



The new propaganda wars

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Berlin, Germany — Even though the Berlin Wall was destroyed more than a quarter-century ago and the city rebuilt, new propaganda wars are being waged here and elsewhere by the major and some minor powers in a more sophisticated way than the Soviets ever imagined.

Disinformation has always been a staple of states and spies, but now the world's airways are being swamped with state-controlled TV "news" stations. Of the 83 TV channels I have access to in my hotel room, roughly 32 of the 51 non-German channels are largely owned or controlled by various governments. This includes the Russian, Chinese, Qatar (Al Jazeera), Thai, Vietnamese, Armenian, Turkish, and Cuban governments. The Russian, Chinese, Qatar, Japanese and French governments have full-time English-language channels here in Berlin, clearly designed to reach an audience outside of their home-country nationals who may be living in or visiting Berlin.

These are almost entirely commercial-free channels, paid for by the taxpayers of their respective countries, and are now found in most major cities in the world, at some considerable cost. The question is: Why are they doing it?

The world's oldest and largest broadcast company is the British Broadcasting Company, started back in 1923 with radio. It was the first global radio and then TV broadcaster. Before the British Empire was dissolved, the BBC was a way for the far-flung British colonies to get a constant British perspective on the news, as well as a way to disseminate British culture and "standard" English. Although exhibiting a leftist bias, the BBC was widely praised for its quality and accuracy.

The United States had no equal to the BBC. But during the Cold War, it created Radio Free Europe and others, which were explicitly designed to provide those in the Soviet Union and elsewhere the "real" global news. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these efforts were largely defunded by the Congress. The Soviets and other communist countries operated their own radio networks directed at people in the West. The efforts on both sides were somewhat effective and served to undermine the legitimacy of all governments.

In 2005, the government of Vladimir Putin in Russia decided to build its own global TV network to serve as a propaganda tool for the Russian government. Originally named Russia Today, it is now known as RT, and it broadcasts primarily in English, as well as in Spanish and Arabic. The Russians knew that they had to make the bulk of the programming both credible and interesting. Most of the news is done in a straight manner without evidence of bias, left or right. But when it comes to interests that the Kremlin believes to be important, RT carries the water.

Mikhail Lesin, who had been highly effective in forcing the previously independent media in Russia to bow to the wishes of the Kremlin, was selected by Mr. Putin to create RT, which is viewed as a great success. In 2009, Lesin moved on to other jobs, ending up as the senior media and lobbying person in the Russian energy giant Gazprom. Lesin spent considerable time in the United States, where his adult children had permanently moved. He managed to acquire a number of multimillion-dollar homes in the Los Angeles area and a huge and very expensive yacht, among other things.

On Nov. 5 last year, Lesin was found dead in a Dupont Circle hotel in Washington, D.C. At the time, the claim was made by his family and Russian sources that he died of a heart attack — which many doubted. Last week, the official coroner's report was released, which said that the official cause of his death was blunt force trauma to his head, neck, torso and extremities — meaning that he apparently had been beaten to death. It has also been reported that he was under investigation for a number of financial crimes — and that he may have been cooperating with the FBI to save himself. In addition, it is widely believed that he had a falling out with Mr. Putin back in 2014, so naturally, the speculation is that the Kremlin was behind his murder, which may or may not be true.

Mikhail Lesin was obviously privy to many secrets, and the reports of his cooperation with the FBI would probably not only upset the folks in the Kremlin, but many others, including those who were recipients of funds from Russia — laundered through Gazprom and Rosneft, an oil company owned by the Russian government. Last year, there were a number of articles in the press about how major environmental organizations and foundations with political agendas had been recipients of Russian money secretly distributed by Kremlin-controlled energy companies through offshore shell companies. All of these groups certainly had a strong interest in Lesin not revealing what he knew — particularly in this very political year.

Governments have interests in promoting their image and influence to the outside world for a variety of goals. In addition to the age-old tools of buying-influence, threatening and discrediting opponents, the state-owned global TV network has become the most important propaganda tool. Watchers beware.

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