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*How is Russia's state media structured? How has it grown? Is it effective?*

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### Introduction

Over the last fourteen years of Vladimir Putin's tenure as prime minister and president, Russia has crafted a state media force which routinely circulates misinformation at home and abroad.

Modern Russian media has reached levels of centralization and homogeneity which have not been achieved since the days of the Soviet Union. As a result, independent media outlets in Russia fight daily with the Kremlin's state media for their continued existence.<sup>1</sup>

Just like popular western media outlets, today's Russian media utilizes all aspects of the modern news, including on-the-ground reporting, interviews with key players, and live updates on social media.<sup>2</sup>

For years, under the guise of relative journalistic objectivity, Russian state-run news outlets have successfully disseminated borderline propagandist

### Key Takeaways:

- Russia has focused on expanding its state media apparatus for several years.
- Russian state media appears more effective in influencing opinion at home than abroad.
- A unified response to counter Russian state media outside of Russia may be unnecessary due to low credibility.

reporting to the Russian public and, to a lesser extent, to an international audience.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of recent events in Ukraine, the biased nature of Russian state media coverage has become more apparent, leading many in the international news community to wonder if there is a feasible way to counter Russian media's misinformation campaigns.

This briefing note's purpose is to give an introduction to Russian state media and several issues surrounding its influence.

### State Media Overview

Dominated by the Western perspective, the mainstream international media has depicted Russia as an antagonist since the Cold War era, largely as a result of the country's history of oppressive state control. In regards to media, the Russian government

has been heavily criticized for the dissemination of misleading and biased information. In fact, representatives of the U.S. Government have labeled Russian state media as ‘propaganda.’<sup>4,5</sup>

In recent years, Putin has restructured and invigorated the country’s domestic and international media; investing over \$1.6 billion annually.<sup>6</sup> Examples of Russian state media are below:

Strictly Domestic Media <sup>7</sup>	International Media
Rossiyskaya Gazeta (Print)	Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency: <sup>12</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voice of Russia (Radio)</li> <li>• Formerly ‘RIA Novosti’</li> </ul>
Argumenty i Fakty <sup>8</sup> (Print)	MIR TV <sup>13</sup>
Zvezda <sup>9</sup> (TV)	Information Telegraph Agency of Russia (ITAR-TASS) <sup>14</sup>
All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK): <sup>10</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radio Mayak (Radio)</li> <li>• Russia 1 (TV)</li> <li>• Russia 24 (TV)</li> </ul>	RT: <sup>15</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ruptly</li> <li>• FreeVideo</li> </ul>
Public Television of Russia <sup>11</sup> (TV)	

## Case Study: RT

Within this multifaceted approach, the Russian government has recently been investing the most heavily in their international television network RT, formerly known as Russia Today.

### Development

Founded in 2005, RT initially suffered a reputation for poor production value and inferior reporting. However, by reporting on the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 from a Russian perspective, RT emerged as a counterweight to the uniformity of the Western media. While the logic and credibility of many of RT’s conclusions were questionable, the network achieved much greater international recognition and, subsequently, attracted increasing proportions of Russia’s overall investment in state media.<sup>16</sup>

### Global Recognition

RT now broadcasts from three global news channels in English, Spanish, and Arabic and employs over 1,000 media professionals in 22 bureaus across 19 countries. Available to over one-quarter of cable subscribers in the world, RT boasts a reach of over 644 million in 100 different countries and claims an audience of 158 million viewers.<sup>17</sup>

### State Funding

In 2005, the Kremlin invested \$23 million to launch Russia Today. Since then, funding for RT has increased by more than tenfold, reaching its peak annual budget of \$380 million in 2011.<sup>18</sup>



## Credibility

In addition to the obvious political agenda of the network, instances of biased reporting, the use of dated images and footage to represent current events, and even blatant fabrications have been repeatedly exposed.<sup>19</sup> Highlighting these credibility issues, Russia was ranked 148<sup>th</sup> in Reporters Without Border's 2014 Press Freedom Index<sup>20</sup> and three journalists employed by RT have publicly resigned due to a lack of journalistic integrity within the agency.<sup>21,22</sup>

## Comparison to International Media:

The international community has had a slow and difficult time curbing the high viewership and domestic influence of Russia's monolithic media force. The US and Europe have thus far developed little by way of a formal response.

- RT has 13 times more viewership in Washington, D.C. than Deutsche Welle, Germany's public international broadcaster. In Britain, two million people say they "regularly" watch RT.<sup>23</sup>
- RT has the first TV news YouTube channel to reach 1 billion views and has approximately 1.3 million subscribers,<sup>24</sup> dwarfing rivals such as Al-Jazeera English and CNN with 0.6<sup>25</sup> and 0.5<sup>26</sup> million subscribers, respectively.
- Certain strategies – such as the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) intent to provide \$1.25 million to Ukrainian media organizations – are being implemented by the USA, but such sums seem almost paltry in comparison to the amount spent by the Russian government on its state media.<sup>27</sup>
- With a total budget of \$196.4 million in FY2013,<sup>28</sup> Voice of America spends \$13 million annually on its Russian outlet. Though there are no available per-country budget figures, RT's total budget is \$300 million.<sup>29</sup>



*Vladimir Putin in a 2013 RT interview. Screenshot from RT/YouTube*

## Effectiveness

Putin has specifically directed his journalists at RT "to break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon mass media"<sup>30</sup> by broadcasting international news from a Russian perspective. In so doing, the Kremlin presumably hopes to ameliorate its public image and disconnect itself from the antagonist role that it has played in popular media for decades.

Analysts should consider the respective target audiences when attempting to gauge the effectiveness of the Russian state media system. If the credibility of the state-run media is in question, is a Western response to Russia's blitz on international media even necessary?

## International Effect

Despite RT's extensive outreach, it is challenging to discern whether the opinions of its international audience are



changing for numerous reasons:

- Russia's commitment to changing its global image is relatively new and thus many of its broadcasting outlets are still in their infancy.
- Because the international community has largely blamed Russia for the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it is very difficult to isolate the impact of Russia's international media on Western opinion.
- If the international community doubts the credibility of these broadcasts, the state-controlled international media outlets may actually be reinforcing the negative public image that they are trying to escape.

## Domestic Effect

Domestically, Russian state media appears to be having more tangible effects. Deprived of comparable alternatives, 70% of the Russian population turns to state-run television for news.<sup>31</sup> Without competing narratives to contrast against the state's media, it becomes very difficult for these viewers to decipher what is truth and what is speculation or fabrication, as can be seen from the data on the right, collected by the Levada Center (an independent Russian NGO) in 2013.<sup>32</sup>

Because almost two-thirds of the Russian population believes that Russian television provides an objective source of news, Putin can use state media to rally popular support for his political agenda – a technique which has been exemplified by the conflict in Ukraine:

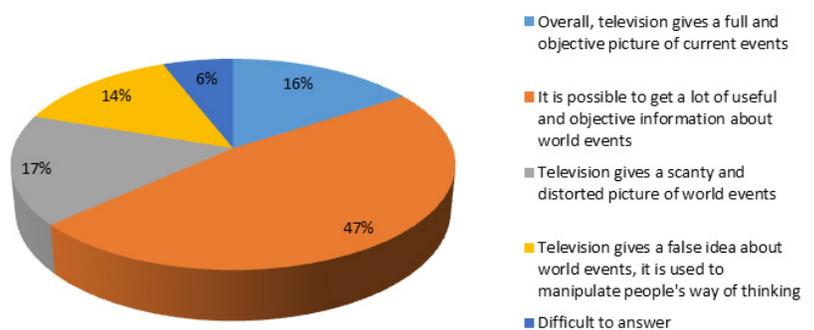
- Prior to the annexation of Crimea, the Russian population was becoming increasingly unsupportive of Putin as a leader.
- November 2013 – “53 percent said they would vote for a different candidate during the next election.”<sup>33</sup>
- As the conflict progressed, the state-controlled media portrayed Russian advances in Crimea and Ukraine as a mission of liberation rather than invasion.
- 86% of Russians would now re-elect him.<sup>34</sup>

## Considerations

Ultimately, the Kremlin's media efforts will only be effective in changing the country's global image if international audiences also believe their reports. As skepticism towards RT internationally is high, it may not be accomplishing its strategic intention.

In determining any potential response, U.S. policymakers should champion the principles of journalistic credibility and objectivity adhered to by U.S. international broadcasting, in contrast to its Russian counterpart.

**Which of the following opinions about Russian television today are you most likely to agree with?**



*Data from the Levada Center*



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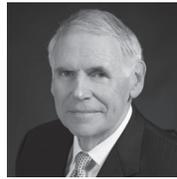
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