



For Russia, Information Is As Valuable As an Army of Tanks

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Speaking in Moscow earlier this month, a prominent Russian political figure provided a timely reminder of the Kremlin's enduring belief in the importance of shaping global opinion. "[I]nformation work today in the conditions in which we live and fight for our country is like a weapon of war," Alina Kabaeva opined at a televised gala before an audience of media professionals. "It is as important as the Kalashnikov rifle. Let's work."

Kabaeva is no ordinary propagandist. The 39-year-old former gymnast and parliamentarian is widely rumored to be Vladimir Putin's long-time girlfriend, and has even been sanctioned by the U.S. government for her proximity to the Russian president. She also chairs the board of the National Media Group, Russia's largest private media holding company. As such, Kabaeva is arguably the country's most symbolic strategic communicator—and her comments underscore that Moscow sees propaganda, disinformation and media manipulation as essential tools of statecraft.

It's a fact that, after all this time, still isn't adequately appreciated in the West. Over the past year, the United States and its partners in Europe have rallied together in unprecedented fashion to oppose Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. And, both in Washington and in European capitals, there's now a growing consensus about the need to tackle Russian malign political influence writ large. But an accurate understanding of where, precisely, information fits into this equation has, unfortunately, lagged behind the times.

Part of the reason has to do with disparate experiences with the phenomenon on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and the massive propaganda campaign that accompanied it, served as ground zero for a new and more serious approach to the Kremlin, waking member nations to the persistent threat of Russian imperialism to the continent in general (and to the parts of it formerly under Soviet control in particular). But this watershed moment passed largely unnoticed in the United States, where Russian disinformation is still seen mostly through a domestic political lens—as a fixture of the 2016 and 2020 election cycles (and not a particularly impactful one at that). The result is a lingering mismatch of perceptions about the scope and gravity of the informational threat posed by the Kremlin.

Significant, too, are the inherent differences in the Western and Russian ways of war. In Washington and many European capitals, policymakers tend to draw stark distinctions between peace and war and see warfare as an end state signaling the breakdown of politics. In Russia, by contrast, conflict is seen as part of a continuum of foreign policy, one in which hybrid tactics like disinformation are used regularly to advance long-term objectives. As Russia scholar Stephen Blank puts it, "Moscow's non-military instruments are deployed every day in a constant, regular, and strategic if not systematic and synchronized effort to break up the processes of European or even regional integration, hollow out the EU and NATO, [and] corrupt and subvert European political and economic institutions..." In the information sphere, these activities have ranged from shaping the narratives of European extremist political parties to promoting pandemic-related conspiracy theories to historical revisionism designed to legitimate Moscow's claims to Ukraine and other former holdings.

While Russia's nervous neighbors in places like the Baltics understand this very well, Washington still generally does not. Aside from a comparatively small cadre of specialists, few U.S. officials grasp the extent of Russia's subversive activities. As a result, they are repeatedly surprised by the persistence, pervasiveness, and effectiveness of Kremlin messaging.

Finally, there is the question of resources. Budgets tend to be accurate predictors of governmental priorities, and the Russian government's heavy spending on information operations speaks volumes about how important those are to its overall strategy. European experts have estimated Russia's "white budget" expenditures on foreign media manipulation to total more than \$1.5 billion annually, in spite of a raft of expanding—and impactful—Western sanctions. (When the activities of Kremlin-aligned media actors, like infamous oligarch and Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, are taken into account, the figure is believed to be closer to \$2.4 billion per year.) By contrast, the total U.S. public diplomacy budget, though now rising, remains comparatively meager (less than \$900 million annually) while European institutions dedicated to countering Russian disinformation are still chronically under-resourced and understaffed.

All of which is a boon to Moscow and gives it significant leeway to shape global perceptions and advance its own narratives, notwithstanding the current difficulties in its war of choice against Ukraine. Changing this state of affairs requires the United States and its international partners to recognize that, for the Kremlin, the pen (and now the keyboard) has truly become as mighty as the sword. It also requires the West to confront Russia in earnest not just on the military battlefield, but on the informational one as well.

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The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.