



Russia's Propaganda Is More Persuasive Than We Think

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On the surface, Russia's war in Ukraine has hit the Kremlin's once-formidable propaganda machine hard. Practically overnight, Moscow's long-running influence campaign in the West foundered, as European governments tightened controls on Russian disinformation, banned state outlets like RT and Sputnik from broadcasting and implemented a raft of new restrictions to limit the reach of Moscow's malign influence.

To be sure, some of these setbacks are the product of self-inflicted messaging wounds. Russian officials probably could have expected that their arguments about the need to "denazify" a country with a Jewish president would be met with widespread ridicule. Russian arguments about Satanic practices in Ukraine, as well as U.S.-sponsored biolabs there, have similarly fallen short.

Even so, the current triumphalism among many in the West regarding the decline of Russian disinformation is somewhat premature. That's because, while Russian propaganda outlets are now having a more difficult time reaching European nations, they're still making major gains in advancing the Kremlin's position—and eroding that of the West—throughout the developing world.

Latin America is a case in point. There, Russia has erected a formidable messaging apparatus experts say ranks as among the most influential in the region. According to Joseph Humire of the Center for Secure Free Society, a think tank focusing on security trends in the Americas, Russia is today outstripping the United States in terms of the scope and breadth of its outreach toward regional states.

The effects are pronounced. Not only is Russia shaping local attitudes about what is transpiring in its war against Ukraine, its broader message—about imperial destiny and the restoration of lost lands—has successfully tapped into local grievances and political discontent. The Kremlin's messaging is "basically a gift to authoritarians worldwide, especially in Latin America, who are now using that kind of narrative to be able to try to recreate lost empires of the past," said Humire. This, in turn, has contributed to contemporary tensions in the region, where a number of national boundaries and borders are relatively newly drawn.

In Africa, meanwhile, a different set of Russian narratives are resonating. Since the start of the Ukraine war, Moscow's propaganda outlets have played upon local fears of economic hardship and food insecurity. This past summer, a report by the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) accused the Russian government and its proxies of carrying out a "massive disinformation campaign" shifting the blame for rising global food and energy prices to the West. That campaign is "intended to both hide Russia's culpability and persuade leaders of at-risk countries to support an end to sanctions designed to stop Russia's unjust and brutal war in Ukraine," the report said.

Increasingly, other players are getting in on the act as well. Kremlin-connected oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, for instance, has been identified by the U.S. government as the mastermind behind a major propaganda campaign in Africa to expand regional support for an asymmetric Russian presence on the continent. Working through proxies and Kremlin-aligned actors, a November GEC report outlined, Prigozhin "has co-opted some Pan-African activists to promote Russia's interests across the continent, including African voices calling for the removal of French and Western influence across the Sahel while encouraging more Kremlin influence. These influencers allow Kremlin-linked entities to maintain plausible deniability of Russia's hand in African affairs, while attempting to mold African opinions favorable to the Kremlin's policy goals."

All of this outreach to the Global South is having a real impact. This past summer, the latest edition of the Democracy Perception Index, the world's largest annual study on democracy, found a wide gap between Western and Latin American attitudes toward Russia, with a number of Latin American nations (including Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela) remaining in favor of maintaining economic ties with Moscow despite the Ukraine war and its atrocities there.

The differences are even more pronounced in Africa. In a recent Gallup study of publics in 27 African nations, 42 percent of respondents had positive views of Russia generally and President Vladimir Putin in particular, while 27 percent either didn't know or simply refused to answer the question.

This sort of goodwill has real world consequences, as it did last spring, when the U.N. considered a resolution to suspend Russia from the body's Human Rights Council and just a handful of Africa's 54 countries voted in favor. It also provides a painful reminder that, while the persuasive power of Russian propaganda may be declining in the West, there are other parts of the world where it is still far from a spent force.

