

## Challenging America. How Russia and Other Countries Use Public Diplomacy to Compete with the U.S.: Anti-Americanism Disguised as Public Diplomacy

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

Since the end of the Soviet era, and especially after the Yeltsin administration (1991–1999), Russian leaders have viewed the purpose of soft power much like their predecessors did: to extend Russian influence and constrain America's. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russians had mostly positive feelings toward the United States and the West. In order to counter this attitude and promote Russia's resurgence against the West, the government of President Vladimir Putin began to re-establish Russia's domination of news and communication outlets, including promoting English, Spanish, and Arabic global TV channels of RT (formerly Russia Today) as well as language and cultural foundations *Russki Mir* (Russian World), and the Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchy.

Under Putin, Russia is investing heavily in soft power tools to promote its energy and economic policies. The Russian government allocated \$1.4 billion for international propaganda in FY 2010,<sup>1</sup> increasing that budget by 33 percent from FY 2009.<sup>2</sup>

**Domestic Media Control.** With increasing control over most popular print, radio, and television outlets, the Kremlin is able not only to project a patriotic image of a unified Russia (unfortunately, one led by former KGB officers), but also to intimidate domestic opposition and neighboring states. Its priority is to denigrate America; disparage other perceived enemies such as Estonia and Georgia; and promote the notion of a multipolar world to counterbalance U.S. dominance.

Russia's premier soft power instrument is its global television empire led by RT, its flagship news network. RT was launched in 2005 with the stated objective to "improve Russia's image around the world." Although occasionally giving viewers a positive perspective of Russia, the vast majority of RT's content is critical of the United States, Western Europe, NATO, Israel, and the so-called Anglo-American dominated global economic order.

Frequent RT commentators include Americans who are generally hostile to U.S. policies, such as convicted criminal Lyndon LaRouche. The newest addition to the RT lineup is Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who, despite facing a warrant for arrest, was given his own talk show. The channel has received global condemnation for airing such controversial programming as a "documentary" espousing that the U.S. government, not al-Qaeda terrorists, orchestrated the 9/11 attacks.<sup>3</sup> RT's organization includes three separate satellite channels, available on cable networks in Washington, D.C., in English, Spanish and Arabic; a website with live streams of these

---

<sup>1</sup>Luke Harding, "Russia Today Launches First UK Ad Blitz," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/18/russia-today-propaganda-ad-blitz> (May 23, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>Evgeny Morozov, "The Kremlin's Quest for Pravda 2.0," *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2009, [http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/09/kremlins\\_quest\\_for\\_pravda\\_20](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/09/kremlins_quest_for_pravda_20) (May 23, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>"Who Was Involved in 9/11? Documentary Reveals Shocking Facts," RT, November 28, 2009, <http://rt.com/news/who-was-involved-in-911-documentary-reveals-shocking-facts/> (May 23, 2012).

channels; a Twitter feed; and a popular YouTube channel that had received over 200 million hits by December 2010.<sup>4</sup> Virtually all of RT's content is available for free.

RT claims that it is one of the most watched global news channels in major world cities, including Washington and New York.<sup>5</sup> It was nominated for best documentary at the 2011 Monte Carlo TV Festival and has received worldwide acclaim.<sup>6</sup> In spite of its frequently shrill tone, RT's attempts to reach U.S. and global audiences with anti-American agenda-driven news and commentary could tarnish America's image where it previously was favorable.

The budgets of all Russian-based global news outlets have grown significantly since the early 2000s. RT's budget alone grew from \$30 million in 2005 to around \$150 million in 2008.<sup>7</sup> Experts estimate it now exceeds \$200 million. As Russia's oil revenues increase, these and other media budgets will likely continue increasing.

The Russian counterpart to Voice of America is Voice of Russia, which has been broadcasting since 1922. It broadcasts in 39 languages, including English, Russian, French, Arabic, Spanish, German, and Chinese, in 160 countries. Its content is available in 33 languages online as well.

Russia also pays major American and European newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*, the U.K.'s *Daily Telegraph*, and Italy's *La Repubblica*, to include special advertising supplements with titles such as "Russia Behind the Headlines"<sup>8</sup> or "Russia Now."<sup>9</sup> The supplements closely resemble news articles, appearing to be objective journalism rather than paid pro-Russian pieces. The *New York Times* published a similar eight-page advertising supplement in full color on February 8, 2012, titled "Russia: Beyond the Headlines."<sup>10</sup> Below that title is a disclaimer in small type that reads: "This special advertising feature is sponsored and was written by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (Russia) and did not involve the reporting or editing staff of *The New York Times*."

The base for much of Russia's global media content is its wire news agency, RIA Novosti. During the Soviet era, RIA Novosti often provided cover for clandestine political activities. Unlike the Associated Press or Reuters, RIA Novosti is state owned. It is main source of news and information for Russian and international media outlets. Other Russian news agencies, such as the venerable ITAR-TASS, and Interfax, are either state owned or closely connected to the government.

---

<sup>4</sup>"RT Hits 200 Million on Youtube," RT, December 23, 2010, <http://rt.com/about/pressoffice/rt-hits-200-million-youtube/> (May 24, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>"RT Watched More than Other Major International News Channels in Major Cities," TI, January 9, 2011, <http://rt.com/about/pressoffice/rt-watched-major-international-news-channels-major-u-s-cities/> (accessed May 24, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>"RT in Final of Monte Carlo TV Festival," RT.com, May 17, 2011, at <http://rt.com/about/pressoffice/rt-in-final-of-monte-carlo-tv-festival/> (March 22, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>Nikolaus von Twickel, "Russia Today Courts Viewers with Controversy," *The Moscow Times*, March 23, 2010, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-today-courts-viewers-with-controversy/401888.html> (May 24, 2012).

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, "What Russian papers Say: Russian Press—Behind the Headlines," RIA Novosti, May 24, 2012, <http://en.rian.ru/papers/20120524/173650192.html> (accessed May 31, 2012)

<sup>9</sup>Inna Leonova, "Revising the Moscow in Our Minds," "Russia Now" supplement in *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2011, <http://russianow.washingtonpost.com/> (accessed May 31, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Wikipedia, "Russia Beyond the Headlines," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia\\_Beyond\\_the\\_Headlines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia_Beyond_the_Headlines) (accessed May 31, 2012).

**Swaying the Opinions of the Russian Diaspora.** For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian diaspora is no longer viewed as necessarily anti-Communist or hostile to the Kremlin. Moscow now actively seeks to curry favor with its emigrants and make them its emissaries. Using its embassies, government websites, and a network of establishments that promote Russian language and culture, its efforts to use public diplomacy to bring the Russian diaspora back into the *rusски mir* (Russian world) are growing. Intelligence experts indicate, however, that since the days of the USSR, such efforts have been closely linked to Russia's intelligence activities, including talent-spotting, recruitment, and operations of human intelligence (HUMINT) assets.

Some Western analysts point out that even the Russian Orthodox Church is being used as cover for funneling extensive government funds to, and garnering influence with the diaspora. Church leaders are encouraging expatriate Russians to "act" more Russian while living abroad, and discouraging them from adopting the cultural mores, language, and political beliefs of their host countries.<sup>11</sup> Metropolitan Kirill, the current patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, stated in 2006 that Russians all over the world "should oppose Western civilization in its assertion of the universality of the Western tradition."<sup>12</sup> During the Soviet era, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were especially active abroad and often acted as agents and officers of the First Chief Directorate, the foreign operations arm of the KGB.<sup>13</sup>

Russia is also monitoring and manipulating its domestic social media. The government leadership understands that social networking is one of the freest modes of exchange between Russians and the outside world, and it does not want to lose control of the message that Russia is a great power. Organizations that track global Internet freedom have documented growing intimidation from Moscow of those who are critical of the Kremlin online.<sup>14</sup> Without a strategy to counteract this increasingly aggressive campaign to win hearts and minds, the United States will continue to find its own messages poorly received by Russians and its interests undermined.

## What the United States Should Do

Governments around the world understand the need to manage their images abroad and present their points of view. Some are now directly competing with the United States when it comes to their strategic investment in public diplomacy, a field the U.S. officially recognized when President Franklin Roosevelt established the Office of War Information in 1942 (which later became the U.S. Information Agency).

Most notably, the common theme in the public diplomacy spending initiatives of China, Russia, Iran—and even the European Union's—is to challenge American leadership and U.S. policies. This should not come as a surprise. What is surprising is that there is no component of current U.S. public diplomacy programming that monitors and analyzes such efforts, particularly

---

<sup>11</sup>Andis Kudors, "'Russian World'—Russia's Soft Power Approach to Compatriots Policy," *Russian Analytical Digest*, Vol. 81, No. 10 (June 16, 2010), pp. 2–3.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Keith Armes, "Chekists in Cassocks: The Orthodox Church and the KGB," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Fall 1993–1994), pp. 72–83.

<sup>14</sup>Damir Gainutdinov and Pavel Chikov, "Threats to Internet Freedom in Russia, 2008–2011," AGORA Association, June 2011, [http://www.openinform.ru/fs/j\\_photos/openinform\\_314.pdf](http://www.openinform.ru/fs/j_photos/openinform_314.pdf) (accessed May 24, 2012).

those aimed directly at American citizens, such as the growing foreign broadcasting enterprises operating in the United States. The “war of ideas” will likely continue regardless of U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan or the Administration’s attempts to engage hostile governments.

While the BBG’s new strategic plan aims to shift U.S. international broadcasting toward greater reliance on digital media and satellite TV, language services and air time at Voice of America and on U.S. surrogate radio stations such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Marti are being reduced. Meanwhile, America’s competitors for the “hearts and minds” of people around the world are increasing their presence on American radio and television. Americans can readily view programs on Russia Today, China’s CCTV, Al Jazeera, BBC America and many other foreign channels. Yet most Americans do not have access to the public diplomacy programs broadcast by their own government, perhaps one of the reasons Americans often find it hard to explain U.S. policies to each other, let alone to foreigners.

The Administration and Congress should work together to:

- **Create a federally funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC)** to collect and analyze data on the public diplomacy investments and activities of China, Russia, Iran, and other countries challenging U.S. policies values, and leadership.<sup>15</sup>
- **Use the findings of this research to craft presidential policy directives** on public diplomacy, modeled on the President’s counterterrorism communication directive published in September 2011.<sup>16</sup> Such directives should outline a national strategy that coordinates the work of relevant government agencies.
- **Task the State Department to collect best public diplomacy practices** from its many embassies and from other countries for the purpose of improving U.S. public diplomacy programs.
- **Ensure visa parity for U.S. journalists** with China, Russia, and other states whose public diplomacy outreach counters U.S. policies and leadership. Condition Russia’s RT access to U.S. broadcasting frequencies in America on equal access in Russia for Voice of America and Radio Liberty.
- **Continue the expansion of the Visa Waiver Program** to strengthen U.S. friendships and alliances through people-to-people encounters, greater tourism, and trade.
- **Fill vacant public diplomacy leadership positions promptly.** The U.S. government needs officials who are accountable for carrying out a new public diplomacy strategy. The position of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, filled in April after a months-long hiatus, has been vacant for long stretches of time since its creation. The Broadcasting Board of Governors is currently operating with most of its members still serving though on expired terms.

---

<sup>15</sup>Helle Dale and Edwin J. Feulner, “Strategic Listening: How to Build Research Capacity Within the U.S. Government,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2726, December 10, 2009, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/12/strategic-listening-how-to-build-research-capacity-within-the-us-government>.

<sup>16</sup>“Executive Order 13584: Developing an integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative,” The White House, September 9, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/09/executive-order-13584-developing-integrated-strategic-counterterrorism-c> (accessed May 31, 2012).

- **Increase oversight of U.S. public diplomacy and broadcasting activities** to ensure consistency with U.S. foreign policies and national interests. Decisions such as the one to end broadcasting to China appear to have been made as a concession to China without U.S. interests in mind.
- **Hire only broadcasting, management and supervisory personnel with U.S. citizenship, green card, or political asylum application to work at VOA, Radio Liberty, and other U.S. government broadcasters.** Stop the prevailing practice of hiring citizens of countries with hostile governments, adherents of radical ideologies, or former employees of state-run radio and TV channels to fill U.S. broadcasting and supervisory jobs.
- **Allow high-level officials in U.S. embassies to challenge foreign disinformation on the embassies' own websites.** A uniform standard as well as rapid-response guidance are needed to ensure those public diplomacy responses support U.S. policy. The State Department's digital rapid-response team in the Bureau of Public Diplomacy was established to serve this purpose, but it is focused more narrowly on counterterrorism communication.
- **Reform the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (the Smith–Mundt Act)** to allow the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors to post public diplomacy publications and broadcasts on U.S. government websites. This would not only help to improve Americans' understanding of U.S. policy, but also enable better oversight.

## Conclusion

As the global threats facing the United States evolve—and as U.S. policies in response to those threats develop—the importance and complexity of public diplomacy grows along with them. To improve the performance of U.S. public diplomacy, especially under the constraints of tightening budgets, the U.S. government must become more nimble and better organized. The last time the U.S. had a clear, overarching goal for public diplomacy was under President Ronald Reagan, for whom the battle for hearts and minds was second nature. If America is to remain the shining city on a hill for people around the world, a new era of U.S. public diplomacy must begin.

*The presentation is based on The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder **Challenging America: How Russia, China, and Other Countries Use Public Diplomacy to Compete with the U.S.** by Helle C. Dale, Ariel Cohen, PhD, and Janice A. Smith. The views are the author's only and do not reflect the views of The Heritage Foundation.*