Testimony
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation
On "Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Propaganda that Threatens Europe"

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Peter Pomerantsev is a Senior Fellow at the Legatum Institute, London, where he runs a project on 21st century propaganda and how to counter it. He was the co-author of a study commissioned by the Dutch, UK and Latvian governments to the European Endowment for Democracy, which identified ways to strengthen independent Russian language media. He is one of the co-authors of a new project by CEPA, funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation, on how to counter Russian propaganda in Europe.

Pomerantsev frequently contributes to the FT, Foreign Policy, Politico and many other publications. He has testified to the US Congress on how to combat Kremlin propaganda. His book about Russian media, 'Nothing is True and Everything is Possible', is longlisted for the Guardian and Samuel Johnson Prizes and is translated into over ten languages.

The West is belatedly waking up to the power of the Kremlin's media machine. The Supreme Commander of NATO called the annexation of Crimea 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen.' Zhanna Nemtsova, daughter of murdered Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, blames the climate of hate created by Kremlin propaganda for the murder of her father and starting the war in Ukraine. 'We are losing the information war' complains the British head of the House of Commons culture and media committee.

The Soviet Empire may be gone but the Kremlin still has media hegemony over the Russian language space: the 149 million citizens of Russia, as well as the estimated 93 million in the former USSR who have Russian as a fluent first or second language (not to mention a further 5 million or so in Germany).

A recent project by the European Endowment for Democracy, a Brussels foundation, looked for ways to tackle this challenge. I was one of the authors, and we soon found differences between today's situation and the Cold War.

Back in the 20th century the job of Western Russian language media such as the BBC World Service or Radio Free Europe was to break through the information iron curtain. The battle was for alternative points of view and against censorship. Today TV is strictly controlled by the Kremlin inside Russia, but there is easy access to other media online. Meanwhile Russian speakers in Ukraine, Moldova or the Baltics have access to a plethora of media, Kremlin, local and Western, each presenting strikingly contradictory versions of reality.

Take Estonia, where viewers who followed the rival Russian and Western stories of the causes for the downing of MH17 ended up simply disbelieving both sides. Something similar is happening in Kharkiv, a town on the Russian-Ukrainian border, where polls showed a high number of people cynical about all media, whether Russian, Western or Ukrainian. In a landscape where viewers trust no one, they are still most entranced by Russian television channels which, according to Latvian focus group respondents, 'are emotionally attractive, because some news you watch as an exciting movie. You don't trust it, but watch it gladly.'

In order to woo viewers the Kremlin has utterly blurred the lines between fact and fiction. Kremlin 'current affairs' programs are filled with spectacular scare-stories

about Russian children crucified by Ukrainian militias or US conspiracies to ethnically cleanse East Ukraine. In a context where no one 'believes' any media, all that matters is that the 'news' is sensationalist and cinematic.

The challenge for independent media is thus not simply to deliver information, but to win trust. This necessitates content that is engaging, reflecting both national and local contexts, and that delves deep into the lived reality of Russian-language speakers across the region.

Reality-based, locally relevant, engaging programming is the one type of content Kremlin media, despite its many successes, does not produce.

News ignores local social problems, whether it's the health service, schools or courts. There is currently no quality Russian language news agency covering the whole of the Russian speaking world. A first step could be to expand the Russian language bureaus of such agencies as the BBC or AFP so they could cover the local news the Kremlin ignores; or create a news-hub that maximized existing sources. One might not be able to convince Kremlin-captive audiences about who shot down MH17, but one can be more relevant to them by focusing on local issues.

Kremlin entertainment meanwhile is largely devoid of socially engaged documentary formats: docu-soaps about institutions such as schools or the army; reality shows exploring ethnic tensions. Local broadcasters need help, both financial and professional, to create this sort of quality content to create the local versions of radio hits like 'This American Life' or 'Make Bradford British', a British documentary program that grappled with ethnic hatred by putting people of different races in one house (in the style of the U.S. show *Big Brother*) and forcing them to confront their prejudices. Imagine a Russian-language program that would use a similar tactic to probe an emotionally charged subject—say, the bitterness between Russians and Ukrainians in a place such as Kharkiv.

New programs could also invite Russians to tackle historical traumas through formats such as the popular BBC series *Who Do You Think You Are?*—a show that follows celebrities as they trace the lives of their ancestors, often engaging with the horrors of twentieth-century wars and genocide. In the Russian case, these kinds of programs would require their subjects to explore the human cost of the gulag, the *holodomor* (Ukraine's enforced famine under Stalin), and the KGB arrests. Some participants would discover their ancestors among the victims; others, among the executioners. In both cases, they would have to reckon with past traumas, a highly emotional and cathartic process. Such content would also allow the audience to move away from the collective historical narratives imposed by the Kremlin, which stress how Russia's leaders, from Stalin to Putin, led the nation to triumph.

Ideally programming would dove-tail with policy priorities: judicial reform in Moldova, for example, accompanied by entertainment shows about courts. BBC Media Action (the charity arm of the BBC funded by grants and not the license fee) have been working with the fledgling Ukrainian public broadcaster on short dramas about young people caught up in the war from different parts of the country. The budget is painfully miniscule but it's exactly the sort of project we need so much more of.

Apart from classical media programmes we should also prioritize media literacy projects which help populations withstand the new Kremlin propaganda and tell the difference between spin and evidence-based inquiry. Online investigative projects, such as Ukraine's myth-busting Stop Fake or Alexey Navalny's corruption-busting website which finds the secret cash stashes of crooked politicians, are powerful not only because of the information they provide, but because they involve citizens in an inter-active, open source search for the truth and thus build communities of trust and critical inquiry.

The key thing is to recognize, as Vladimir Putin understands so well, that media and entertainment are as essential to societies and security as doctors or soldiers. The West made a dreadful mistake in the 1990s, abandoning the development of media in the former Soviet Union to the 'free market': instead media were captured by oligarchs or corrupt regimes, who have used them for malign ends. After the Cold War it was considered part of the 'peace dividend' to slash funding for Radio Free Europe or BBC Russian. A much greater cost is being paid now.