IN THE POST-SOVIET PROPAGANDA SPHERE

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Any discussion of propaganda in the geopolitical context must dwell on the spheres of influence, a term that has unfortunately crept back due to the Russian determination and despite the Western attempts to turn a blind eye to the reality that the division of Europe is not a thing of the past.

My take on these spheres is based on the societal perspective rather than on media-centred explanations.

There are two spheres where the Russian propaganda thrives, and different ones at that. In the post-Soviet sphere, mostly older tactics of the information warfare are employed whereas further west, societies deal with newer, more sophisticated methods of the Russian media influence.

Media in this case are merely the reflections and instruments through which the societal differences are displayed. There are two main issues on this level. Firstly, Baltic societies are different from the Western societies and still belong to the post-Soviet sphere of Russian propaganda when it comes to its messages and methods. Secondly, Baltic societies — and their media — react to propaganda in a different way to the West.

Both of these issues are alarming. They are not so much related to what Russia does as much as to what the Baltic societies are. Their weaknesses are more fundamental than simply media shortcomings and thus are more difficult to change.

A quick look at the background of the Russian messages aimed at the post-Soviet sphere would reveal a noticeable shift in recent years, showcased by the fact that suddenly an EU Association Agreement with Ukraine has ostensibly become a major issue for Russian foreign policy.

Not so long ago, it was NATO and the hard power that Russia imagined it was opposing. America has always been its enemy. Europe, though, was, to a large extent, a reference point rather than a counter-point. The Russians, ever cognisant of their 'special civilisation', have nevertheless strived to do things the European way, as terms such as 'Evroremont', or 'European-style renovation', suggest.

Then something changed, not least in Vladimir Putin's mind. America in this mind-set has subjugated Europe, and Europe has now become part of the enemy. Weaker, more disoriented and faster declining than America, yet clearly 'them', not 'us'.

It changed the way the world is presented in the Russian media. Now Russia can legitimately — to its own population — claim that it is a counterbalance to the West at large and its inclination to impose its values.

This only works in Russia itself — and in the rest of the post-Soviet world, which is very alarming in the case of the Baltic States.

This sort of Russian propaganda would be doomed were it applied in the West. When President Putin invites Western analysts to the Valdai club discussions only to scold the West and proclaim how Russia is superior, it merely has an effect, as someone has noted, of a Chechen leader inviting Westerners for a lecture on the advantages of blood revenge.

Therefore what the Russian propaganda does elsewhere, is not only more nuanced but outright different. Presenting Russia as a counterpoint is a long shot; but to present the West itself as hypocritical strikes a chord in the self-aware societies that have long traditions of questioning their own power structures.

The Russian media that works for Western audiences thus seeks to sow doubts, multiply possible versions of the truth and encourage questioning reality and the entire system of values. (These methods are employed also for the Russian audiences, to be sure.)

Yet it does tell a lot about the Baltic societies that large parts of their population find these messages emanating from Russia still rather powerful and subscribe to these ideas.

Were one to think about two 'propaganda departments' in Moscow, one preoccupied with the Russian target audience and the other with the Western audiences, the most important problem is that the Baltic societies would fall under the sphere of the domestic propaganda department.

By no means should the progress that the Baltic societies have made in the past decades be belittled. Yet research constantly shows that the large parts of their electorate and the societies in general are still cynical about the institutions, democracy, not used to debates and criticism and are anti-modern in their economic activities (i.e. inclined to rely on doing things themselves rather than relying on the market or institutions).

Just as the Russian society, large parts of the Baltic societies still believe in irrational things and big-power conspiracies. The fact that Russian is just about the only foreign language that parts of the native population still speak also adds to the problem.

Given that propaganda is most powerful at amplifying views that are already held rather than at countering established wisdom, this shows why the Russian messages reverberate so powerfully in significant segments of the Baltic societies. They exploit the cynicism, feelings of inefficacy, crudeness and harsher ways of operating in public.

The Baltic societies have moved on; they have actually moved very far — yet there are far too many aspects that still hark back to their Soviet past.

The rest of the Western societies are different but they, too, have their own weaknesses. They are too politically correct and too preoccupied with applying rules rather than seeing the bigger picture. The Western-oriented deluge of Russian messages is successful in exploiting these weaknesses.

In most of the Western societies, the Russian propaganda is aimed at their fringes, more radical and dissatisfied than the mainstream. In the Baltic societies, it is aimed at the core. Just recently, research data in Lithuania once again showed that more than half of those polled viewed the Soviet era positively. There is much to tap into.

To turn to the second major problem, that of the difference in reactions between the Baltic and the rest of the Western societies, one has to admit that the ways of dealing with the Russian propaganda display much haste and little long-term thinking. This is an unfortunate paradox: deep, societal problems are being fixed with temporary, questionable solutions.

Most Baltic actions in countering propaganda still aim at the short term. Yet they increase the dangers for the long term. Methods employed — bans and counter-actions rather than spreading the enlightened ideas of Western-style criticism and fundamental civil liberties — can themselves inhibit the Westernised development.

Faced with the imposition of top-down decisions on what to read and how to react, the societies might take a longer time to — inevitably — cure themselves than they would do otherwise. (Admittedly, there are differences among the Baltic societies, say, between the Estonian and Lithuanian approaches to banning Russian TV.)

The media elites and activist circles in the societies often display group-think and siege mentality. Over the past year, many have come to think that propaganda must be responded to swiftly and, all too often, that there is one side to be supported.

Large audiences now only want to hear what they approve of. To many otherwise critical people, supporting Ukraine and its version of the truth has become a must despite indications that it might not be telling the truth either.

Questioning the patriotic, almost black-and-white worldview of the mainstream of the political class has become less welcome. Those who do, sometimes face personal attacks. Many people feel they are already at war so there is little justification for them to be self-critical.

The Baltic societies have always lacked the critical discourse of the Western scope and depth. In the current very dangerous situation, the knee-jerk responses have increased the danger that its emergence might be slowed. Once again, a great deal has changed in the past quarter-century but one must ponder the situation where the societies might be thrown some way back.

The added problem is that there is very little overlap of what is discussed in the Baltic media universes with the mainstream discourses in the Western European societies.

This increases the dangerous sentiment, fuelled by conspiracy-style thinking, that the West is not standing up to the challenge. To assume that Western leaders in responding to the Russian actions do not understand the concerns of the frontline Baltic societies, do not 'feel their pain' and cannot hear their worries, only adds to self-marginalisation and victimisation.

Aside from these concerns, but connected to the broader lack of critical discourse and lacklustre demand for quality journalism, pure unprofessionalism must be noted. Almost daily, the media outlets directed by Russia hawks who publicly profess harsh criticism of its propaganda still pump out stories lifted from the Moscow playbook — not intentionally, but due to the sheer unprofessionalism and ignorance of line editors.

In the media markets where there is little incentive to stay in journalism beyond a few years after graduation, media outlets routinely translate and distribute, without giving much thought to checking the facts, stories such as the elegant invention by the Russian political technologists of a fake election-monitoring organization 'ABSE' that was intended to confuse the public once the real 'OBSE' (OSCE) declined to monitor the Donetsk and Lugansk 'elections' in November.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, of course, the weak spot for many other Western societies is the dogged application of the media standards that is exploited by the Russian propaganda. Through the inclination to hear all sides of the story, media institutions are often giving similar treatment to both truth and lies as equally valid points of view.

The Western media too often fails to deal with the propaganda appropriately. It is a serious weakness but a short-term one. It takes a critical mass of evidence for the slow-turning Western societies to start critically appraising the so-far distant events on the European periphery but then their instinctive, value-imbued judgements start informing their reading of the situation.

In the long term, there is no doubt that the all-encompassing nature of the media and their standards are one of the most important pillars of the Western societies.

To conclude, one cannot exclude that the Russian propaganda would win in the short term. One has to accept that there is simply not enough ruthlessness on the part of the West or specifically the Baltic societies to stand up to the torrents of misinformation and outright lies coming from the East. But the most immediate short-term challenge is to start focusing on the long term, leaving the current issues to the militaries and security services that should take the necessary protective measures.

Short-term defeat is acceptable. But one has to lament the very fact that the long-term societal weaknesses still need to be discussed a quarter-century after the breaking away from the Soviet regime and after much effort in building Western institutions.

It shows that the Baltic societies were not exactly successful in building solid defences and the sense of truly belonging to the Western community. It is imperative at least not to shoot oneself in the foot by taking hasty steps now.