



Propaganda enables Putin's aggression

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In recent weeks, as the Kremlin has beefed up forces along its common border with Ukraine in an apparent prelude to some sort of military action, observers in Washington have wondered about the method behind Russian President Vladimir Putin's madness. Surely, they have mused, Russia can't be eager to replay the events of 2014, when its aggression against Ukraine fell far short of the Kremlin's goal of creating "Novorossiia" (New Russia) and further accelerated Ukraine's drift toward Europe and the West.

The view from Moscow, however, is very different.

All politics, they say, are local, and the Russian government's current mobilization is designed with some clear goals in mind: to advance its standing at home and improve its strategic posture abroad. It's an approach that's succeeding on both fronts — and the reasons have everything to do with propaganda.

In recent years, a key piece of Putin's domestic consolidation of power has been informational in nature. Russia's strongman has worked diligently to create a profound sense of siege among his populace via a steady diet of state propaganda that amplifies Western transgressions, minimizes the Kremlin's culpability in global disorder, and generally inverts the global security situation.

This effort is vast, and it is growing.

More than half-a-decade ago, Russia's government was already estimated by Congress to be spending more than \$600 million a year on messaging.

A 2016 RAND Corporation study estimated that the Kremlin's premier propaganda outlet, *Russia Today* (now known as RT), alone received \$300 million annually. And in its most recent budget, released last Fall, the Russian government allocated 102.8 billion rubles (\$1.37 billion) to state media outlets like *Channel One* and RT, an increase of 37 percent over 2020 figures.

These investments have slowly but surely altered perceptions among ordinary Russians about the state of the world — and Russia's place in it.

The numbers tell us just how much. In its latest survey of Russian public opinion, Moscow's Levada Center polling institute found that half of all respondents believed the current escalation in tensions between Russia and Ukraine to be the fault of the United States and NATO. By contrast, just 4 percent of the 1,600 adult Russians polled believed that their country was the instigator of the current crisis — despite a months-long military build-up on the part of the Kremlin that the U.S. community estimates will reach 175,000 troops by January.

In other words, Russian state propaganda has been overwhelmingly successful at inverting the geopolitical equation, and convincing domestic audiences that the Kremlin is a defender instead of an aggressor, and that its military build-up is a product of necessity rather than choice.

All of which has helped bolster the legitimacy — and the popularity — of Putin's foreign adventurism.

For his part, Russia's president has been quick to use all this to his advantage. In the wake of the Dec. 7 Zoom summit with President Biden, the Kremlin sent the United States security proposals outlining a list of ambitious demands, ranging from a cessation of NATO expansion to an American pledge not to provide weapons to Ukraine and other states possibly threatened by Russian aggression. The not-so-tacit warning accompanying the Russian government's wish list is that, unless the United States and Europe sit down to negotiate these terms, a war may be in the offing.

Whether Russia's government makes good on its threats remains to be seen — and depends greatly on just how much the U.S. and its partners can raise the costs of such actions to the Kremlin.

We can be sure, however, that whatever course Putin ultimately chooses will depend greatly on the level of support it enjoys at home.

To get a sense of what that might be, we would do well to spend a bit more time watching Putin's messages to his own people.

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