
Putin Combats « Russiaphobia ».

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and his aides at the Kremlin say they feel surrounded, and they're not going to take it anymore.

Russian corporations are being foiled abroad; the Russian state is being unfairly blamed for volatility in global energy markets; and suggestions that the state is eliminating its critics are just preposterous.

Why all the bad press? Because of "Russophobia" - an unreasoning Western hostility toward Russia - according to the Kremlin.

"I see a campaign here," Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said in a TV interview last week. "The stronger we are becoming, the greater, perhaps, is the number of those willing... to prevent us from getting stronger."

Amid all the allegations that the Kremlin - in a reprise of KGB tactics - is behind the mysterious deaths of two investigative journalists and a former KGB agent turned critic in recent months, President Putin is turning to a page out of the old Soviet playbook.

His aides are reviving elements of the Soviet Union's once-massive propaganda machine as well as considering fresh approaches.

Novosti, the USSR's "information agency," has been renamed RIA-Novosti and is being bolstered by a flood of Putin-era petrocash. It has started an English-language satellite news network called Russia Today and a monthly feature magazine named Russia Profile, both of which carry offerings on the good job Putin is doing in the world and next to nothing on things like the conflict in Chechnya or the murder of government critics. The organization also brings Moscow's spin to U.S. readers with paid supplements in The Washington Post and other papers.

"Many forgotten forms of work are being restored," says Pyotr Romanov, a Novosti veteran. "We feel there is a lot of misunderstanding about Russia out there, and that the Russian point of view urgently needs to be expressed in the world media."

But recently, that's become a tougher sell.

Investigative journalists who died

Ivan Safronov, a reporter for the Kommersant daily who was investigating planned Russian weapons sales to Syria and Iran, fell to his death from a window in his Moscow apartment building last Friday. His paper said he was being pressured by the government to stop his investigations and that he had been questioned multiple times by the Federal Security Service (FSB), the agency that replaced the KGB.

His death followed the mob-style killing of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya last October in Moscow, who had written extensively about government torture and murder in Chechnya, and the murder by poisoning of former KGB and FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London the next month. Litvinenko had accused Putin of mob ties and of ordering Politkovskaya's murder.

Wednesday, the US Embassy in Moscow confirmed that two Soviet-born American

women had been hospitalized for thallium poisoning in Moscow, though both were recovering. How they were poisoned is under investigation.

Many Russians decry cold war cliches

Yet many Russian analysts say they wince when they read stories animated by what they consider cold war cliches, especially in British and U.S. newspapers.

"Once again it's all black and white, and the image of Russia is that of a potential enemy," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, an independent foreign policy journal. He says that some Western media outlets "rushed to judgment" on the murder of Litvinenko by suggesting Mr. Putin may have ordered the former Russian spy's assassination.

An organization of intelligence service veterans, "For Spirit, Honor and Dignity," told the Russian media that it's thinking about suing the London Telegraph over its Litvinenko coverage. "It was absolutely open slander, we have never seen such staged malevolence," said a man who answered the group's Moscow phone this week, but refused to give his name.

And the Russian establishment say they aren't just being unfairly attacked over politics. When Arcelor, a large European steelmaker, rebuffed a takeover bid by the Russian firm Severstal last year, Moscow officials were quick to point to anti-Russian bias. "The unprecedented propaganda campaign that has been launched... shows that people don't want to let us into global markets," said State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov.

And after a January energy blockade of Russia's neighbor Belarus led to shortages in Europe, the Kremlin blamed the messenger. "The Western mass media are always suffering from an old disease called Russophobia. Only this time it's energy," Andrei Reus, deputy minister of industry, told a recent oil and gas conference in Houston.

In addition to the Soviet-style approach, Moscow is also considering Western image boosters. Kommersant reported in January that Russia paid \$15 million to the U.S.-based Ketchum Inc. - which has done PR for the U.S. Army and government agencies - to handle publicity for last July's Group of Eight meeting in St. Petersburg. "This kind of action is badly needed, not to deceive, but to explain [and] make Russia look more accessible," says Mikhail Maslov, director of the Moscow-based Maslov PR Agency.

Some say a Russia flush with oil money and an assertive leader frightens Westerners into a cold war posture. "Can you explain how it is that life is better in Russia today, but Western coverage... is much more negative than it was six years ago?" asks Sergei Markov, a Kremlin-connected analyst. "It's because Russia is rising off its knees."

The heavily state-controlled media has, in turn, adopted a more stridently anti-Western tone.

"One reason Putin is so popular... is that he is seen as standing up to Western pressure and strengthening Russia's defenses. Our media merely reflects those feelings," says Mr. Romanov.
