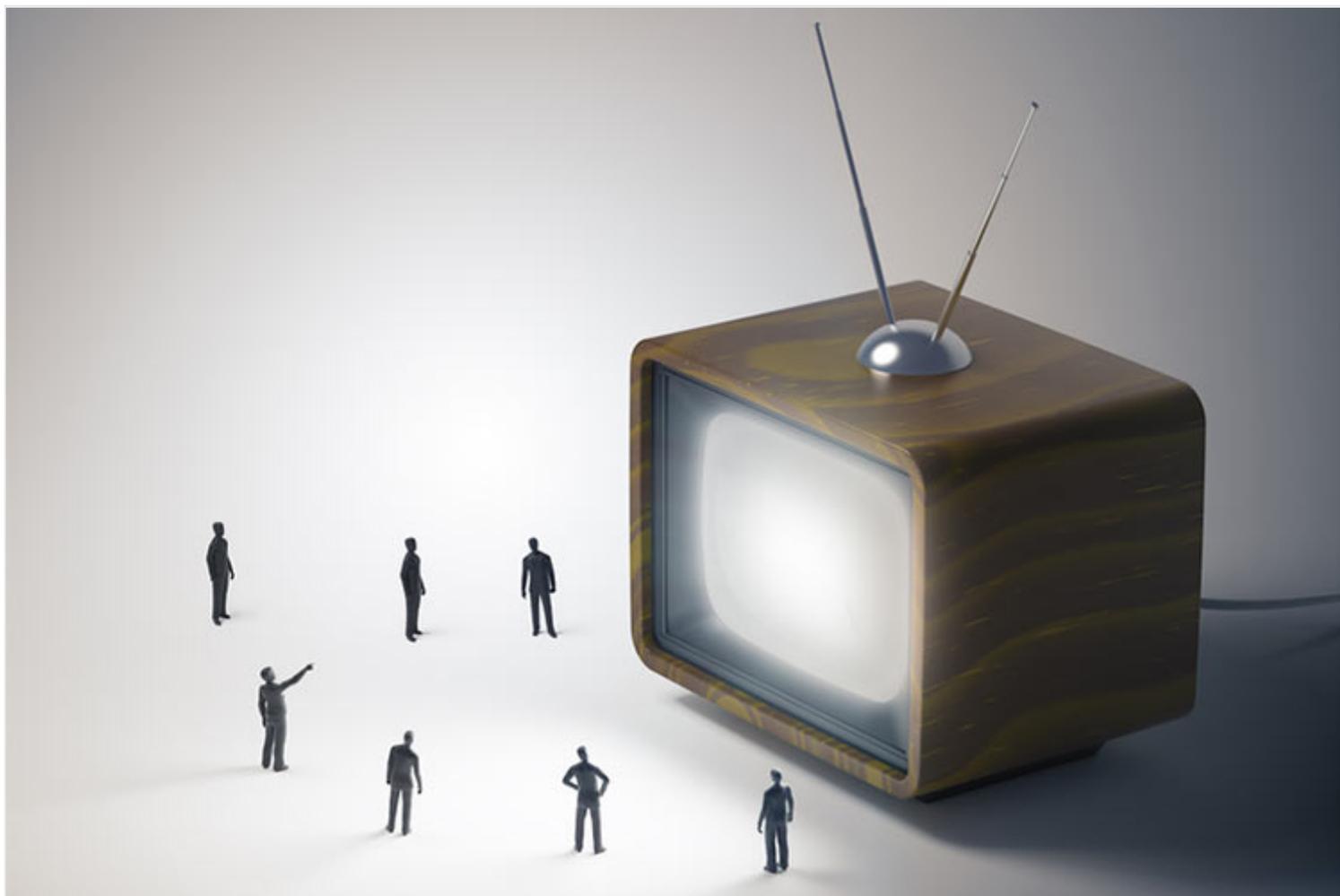


# Weapons of Mass Deception. Part Two



## Launching an Offensive Against the West

There is another side of the story that I merely touched on at the beginning of this article. By 2007, the West had very mixed feelings about Russia, as did Russians. Those mixed feelings were communicated through the mass media. Some opinions expressed in the mass media on Russia and Russian politics (as well as on Putin personally) were critical, while some were neutral and some positive. Overall, Russia received the treatment from global media that it deserved—it was portrayed as a large, diverse, transitional country with nuclear power, a questionable democracy, apparent corruption, and a lack of soft power that at the same is both interesting and rich.

The Western press did display one bias that can hardly be denied: it described Russia in a much more critical way than Russians would have liked, especially when it focused on one particular Russian—President Vladimir Putin.

The question remains of whether the Western press has really been diverted by the perils of the Cold War to become a tool of the capitalist governments carrying out a century-long operation against Mother Russia (regardless of who governs it). When you approach this issue with the twisted logic of the elite narrativists mentioned earlier, you are doomed to discover all the elements of an orchestrated, manipulative campaign. It's hard to argue with this position, as it is bolstered by “evidence” that runs the gamut from fake quotes by Winston Churchill to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated historical document that has been largely used to support numerous conspiracy theories. But by looking deeper, one can see the difference of perception: while Russian people and their leaders suffer from what they perceive as humiliation, Western media view this perception only as a subject of reporting and publishing opinions.

The new Russian narrative has developed since 2007, and it continues to expand, feeding on every action (or lack thereof) of the Western governments. Through Russian communication channels (including foreign propaganda such as RT, domestic state-controlled media, and top-level diplomacy), U.S. foreign policy is presented as a lasting diabolic plot aimed at dismantling Russia. Everything feeds this narrative. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria; the ISIS threat; the development of private spaceflight companies; fracking; the Internet, social networks; iPhones; Hollywood; the U.S. higher education system, which lures in the best students from all over the world—all these, according to the twisted logic of many Russians, are undeniable “facts” that prove the existence of a U.S. conspiracy against Russia.

However, it is hard to explain why, until recently, Russia seemed to have tolerated U.S. global dominance and the American government's cruel plot. It is even harder to explain why Russia now demands approval of and respect for its policies (e.g., the annexation

of Crimea and its proxy war in eastern Ukraine) from the United States if it views the latter as such an aggressor.

The charge of waging this new narrative has inevitably returned Russia to the former Soviet communications policy of pervasive propaganda, whether open or covert. The difference is that the Soviet weapons were loaded with possibly deadly communist ideas designed to combat the unlimited, wild capitalism of the 1920s. Today, the Russian weapons of information warfare are loaded with deception. Communism offered a dream of universal equality and the just distribution of wealth. Russia today relies on concussive weaponry that aims to damage the messaging system of the Western democracies. When RT adopts the slogan “Question more,” does it imply that the public should question the government more, and if so, on what subject? The Communist narrative was bound to the crucial issues of the society; Putin’s narrative, appropriated to undermine the Western worldview, aims to discredit the very concept of truth and interfere with public opinion.

Most importantly, some (if not all) weapons Russia employs target the Russian audience, too. Putin’s narrative is the only one that dominates the national mass media, and even though his critics spend a lot of time trying to expose the deceptive nature of this view, by spending so much time and effort on this task, they actually expand the narrative, giving more authority to Putin’s distorted worldview.

### **“Arsenal of Democracy”**

Western media bodies, like the Broadcasting Board of Governors in the United States or the BBC World service in the United Kingdom, seem inept when it comes to Russia, as they also spend a lot of time “explaining the truth” and arguing with the Kremlin’s worldview. Instead of taking proactively steps, they only respond to Russian information attacks, merely hoping that their antidote of “the truth” will work before the Kremlin’s lies poison the overriding narrative.

As Western culture is increasingly predisposed toward self-reflection, the poisoning

of the narrative induces a discussion of “What has the West done wrong with Russia?” The mistakes of the West with regard to Russia were many, and there’s no time machine that will allow these countries to go back and retroactively correct them. The lessons of history should provide guidelines for the West to not repeat these mistakes. However, the question remains: Why does Russia repeatedly cause the West and particularly the United States to fail to build a successful bilateral relationship?

**Ideally, the Kremlin should be ignored. The West has to adopt a sort of news boycott on Russian events (or, even better, opinion editors might agree to declare a kind of boycott on “Russian issues”).**

Sometimes loaded words speak louder than anything else. Putin doesn’t wish to hit a playback button and return Milosevic to Belgrade or resurrect Saddam Hussein. Nor does he mean that the European Union and NATO have to expel the Eastern European states. His core message is—and has been since the early days of his leadership—“Don’t mess with my personal political dominance, don’t challenge me at home, and don’t foster political and civic powers that can offer an alternative to me.” Scared by the Ukrainian uprising in 2004, and shocked by the Arab Spring, Putin consolidated all the media power at his disposal and fired a cannonade at the West that can be boiled down to the following message: “Stay away from my domain and my people.” It was a turning point: Putin lost control of the narrative. From that moment on, the narrative took control of him, as it did with millions of Russians who were overexposed to this loud outcry.

The arsenals of the media war are growing on both sides. Russia is a favorite target of U.S. hawkish conservatives, who represent a remnant of the Cold War mentality (although there is truth to their concerns: Russia still possesses a large nuclear arsenal and thus theoretically poses a threat to U.S. security). Furthermore, the Russian government supports illiberal, sometimes xenophobic social attitudes and values, which exposes it to criticisms from the left. Putin’s Russia returned to the logic of “spheres of influence,” a stance that frightens former Soviet client-states and neighbors. Western

politicians have started campaigns to reduce the power of Russian interests abroad and have offered support to the opposition in Moscow. Journalists have flooded the Western media with stories revealing the regime's alleged and real crimes. In describing the new Russian/Putin threat, columnists have invoked the language last used by Sen. Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare. Most, if not all, of this retaliation is justified and sincere. People in the West see the aggression projected from Moscow. But in the Kremlin's eyes, the retaliation certainly looks orchestrated by someone in the White House or the State Department.

Under these circumstances, the West should realize that it is time for, to quote Roosevelt, the deployment of the "arsenal of democracy." But the worst thing for the West would be to fire back at Russians using the same weapons that the Kremlin has employed. Telling the truth about Russian woes, including those that derive from corruption, is not a solution either. Investigations must be conducted and exposés must be published by Russian journalists and concerned citizens. Demonization of Putin by the Western media will continue to be ineffective, as it is perceived as a form of treachery and further triggers the feeling of national humiliation.

While it may feel terribly unjust and offensive to the West to be a target of a propaganda campaign that spreads lies, the only sensible response is avoidance of any escalation of conflict. Indeed, Putin's dominant narrative needs to be countered—but when the Western states imposed sanctions against Russian individuals and companies last year following Russia's involvement in the Ukraine crisis, this measure was the single most effective action that fed the aggression narrative. When Western media joined the leaders of their countries in mocking Putin as a crook, they only added fuel to the fire.

Ideally, the Kremlin should be ignored. The West has to adopt a sort of news boycott on Russian events (or, even better, opinion editors might agree to declare a kind of boycott on "Russian issues"). Lacking international attention, the monster of a propaganda machine created by Putin will be left chewing over its old arguments, and eventually its narrative will wither and die. Does Putin's Russia really threaten the

United States and Europe? Well, any responsible analyst will say, no. The nuclear threat is essentially theoretical. Russia's conventional or hybrid military powers are sufficient for a local conflict but deployed on a larger scale will cause more trouble to Russia itself than to NATO. Many observers don't realize that the Russian regular army has enormous problems: it's understaffed and inadequately equipped, its intelligence capacity is feeble, and its spirit is very questionable. Russia's economy and trade should not be underestimated, but they would not sustain a major trade war.

The fewer reasons there are to fuel Putin's paranoia, the sooner the country's isolation will affect his policies. In this case, the Western media should take a unified approach: if the Kremlin wants to be mentioned, voice an opinion, or publicize its achievements in the Western news, it should pay for that as if it were an advertisement. Essentially, any information coming from the Kremlin should be treated as propaganda, like that found on RT or heard from some marginal European politicians aiming at misleading the public. Such actions by the Western media to avert propaganda at home would be justified.

This policy should have one distinct exception. The only news from Russia that should be reported under this boycott should be that pertaining to human rights issues. Sound familiar? Indeed, it is a replica of the practice adopted by the Western press after the Helsinki Accords. At that time the Soviet Union had much to say (and had far more power than today's Russia), but it still failed to counter this approach.

Information can be seen as a weapon, and it can hurt. But ignorance hurts more. The responsive, reflective, tactical nature of Putin's policy will suffer more if no one speaks about it, listens to it, or slams it. While this approach may be wrong from a purist Lippmannian point of view, which prioritizes covering all sides of the story, it does inherit Kennan's idea of containment. Although lies and deception are annoying to democratic institutions like the free press, the last thing the West should do is participate in the spreading of conspiracy theories produced by the Kremlin for the sake of preserving a "balance of opinion." There are enough conspiracy seekers in the

West. No reputable media outlet should invest in developing countermeasures.

As for the abovementioned BBG, BBC, and Deutsche Welle (the bodies created in the West to influence nondemocratic states, including Russia), they must employ the most powerful weapon of democracy: the ability to showcase the opportunities that grow from the free pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. These still remain scarce in Russia today.