The West through the eyes of Russians

The demonized image of Europe and the West in general which dominates in the minds of Russians today has been wholly created by the Kremlin and its obedient media. The anti-Western campaign currently waged by pro-Kremlin media is by no means the first but it is characterized by its hitherto unprecedented scale and duration which is capable of effectively changing not only superficial judgements of Russians, as it was before, but of exerting a more profound and long-term impact on the average psychological profile and hence the future of Russian-Western relations.

Fomenting anti-Western hysteria

Contemporary Russia had experienced the first large-scale anti-Western campaign even before the process of propaganda institutionalization was launched. Against the backdrop of the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces in 1999, most of the major Russian media outlets took an unwaveringly pro-Serbian stance, ignoring the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and focusing on the need to support the Orthodox Slavic brothers – a relevant topic given recent events. As a result, the narrative of NATO bombing entirely blameless Serbia for the sake of geopolitical ambitions was firmly instilled in the minds of Russians. Amenable public opinion, prone to manipulation, was shaped in quite a predictable way and old phobias inherited by new Russia from the Soviet Union immediately surfaced, since no large-scale de-Sovietization has ever taken place. As a result, in 1999, half of the Russian respondents interviewed by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) stated that they believed that the USA was an external enemy of Russia and was capable of waging a war against it (nearly one third of Russians shared this view in 1997). In general, negative perceptions of the USA held by Russian citizens rose from 28% to 72%. However, soon, media – still independent of the direct dictate of the Kremlin at the time – switched from anti-Western rhetoric and the problems of Yugoslavia to the internal agenda: the second Chechen war which started on August 7, 1999, and a wave of terrorist attacks. Against this backdrop, Russians’ anti-Western phobias dissipated and did not leave a lasting effect on the way Russians fundamentally perceived the West and Western values.

Media resorted to using of the image ‘the West – the enemy’ in a fully-fledged and well-orchestrated manner again in 2003, when the operation in Iraq initiated by the USA and its allies, was presented as purposeful destruction of the existing international norms and as arrogation of the right to overthrow legitimate rulers by Washington. And, again, in 2008 when the Russo-Georgian Five Day War was interpreted through the prism of the confrontation with Washington which allegedly coordinated Saakashvili’s actions. However, these information campaigns were situational in nature and alluded mainly to the foreign policy of the USA without questioning Western values as such. The mechanism of ressentiment was undoubtedly set in motion but key assumptions about the preferability of life in a society tailored to Western norms remained unaffected.

And this is precisely what sets the Kremlin’s current anti-Western propaganda campaign apart from previous waves. Whereas, previously, the policy of ‘exporting democracy’ by Washington was mainly lambasted, Western values as such have been discredited in recent years. Europe is portrayed as Washington’s vassal which is degrading because of its lack of traditional values and the ubiquity of homosexuality and pedophilia seen as a consequence of tolerance typical of European liberalism. Besides, propagandists increasingly resort to false arguments about the imminent disintegration of the USA, for example, presenting the marginal Texas secession movements as mainstream movements which enjoy the real support of citizens of the state. While
the European Union, according to the official propaganda, will collapse under the burden of the current immigration crisis. By the way, over one third of Russians blame the USA for it, according to opinion polls conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM).

It is not surprising that against the backdrop of the mass media campaign aimed at discrediting the West is effectively saying to its audience: ‘Yes, it is not a bed of roses here, but look at them. It is blood-and-thunder over there’, the attractiveness of the Western way of life diminishes significantly. As a result, we arrive at a situation when, in an attempt to distance itself from the negative characteristics attributed to Western society, the largest European nation in Europe denies its European identity. The most recent opinion poll by the Levada-Center shows that 53% of Russians do not consider themselves ‘people of Western culture’ whereas 45% have a negative attitude towards the Western way of life in general. In addition, negative mobilization resulted in the fact that 75% of respondents named major Western countries as ‘Russia’s enemies’ (compare this with the figures from 19 years ago when 70% regarded countries of the West to be models for the development of the country) whereas tension between Russia and the USA has reached its post-2001 peak (45%).

The Kremlin would have hardly managed to create such an effect without control over the media. But a logical question arises: Why is the current anti-Western campaign so exceptional in terms of its degree of fomenting negative sentiments and - unlike previous waves - why does it give priority to demonization of the system of values?

### Putin’s popularity recipe

If one looks at a [graph](#) of Putin’s popularity, one can observe that the peak of his public support was achieved against the backdrop of ongoing anti-Western campaigns and references to the image of the threat hovering over the country: in late 1999 (the second Chechen war, terrorist attacks in Russia and the image of the West-the enemy formed against the backdrop of NATO operations in Yugoslavia); in late 2003 (fomenting of anti-American sentiments triggered by the onset of ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’); and in 2008 (even under the conditions of a tangible financial crisis, interpretation of the Russo-Georgian war through the prism of confrontation between Russia and the USA generated an upsurge in approval ratings which reached 88%). The fourth peak of exorbitant popularity of the Russian president has continued with minor fluctuations from 2014 until now. It is noteworthy that the current stage of social consolidation around Putin was preceded by an era of mass protests in 2011-2012, and as few as 29% of Russians were willing to vote for him in elections by January 2014, his credibility rating dropping to 61%. Given such a situation, only a time-honored method could help raise the ratings: forced consolidation around the leader thanks to a manufactured, artificial threat, namely Ukrainian ‘fascists’ conceived and managed surreptitiously at the hands of the West - and, in general, the West itself which is striving to destroy Russia. Negative mobilization has worked once again. Thus, we can see that Putin’s popularity recipe lies in a skillful play based on the mistrust of Russians for the West dating back to the Soviet days, fueling public ressentiment and conflicts Russia is involved in either directly or indirectly. And the fomenting of anti-Western hysteria is nothing more than a means of maintaining Putin's power.

However, unlike in previous years, the power elite currently has no other mechanisms of maintaining credibility left. Should the Kremlin diminish its pressure on media and reduce propaganda now, people will immediately redirect their nurtured aggression towards criticism of the deteriorating inner dimension of Putin’s policy: economic stagnation, rising prices and unemployment, degradation of public institutions etc. This would inevitably lead to gradual build-up of protest moods and would ultimately result in social upheaval. It turns out that the Kremlin has backed itself into a corner: unable to ensure economic growth, it will have to maintain the impression that Russia is under threat, drawing the country into new conflicts time and again, as we are now witnessing in Syria.

Attempts to preserve the regime can also be seen in the policy of ongoing propaganda aimed at discrediting Western values and the Western way of life. Whereas Russians dissatisfied with NATO policy used to note earlier that fundamental European values were nevertheless not alien to them, today, due to propaganda, the Russian-West conflict is perceived as a confrontation of the systems of values: traditional and conservative values versus tolerance-blemished European ones; spiritual Russian ones versus material European ones. This impels Russians to renounce their European identity and recognize the need to develop in an unbeknown
'special way'. Besides, propaganda imposes certain semantic associations such as the tenet that 'anti-governmental protests end in violent shifts in power, let alone the coup d’état which inevitably ends in anarchy and bloodshed, and the ubiquitous hand of the West is looming behind all of it'. Ultimately, the average Russian, with no access to alternative information, becomes disillusioned with the European developmental model as a desirable benchmark for Russia's future and begins to experience a subconscious fear of any signs of dissatisfaction with the regime, which minimizes the likelihood of an open expression of discontent and participation in protests.

In order to create the desired image of a divided Europe mired in problems, the Kremlin spares no media resources in promoting its picture of reality both domestically and internationally nor money for supporting European radicals. By financing extreme right-wing, pro-fascist and other marginal forces in Europe, the Kremlin has no hope of effectively destabilizing the situation in Europe, since, in its opinion, other external actors will cope with this task perfectly well. The ultimate goal of this policy is primarily addressed at the domestic consumer, since Putin-sponsored forces obediently broadcast all of the Russian propaganda myths to Russians, albeit via the mouths of Europeans in this instance. And, within Russia, their view is presented as the opinion of most Europeans. And hence, since everything is so bad there, it is better not to follow their lead.

Taking into account that, in order to ensure the loyalty of society, Putin has no other means left but to drag the country into conflicts and to further incite anti-Western hysteria, one can forget about any imminent policy shift.

**What can Europe do?**

Europe has to realize that, fundamentally, it is equally interested in a stable, democratic Russia just as Russia is interested in a strong Europe: Not a Russia with its current kleptocratic regime, but a Russia where, despite all the propaganda they are lambasted with, 46% still consider Western democracy indispensable to its development (10% - unconditionally and 36% - taking into account the specific characteristics of the country). Putin will leave sooner or later but the society he created is here to stay, and Europe will have to look for common ground to share with it. Hence, it is crucial today to expend every effort to ensure that Russia’s European identity does not erode so much so that it comes to assume an irreversible form.

To this effect, it is crucial to create and maintain direct communication channels with Russian society – by supporting the remaining free Russian media outlets, by creating a platform for dialogue and establishing new Russian-language media in Europe which will be able to communicate the necessary message to the most active and well-educated segment of Russian society, so long as the Internet is not completely controlled by the Kremlin in Russia.

Aside from that, one should seriously consider the possibility of inviting Russia to enter into a dialogue about the formation of a common European space which, on the one hand, cannot be established under Putin due to the need to harmonize legislation and carry out reforms, but, on the other hand, will serve as a signal to Russians that, for them, the European future as such is not out of the question once and for all.

*According to* Vladislav Inozemtsev, a visa-free regime introduced for Russian citizens in the future could also become an immensely powerful blow to anti-Western rhetoric. Such a move could increase the flow of Russian tourists. And, as practice shows, Russians who have experience of travelling and knowledge of foreign languages, as a rule, tend to be more critical of Kremlin propaganda.

Europe has colossal potential to use soft power whereas Russia is predisposed to naturally absorb European norms. This, which is happening today, is an automatic, artificial deviation of Russia from its historically inculcated vector and yet, Russia is incapable of getting back on the right track unaided.