Russian propaganda:

- 1) To weaken critical thinking;
- 2) To create an image of the enemy;
- 3) To link all internal problems to external factors;
- 4) To emphasise the consolidation of society in the face of a military threat;
- 5) To create the image of Vladimir Putin as the only leader capable of withstanding the military threat;

Moscow saw the EU as an agglomeration of countries bind with each other with economic ties, and unable to put up serious competition to Russia in terms of military power.

- 6) To prepare for the inevitable hardships of “wartime”;
- 7) To create an image for the West of a united Russia ready for war.

The most dangerous feature of the post-2013 course taken by Russian propaganda is the cultivation of militarism and Stalinism among Russians, with a special emphasis on the younger generation. It aims to morally prepare the Russian audience for a potential war with the West, which bitterly resembles the Soviet experience. For this purpose, the Russian authorities created **two movements** – Anti-Maidan and Yunarmia. The first assembles people from all walks of life including illustrious public figures, sportsmen and intellectuals as well as war veterans and Cossacks – the so-called “patriotic core”. The latter intends to familiarise the Russian youth with the armed forces and to promote militarism and “patriotic feelings”. Incidentally, this initiative was personally blessed by Sergey Shoygu.

Another phenomenon (not a new one though) that ought to be linked to an outbreak of political confrontation between Russia and the West from 2013 on, was the emergence of a pool of so-called “trolls” and “bots”. Both “trolls” (online internet accounts run by humans) and “bots” (operated by automatic processes) became a powerful tool of opinion-making and generating of anti-European/American feelings among both the domestic and external audiences. Without going into details, it should be mentioned that the main task of both elements is to create a discussion between readers of online publications that will outgrow into a debate that usually ends up as a torrent of vilification and even intimidation/harassment of foreign/domestic journalists and social activists that disagree with the Kremlin’s position and attempt to provide an alternative opinion. As a result, in the scopes of information warfare against the West Moscow has received an effective army of pre-paid “virtual fighters” that are not easily detected. Out of a great pool of platforms and social networks used by trolls, perhaps it would be worthwhile to mention the following two – VK (“ВКонтакте”) and Odnoklassniki (“Одноклассники”) both established in 2006)

– which are the main outlets of pro-Kremlin (and anti-Western) propaganda at a grassroots level. It would not be entirely correct though to reduce the influence of these networks to the Russian domestic audience. They have become extremely popular in the entire post-Soviet area as well as among the Russians living abroad.

In an **article** entitled “A virtual eye of the elder brother”, the pillars of Russian trolling were identified as follows: 1) defence of Stalinism; 2) praising of the personalities of Vladimir Putin and Sergey Shoygu, as well as the Russian armed forces; 3) aggressive militarism; 4) fascist-style anti-Semitism and xenophobia; 5) sacred sanctity of the Chechen war; 6) loyalty to the KGB/FSB and hatred of the “fifth column”, “deserters” and independent journalists; 7) anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments; 8) Soviet nostalgia and rejection of *perestroika*; 9) blaming dissidents and liberals for Russophobia.

These are the key objectives adopted by Russian anti-European (and the West in general) propaganda, as identified by Keir Giles:

- Direct lies for the purpose of disinformation both of the domestic population and foreign societies;
- Concealing critically important information;
- Burying valuable information in a mass of information dross;
- Simplification, confirmation and repetition (inculcation);
- Terminological substitution: use of concepts and terms whose meanings are unclear or have undergone qualitative change;
- Introducing taboos on specific forms of information or categories of news;
- Image recognition: known politicians or celebrities can take part in political actions to order, thus exerting influence on the world view of their followers;
- Providing negative information, which is more readily accepted by the audience than a positive one.

Source: Source: Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian information warfare*. NATO Defence College, November 2016, pp. 47–48

The “trump cards” of Russian propaganda

In sum, Russian propaganda is a complex, multifaceted and skilfully crafted phenomenon. Its strong points can be presented as a pack of cards each of which plays its unique role and has a specific goal ascribed to it.

Card 1. Anti-fascism. Victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) that claimed the lives of millions of Soviet citizens still remains one of the main pivots of Russian national pride and sorrow. The legacy of this event is embedded in the May 9th celebrations and attained additional symbolism within the Brezhnev period, but was rapidly losing popularity in the early 1990s. Everything changed in the second half of the 2000s. As the legal heir of the USSR, the Russian Federation has monopolised the triumph of the Soviet people in this war, accepting the attire of a referee when labelling countries “fascist”. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the “Bronze Soldier affair” in Estonia would become the first attempts to play the “fascist card” and mobilise internal pub-

lic opinion against Ukraine and Estonia, respectively, which was however done on a limited scale. The decisive moment came in 2013 with events on the Ukrainian southeast, when themes related to the “fascist Ukraine ruled by a mob of Nazi criminals” started to dominate Russian propagandist discourse to be employed both domestically and internationally. Preposterous and groundless as these accusations are (especially given the role of the USSR in the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939) these find overwhelming support among the Russian domestic public. Moreover, this turns out to be quite effective for external purposes as well, especially among southern European countries.

Card 2. Conservatism. Russia is a country that by virtue of history is predisposed toward political conservatism. Contemporary Russian conservative discourse is based on a combination of religion, political will (coupled with military might), and traditionalism in social relations. This is frequently presented by Russian authorities as a viable alternative to a “morally stagnant” Europe that is rapidly departing from traditional Christian values. Russian propaganda **portrays** Europeans as drowning in hedonism, sexual perversions, paedophilia and immorality. This **creates** an image of Europe as the “Sodom and Gomorra of the twenty-first century” – something that is repulsive to the Russian national spirit, culture and traditions. In this regard, it would be interesting to recall that the so-called “**conservative revolution**” in Russia coincided with the emergence of an extremely insulting term “*gejropa*” (from “gay” and “Europe”) that has become quite popular among Russians while referring to Europe.

At this juncture, it would be worthwhile underscoring an idea expressed by Russian Patriarch Kirill during his visit to Kaliningrad in 2015 when he **demand**ed that the Russian enclave must become the Russian lighthouse of morality for the entire Europe that is going astray. Given the level of Euroscepticism in the EU and the glittering façade that Moscow has been able to erect during Putin’s era, this image might be dangerously appealing, especially for those who are not familiar with the **actual state** of Russian domestic affairs.

Card 3. Diaspora. The collapse of the USSR, (in)famously defined as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”, witnessed 25 million ethnic Russians left in the newly emerged sovereign countries. Initially the matter appeared to be a humiliation and was rarely discussed in public by Russian authorities. But over time Moscow was able to turn it into one of its most powerful tools for influencing the internal affairs of other countries and for propagandist purposes. Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine have seen how the pretext of “discrimination” of ethnic Russians can lead to Russian (in)direct involvement. Employing the card of Russophobia, Russian propaganda is pursuing two goals: undermining internal cohesion within the EU, and promoting secessionist movements and cultivating conflict within these countries by purposefully pitting the endogenous population and Russophone minority against one another. One

of the best examples, that of the “Latgale People’s Republic” (October 2012), should be seen as a stern warning not only to the Latvian government but to the EU as a whole, especially taking the Ukrainian scenario into consideration. In fact, Russian propaganda has created a **map of secessionist movements** in Europe that might be used by Moscow for undermining internal stability and cohesion among European countries.

Card 4. Flexibility. Russian propaganda has proven itself to be outstanding in terms of flexibility. Paradoxically, it has been able to enchant powers from various sides of the spectrum of European forces, ranging from far-leftists and anar-

The most dangerous feature of the post-2013 Russian propaganda is cultivation of militarism and Stalinism among Russians, with a special emphasis on the younger generation.

chists (on the basis of anti-fascism) to various types of populist and even far-right radicals (with militarism, conservatism and anti-Islamic sentiments being the driving force). Also, Russian propaganda is very effective at exploiting the feelings and hopes of some recently admitted members of the EU whose expectations do not fully match the anticipated results. Appealing to the Soviet period, the pro-Kremlin propagandists are claiming that EU membership has brought former members of the socialist camp nothing better and has instead **turned them** into a source of cheap labour for more developed member states.

Card 5. Effective myth-building. Aside from that of the “decadent West”, Russia has proven to be an extremely effective myth-builder. One such myth, the “subjugation of Chechnya” by Vladimir Putin’s iron hand, causes admiration among many European (and domestic) conservatives and even ordinary people who tend to blame domestic politicians for indecisiveness. Another myth is that of “prosperous Russia and poor Europe”. The outbreak of the “sanctions war” between Russia and the West witnessed a certain transformation of the anti-EU campaign that relies on myths related to Europe allegedly “suffocating” as a result of counter-sanctions introduced by Moscow. Russian mass media are filled with stories about “poor Polish farmers” and the “dilapidated Finnish agricultural sector” that are no longer able to find new markets. Similarly, Russian discourse has also accepted a thesis that boils down to the **following formula**: “since Europe has deteriorated economically, its lifestyle and economic model no longer seem to be attractive to the majority of Russians”, whereas Russia presents a much more buoyant and thus attractive economic model that is invincible to external pressure. Given the extent of Russian poverty these arguments seem to be rather ridiculous, yet they remain unknown among those Europeans who are not able to see the difference and thus cannot make accurate judgements.

Card 6. Aggressive style. At the end of 2016 the Russian Embassy in Vilnius **started** to disseminate highly provocative leaflets that agitated Lithuanians to move from their mother-

land to Kaliningrad Oblast – a neighbouring Russian enclave that is fully dependent on the Kremlin’s financial support – in pursuit of better living conditions. Even though this was a distortion that was immediately ridiculed by Lithuanian economists the target was hit anyway. The main strategy of Russian propaganda is to present as much disinformation as possible, since it is practically impossible (and pointless) to confront each and every piece. Russian propagandists do not give much thought to the potential international reaction or counterarguments; the main goal is to spread doubt by dispersing lies. In this regard, this pattern of behaviour resembles trolling methods. Moreover, Russia’s aggressive style is inseparable from bluff and the imitation of danger, such as the threat to use nuclear weapons (as was the case during the annexation of Crimea) or “serious repercussions” for neutral states as a punishment for pro-NATO rhetoric (which was hinted at by Sergey Lavrov).

The joker card

Unlike Europeans, Russians are ready to spend huge financial means on projects deemed to be strategically vital irrespective of the wellbeing of the population. The notorious phrase uttered by Ivan Vyshnegradsky amidst the terrible famine that struck Russia in 1891 claiming lives of millions of Russian peasants (“we must go hungry, but export”) should

The EuroMaidan in Kyiv became a watershed that dramatically changed both course and essence of Russian anti-Western/European propaganda.

not be seen as a relic of the past. Thanks to powerful propaganda and historical reasons the Russian domestic audience is convinced that economic and political sanctions from the West (including the EU) are a punishment for assertive foreign policy. This makes Russians readily brook hardships that are construed as a price necessary to pay for Russia to be able to “get up from its knees”.

At this juncture, one of the most distinctive features and undisputed strong points of undemocratic regimes is their ability to mobilise resources (both human and material) for a specific task within a very brief period. Russian history can boast a great number of such examples, and the propaganda domain is no exception. This is however just one side of the picture. History has witnessed many instances of undemocratic regimes suffering a defeat because of the inability to transform after the fulfilment of initial objectives.

As powerful and omnipotent as Russian propaganda might seem on the surface, it has many flaws and limitations. In this regard, Europe should not forget the words of Otto von Bismarck who pointed out that “Russia is neither as strong nor as weak as it appears”.