



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

29

**MOSCOW'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGN
AND GEORGIA**

ALEXANDER RONDELI

EXPERT OPINION



2014



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

ALEXANDER RONDELI

**MOSCOW'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGN
AND GEORGIA**

29

2014



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski
Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 2014 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-7219-2

Russia in the Post-Soviet Space

What are Russia's goals in its immediate neighborhood? Does it just seek to influence by using its soft power or does it want to dominate the region to have a sphere of influence? This is a choice between post-and neo-imperialism. After the invasion in Georgia, after Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, this question is not difficult to answer.

Russia deals with its neighbors like the former colonies they are. They are not considered fully sovereign states. Russia doubts the ability of its neighboring states to maintain their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

To achieve its goals Moscow uses separatism and irredentist claims in neighboring states to blackmail and, if needed, dismember them. This is evident in Moscow's approach to Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Russia uses the keen-state concept as an instrument of foreign policy.

Soft power is a necessary instrument to achieve neo-imperial goals. Moscow's soft power, used against its neighbors, is predominantly based on lie and disinformation.¹

Since the collapse of the USSR Moscow tried keeping the former Soviet republics under its control, inventing integrative schemes and organizations (CIS, CSTO, EURAZES). The CIS project, being the most known, was launched soon after the break-up of the Soviet Union and turned out to be a failure. The Kremlin's problem was how to wrap its imperial goals in economic and ideological clothing that would be acceptable for the former Soviet republics. Most of the post-Soviet states saw the imperialist goals in the Kremlin's integrative activities. Moscow tried to compel its newly-independent neighbors to its will by creating and waging separatism in the so-called "near abroad" and using threats and blackmail as well as economic tools (embargo, sanctions). When the Kremlin considered it necessary, it relied on brutal force like in Moldova, Georgia and, recently, in Ukraine.

The Kremlin never abandoned the idea of keeping its post-Soviet neighbors under control. In the 2000s, the Kremlin demanded from the West the creation of the so-called "new security architecture" and "indivisible security in Europe" which had to give Moscow the Western acceptance of Russia's special rights in the so-called "privileged sphere of interests." The West did not buy that idea but in 2008 and invading Georgia, Russia showed its rivals that it will not let European and Euro-Atlantic structures incorporate Russia's neighbors (except the already incorporated Baltic states).

1 On Moscow's soft power against Georgia see: *Soft Power: The New Concept of Russian Foreign Policy toward Georgia*. Tengiz Pkhaladze (Editor). Mtatsmindeli, Tbilisi, 2010.

Considering the transatlantic alliance internally weak and divided, and seeing Europe as plunged into crisis and indecisiveness as well as strongly dependent on Russia's energy supply, Moscow activated its policy towards its neighbors and tried to pull them into a Kremlin-designed new integrative project (Eurasian Economic Union) which, by the Kremlin's view, could provide conditions for survival for Russia as a great power and integrate the most important post-Soviet states under Moscow's control. The backbone of the Union had to be Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

At the same time, the Russian elite never abandoned its efforts to define a new Russian identity and its role in the changing world and it tried to find an ideological and legal "package" for its imperial objectives. The Russian politico-military elite has already been under the charm of geopolitics for a long time, especially its new imperial Russian version developed mainly by Alexander Dugin. His so-called "neo-Eurasianism" strongly influenced Moscow's post-Soviet national security thinking. There are also other authors whose ideas have strongly influenced the Kremlin's decision-makers. Among them, Piotr Shchedrovitsky, a philosopher actively engaged in developing ideas concerning Russia's future and a way of development, has to be mentioned. He is the author of the powerful imperial concept of the "Russian World" which is to provide Russia with "its due place" in the globalizing world. That concept developed by Shchedrovitsky in 1993-1997 has today become a kind of Bible for Kremlin politicians and propagandists.²

The main direction of Moscow's foreign policy activity is the so-called post-Soviet space in which, according to the "Russian World" concept, live as many Russians as inside Russia proper. Moscow also considers bilingual persons, those speaking and thinking in Russian, as Russians. Thus, many ethnically non-Russians are also included into the category of Russians. This concept means that there is a certain socio-cultural reality in the post-Soviet space, a so-called "civilizational space" which is based on three pillars: 1) Orthodoxy, 2) Russian culture and the Russian language and 3) a common historical memory and common views on societal development. This is a purely imperial expansionist concept masked as a civilizational and cultural project created by the Kremlin to legitimize its actions in the post-Soviet space. One can imagine how masterful propaganda can strengthen these "pillars!" And the Russian media does its best.

² President Putin first mentioned this concept at the end of 2006 at a meeting with Russian *intelligentsia* in St. Petersburg. Soon after, a new foundation, the Russian World Foundation, was created by Putin's Decree No. 796. This Foundation, headed by V. Nikonov, is very generously financed by the Russian state.

In the opinion of the authors of the concept of the “Russian World,” big countries within the situation of globalization should develop either via colonization or at the expense of diasporas. This is how they can adjust to globalization. There is a notion among the advocates of this concept that the Russians and “Russian thinking” people who live outside the country represent the “immune system” of the Russian Federation. What a beautiful name for Moscow’s “fifth column”!

The Russian Orthodox Church plays a big role in the popularization of the idea of the “Russian World.”³ Patriarch Kirill, at a meeting with Moldovan clergymen, declared that “Holy Russia is neither ethnic nor political nor does it have a linguistic term; it is a spiritual term.... This is a unity of values, spiritual orientation which sculpts our spiritual unity and stands above any political borders.”⁴ This is a masterfully disguised imperial vision. The same Kirill in 2009, in his speech to the Assembly of the “Russian World,” mentioned the term “Russian World” a total of 38 times, declaring in geopolitical terms his belief that the united Russian world can become a powerful actor in global politics, more powerful than all sorts of political alliances.

The idea of “divided Russian people, the biggest divided people in the world,” which has the right of reunification, has been introduced by the Kremlin. On March 18, 2014, President Putin, in his appeal to the Federal Assembly of Russia, made this an official view.⁵ On March 7, 2014, Press Secretary of the President of Russia, D. Peskov, commenting on the situation in Crimea, declared that V. Putin is the main guarantor of the Russian world’s security.⁶ He meant that Moscow’s zone of responsibility concerning national security has increased and its boundaries are wider than the Russian Federation’s state boundaries.⁷ Does this not remind us of A. Hitler’s claims about the defense of Germans beyond borders?

Georgia is not a part of the so-called “Russian World,” a concept which is strongly promoted by Moscow and by the practically government-controlled Russian media. Georgia falls into the category of a land of compatri-

3 Геннадий Друзенко. Геополитика от Патриарха: Царство Небесное vs «Русский мир». «Зеркало недели», №44 (772), 14-20/11/2009

4 Патриарх Кирилл: Мы один народ пред богом,» Русская линия. Сводка новостей от 23 Августа 2010. <http://rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idor=43517>

5 Обращение Владимира Путина к федеральному собранию. www.echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1281680-echo/

6 Заявление о ситуации на Украине Пресс-секретаря президента РФ Дмитрия Пескова. 7 марта, 2014, TV Россия 24”

7 Наталия Нарочницкая. Русский мир шире границ самой России. «Русская линия.» 08.10.2007; Игорь Зевелев. Границы Русского мира. Трансформация национальной идентичности и новая внешнеполитическая доктрина России. «Россия в глобальной политике», Март-Апрель 2014

ots and a territory which “naturally” and geopolitically belongs to Russia’s politico-military orbit and which has to remain under Moscow’s control.⁸

Russian propaganda has become an extremely aggressive, well-calculated and effective tool of Moscow’s policy internally and abroad. The main target of Moscow’s propaganda abroad is the post-Soviet space towards which the Kremlin has developed integrative plans that are declared in the country’s main foreign policy and national security documents. Recently, Moscow has developed the already well-known concept of the so-called “Russian World” which has already become a main guideline for the Kremlin in its goal of the creation of a buffer zone around Russia consisting of protectorates and dependent states.

Information War against Georgia

There is no massive propaganda campaign against Georgia like there was before, especially in 2005-2009, during the preparation for invading Georgia, but there are certain narratives concerning Georgia which are constantly spread by Moscow’s media.⁹ These are: Georgia has to stay with Russia because of its geography, the common 200-year history and the common Orthodox religion; the Georgian and Russian people are friendly to each other and only the Georgian governments betray that friendship, going against historical logic and trying to take Georgia out of Russia’s sphere of influence; Russia will never let Georgia go, join NATO and the EU and will destroy Georgia if it does not obey Moscow’s will; the West is not a reliable partner and Georgia is in an illusion about its Western perspective.

It looks like Moscow does not believe too much in the effectiveness of the classical soft power instruments: language, cultural influence, etc. Moscow more and more relies on destructive propaganda and wages information campaigns as soon as it finds it timely and necessary.¹⁰ Moscow’s narratives are the following: the West is the enemy and wants to destroy Russia. The West is in a degradation process, incapable of further development, and plunged into filth and vice. Russia is morally clean and can consolidate around it all of the healthy forces of the world which care about genuine human values. Western democracy is a myth and a failure. The West is divided. Russia’s activities are legitimate, and so on.

8 On the “compatriots” concept concerning Georgia see: The “Compatriot Protection Policy of the Russian Federation and Consular Policy toward Georgia.” In *Soft Power: The New Concept of Russian Foreign Policy toward Georgia*. Tengiz Pkhaladze (Editor). Mtatsmindeli, Tbilisi, 2010, pp. 52-63.

9 Some Russian authors consider Georgia as a part of the “Russian World.” See: Юрий Сошин. «Грузия-часть Русского мира» Russkie.org. 08.12.12.

10 On the specifics of Moscow’s disinformation campaigns see: Paul Goble. Lies, Damned Lies and Russian Disinformation. The Jamestown Foundation. August 13, 2014.

To achieve its political goals, Moscow actively conducts a propaganda war against the West and tries to influence post-Soviet states in order to strengthen Russia's position in the region.

After the 2008 war with Georgia, Moscow's propaganda intensity reached its peak in 2014 during events in Ukraine. Moscow used the following contextual and campaign narratives in the information campaign against Ukraine: there is a Slavic or a Russian world and Ukraine is an inseparable, integral part of it; the Great Patriotic War continues, fascism in Ukraine is not defeated yet and Stepan Bandera's followers, extreme nationalists and fascists, who rule in Kyiv, want to divide one Slavic (Russian) nation and weaken Russia; Ukrainian events are masterminded in the West and it is a Western conspiracy against Russia; Russian activities are legitimate, Russia speaks the truth and the West lies; Eurasianism is the right step toward the better future for Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries; Ukraine is an important part of that Union and the West and Ukrainian fascists want to destroy it. The West has strayed away from God and has lost its moral values.

These ideas are "transmitted" by Russian media through audience segmentation and narrative control. As the most important instruments of the information campaign, Russian nationwide TV channels are used.

At the same time NGOs, compatriot organizations, experts and social media are used for synchronized messaging and massive falsification on a large scale. In social media, Moscow effectively uses so-called "troll farms," actively spreading Moscow propaganda on the internet. Social networks have turned into a large battlefield on the internet in which Moscow is more and more active.

Media in Russia is under the control of the government and conducting an information war or a propaganda campaign is relatively easy for the Kremlin. For controlling the media, Moscow uses weekly meetings at the Kremlin for media leaders, providing special budget, controlling media personnel and introducing certain restrictions.

Moscow has successfully tested its propaganda against Georgia and managed to dismember our country.

There is still enough fertile soil for anti-Western attitudes in post-Soviet societies because of the remnants of the Soviet legacy, Russian propaganda and the negative role of the reactionary segment of the clergy. It is clear that propaganda cannot be effective without an acceptable audience and that audience is still there. Russian propaganda comes with a certain vision of world politics in which Russia is a victim of a Western, especial-

ly US, conspiracy. It is more for internal and post-Soviet “consumption.” Moscow’s global propaganda Russia Today TV relies more on the vision in which the West is in the process of degradation and Russia is moving towards a bright future.

Russian media and local Russia-oriented NGOs and groups talk about the uselessness of European integration for the Georgian economy and the danger for local culture and blame the Georgian government for not integrating with Russia.

A certain “alternative reality” has been created which seriously influences public opinion in Russia and to a certain extent many societies in the post-Soviet space. It is not a completely unknown experience for the post-Soviet human being to be influenced by propaganda and brainwashing. Soviet experience serves as fertile soil for modern brainwashing.

The Russian language remains the lingua franca for the majority of ethnic minorities (around 20 percent of the population) in Georgia as well as the communication instrument between different ethnic groups and audiences (Georgian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian.) State-minority relations are a national security issue! Many among the young generation do not know Russian but middle and old age people still speak Russian and use the Russian language media (mainly TV).

During the previous government, the Russian language TV channel (PIK TV) was created but it was closed down as soon as the new leadership came to power in Georgia in October of 2012. It was done presumably “not to irritate” Moscow and as a positive step towards our northern neighbor. PIK TV performed quite well and served as a source of information for the Russian-speaking population in Georgia but also as a counter-propaganda media outlet. PIK TV was also popular in the post-Soviet space and was hated by the Kremlin. PIK TV was a part of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and financed from the state budget. Because of a quite high quality of TV journalism and its alternative view, the TV station gained popularity.

Unfortunately, in the regions of Georgia mainly populated by ethnic minorities (particularly in Javakheti, predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians), the majority of non-Georgians are not well integrated and involved in Georgia’s socio-cultural and political life. The main reason of that is a very low level of the knowledge of the state language. This is also the main reason for their ignorance of local political and cultural life and their lack of information about internal politics. Previously, PIK TV filled the informational gap but, today, it is replaced by Russian and other neigh-

boring countries' TV channels. This situation can be defined as a national security issue.

Only one TV channel (Objektiv) and the radio station with the same name can be considered as an anti-Western media outlet although one more TV station, because its financing is provided by a Russian-based Georgian businessman, takes the position which can also be easily transformed into an anti-Western TV channel. It has to be emphasized, that since November 11th, 2014, Russian radio station "Sputnik" which broadcasts in Georgian and serves Moscow's political interests, was launched.

Among printed and electronic media there are some which are clearly anti-Western and even pro-Moscow and one may suspect that they are financed from abroad. One of them is a very popular tabloid, *Asavali Dasavali*. One representative of the electronic media, the notorious *Georgia and the World*, is openly pro-Moscow and anti-Western. Its financial support without doubt comes from the North.

Moscow is seriously thinking about using its soft power more effectively in Georgia. There are signs of this "new approach." There are some new NGOs and groups like the Georgian branch of the notorious Eurasian Society which conduct anti-NATO and anti-EU propaganda, popularize the so-called Eurasianism, organize anti-Western and anti-NATO rallies, etc. These groups together with their Russian counterparts organize meetings of Georgian and Russian youth, invite groups of Georgian youth to Russia in order to create a friendly and positive image of Russia and make Georgians feel that staying with Russia is the only option for Georgia. The lack of diplomatic relations with Georgia to a certain extent limits Russian anti-Western activities in Georgia. It is important to stress that the democratic media in Georgia pay more attention to internal political processes, etc., and does not consider the handling of Russian propaganda as an actual and necessary task. One can say that the Georgian government does not pay enough attention to the neutralization of the lies and the disinformation coming from the North. Georgia is a democratic country with freedom of expression and because of that taking effective measures against anti-Western propaganda are not easy to organize. The events in Ukraine once more show us that the government has to develop a certain strategy for dealing with this problem.

Moscow's disinformation campaign, advancing political agenda, is a serious national security challenge for our country.¹¹ Our government needs to pay much more attention to it and acquire the capacity to neutralize

11 On this issue see: Mariam Tsatsanashvili: "Russian Media and Georgia." In *Soft Power: The New Concept of Russian Policy toward Georgia*. Tengiz Pkhaladze (Editor). Mtatsmindeli, Tbilisi, 2010, pp. 69-76.

and counteract disinformation and propaganda coming from the North. Before it is too late, we have to develop the expertise and measures to counteract Moscow's propaganda campaign at home and, as much as possible, abroad.

Conclusion

Today, there are four media audiences in Georgia: Georgian, Russian-speaking, Azerbaijani and Armenian. Abkhaz and Ossetian audiences in the two breakaway regions also need special attention. There is no nationwide TV channel or daily newspaper in Russian.

Freedom of the press means that certain newspapers and electronic media conduct anti-Western and "mild" pro-Russian propaganda which is not compatible with our state's internal and foreign policy goals.

Despite the fact that TV, from among media, maintains a leading position as the most influential instrument of manipulating public opinion, printed media, partly occupying the internet, still has a certain role and influence.

The size of the audience greatly defines the amount of resources. When it comes to the problem of national security, it is not appropriate to use market principles. Each audience, even a small one, as it is in Georgia, still needs special attention. It is a solvable problem to find an optimal scheme.

There is also the necessity of a counterpropaganda (one can call it differently!) center which will offer adequate information to all citizens and media and serve as a positive contributor to interethnic relations. It will serve as a balancing tool to hostile propaganda, lowering national security risks.

Special attention has to be paid to the reactionary part of the Orthodox clergy, poisoning their parish by anti-Western propaganda and conspiracy theories. The Russian Orthodox Church maintains quite a significant influence on our clergy among which it even finds allies.¹²

The information war, emanating from Moscow, is gaining momentum. Consequently, it has to be dealt with using adequate expertise and measures.

12 On this issue in detail see: Tengiz Pkhaldze, Giorgi Gvimradze. "The Religion Factor Used by Russia in the Context of 'Soft Power:'" In *Soft Power: The New Concept of Russian Foreign Policy toward Georgia*. Tengiz Pkhaldze (Editor) Mtatsmindeli. Moscow, 2010, pp. 91-107.