

Analysis

Russia's Use of PR as a Foreign Policy Tool

By Robert W. Orttung, Washington

Abstract

Public relations plays a major role in Russian domestic politics and its foreign policies. Vladimir Putin relied heavily on PR to establish his initial image in Russian politics. In foreign policy, the Russian state and corporations have hired Western PR firms to improve their image abroad. They have also engaged in a number of other techniques, from establishing a global television network to sponsoring a German soccer team. Russia itself seems to have derived few benefits from these efforts, particularly since self-inflicted wounds which result in extensive reputational damage tend to overshadow the benefits gained from successful PR campaigns. However, Russian companies such as Gazprom seem to gain some positive results from their efforts to promote business relationships.

PR Power

Countries around the world use a variety of hard power and soft power to either command or co-opt others into supporting their goals. Hard power tools include coercion and inducement, while soft power techniques emphasize agenda-setting and attracting others through positive values, culture, media, and overall effectiveness. Public relations techniques in all their various forms contribute a useful addition to this tool box, with persuasion fitting somewhere between the hard and soft ends of the power spectrum.

Russia is not alone in devoting considerable attention to this effort. Through the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the US government supports civilian international broadcasting with the partial purpose of explaining American policies and values. Its outlets include the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio and TV Martí, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks—Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television. BBG broadcasters distribute programming in 60 languages to an estimated weekly audience of 171 million people via radio, TV, the Internet and other new media, according to the BBG website. The agency's 2008 budget was \$682.1 million. Similarly, China has launched a \$6.6 billion dollar juggernaut to establish a media giant that will give the rising power the ability to offer international audiences Chinese perspectives on a wide range of issues and to correct the misperceptions that Chinese leaders believe the Western media disseminates. The effort includes broadcasts by China Radio International, China Central Television, and the official Xinhua news agency.

The Domestic Context

PR has been a part of Russian life and politics since Rus's beginnings in the ninth century, according to United Russia Duma deputy and MGIMO professor Vladimir

Medinsky. His latest book, *Osobennosti natsional'nogo PIARA* [*Peculiarities of national PR*], traces this history in great detail showing how the authorities have tried to get their subjects to think what they want them to think without even realizing that their ideas are being dictated by external stimuli. The process is the same for selling a candy bar or the president, as Yeltsin's famous slogan "Vote or you lose" demonstrated.

While all politicians in all countries rely on PR to build their image with the public, Vladimir Putin had a special need for such techniques, as Greg Simons points out in his 2010 study of media in Russia. When Yeltsin chose him as his successor to the Russian presidency, Putin was largely unknown to the electorate. The Kremlin image makers could start with a reasonably blank slate to build him up as someone whom voters would support as their next leader. Even though Yeltsin chose Putin as Russia's second president, Putin's campaign for office created an image that both separated him from Yeltsin and contrasted him with his predecessor, depicting him as a chief executive who was healthy, young, energetic, and able to reassert control over the violence-plagued North Caucasus.

From his start as a Russia's president, Putin has effectively shaped his image. He quickly asserted control over the national television networks, where most Russians gain their information, in order to ensure that his message reached its intended audience without filtering through independent journalists and analysts. The Kursk submarine incident early in Putin's tenure as president taught him the importance of constant vigilance in securing his image. When the submarine sank, killing 118 sailors, Putin at first appeared unconcerned and remained on vacation. When he finally did travel to the sub's base, angry relatives still grieving their loss berated him. Putin did not make this mistake again.

Subsequently, Putin has understood the importance of appearing to be a popular leader. In 2003, his Kremlin took control of the country's then most respected polling agency VTsIOM, provoking an exodus of the key staff into the Levada Center, a new organization independent from the government. He also held annual press conferences that gave the impression that he was accessible to the population even though the questions were tightly controlled in advance.

Putin uses PR to make his policies palatable to a wide spectrum of the Russian audience. While Putin presents himself as the scourge of the oligarchs to the broad public, most of Russia's richest men continue to thrive, as Miguel Vazquez Linan points out in a recent analysis of Kremlin propaganda. And while the government describes Putin's policies as lifting Russia off its knees from prostration before the West, Russia in fact frequently cooperates with Western policy. The combination of extensive energy subsidies and the government's "monologue of power" control of the media ensure that the population will continue to back the current leadership.

PR in Foreign Policy

Russia's attempts to use PR strategies in its foreign policy extrapolate from the Kremlin's successful use of media tactics inside Russia to achieve similar ends on the international stage. The Russian government, regional governments, state-owned corporation, and even individual oligarchs have hired Western public relations firms to achieve their purposes. This work goes on around the world but is most transparent in the US since the US government requires all PR firms working on American territory to disclose their public relations activities conducted on behalf of foreign governments and companies (See Table 1). The Justice Department publishes these disclosures on the Internet.

When Russia served as the G8 president and hosted the group in St. Petersburg in June 2006, it sought Ketchum's help in organizing its media relations, paying \$2 million to the PR giant for this support. In 2007 the Russian government again hired Ketchum for advice, lobbying, and media relations support to promote energy security, the Russian Federation as a place favorable for foreign investments, and the Russian Federation's accession to the World Trade Organization. The Russian government sought to promote greater visibility and understanding of its goals. It paid \$845,000 for a two month contract at the beginning of the year. Similarly, in the first five months of 2009, the Russian government paid \$175,000 for help gathering information on

US policies that affected Russia. (See Table 1 for the details). The government currently does not have any contracts on file in the database.

By comparison, the Georgian government is spending more than \$2 million on PR and lobbying contracts in the US during 2010, according to data collected by Lincoln Mitchell and Alexander Cooley. The German government does not engage PR firms for this kind of work. On July 11, 2007, the Congressional Affairs office of the Chinese embassy in the US hired Patton and Boggs for the fee of \$22,000 per month and a term of one year to provide counsel on US congressional matters.

Regional governments have also hired PR firms. For example, Krasnodar Krai worked with APCO Worldwide Inc. in order to arrange meetings with prominent US media outlets such as *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *The New York Times* for the purpose of promoting foreign investment in the region.

Russian corporations have also hired PR firms to promote their interests in the US. According to the publicly available documents, Gazprom and its subsidiary Gazprom Export have paid approximately \$350,000 a month for PR services in the US since August 2007. The goal is to work with the media to improve understanding of Gazprom's basic business strategies and strengthen investor trust in the company. The basic idea was to encourage Western media to broaden their focus away from problem areas in covering Gazprom, such as its prominent energy conflicts.

Techsnabexport (TENEX), the key Russian exporter of nuclear materials, hired APCO Worldwide in April 2010 to improve the image of Rosatom, Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation, as a reliable supplier for US utilities among relevant American decision-makers. It also sought help in overcoming existing political and trade barriers and in overcoming information attacks by competitors.

Additionally individual oligarchs have hired US firms to help promote their business. Oleg Deripaska, the head of a diversified business empire with major stakes in Russia's aluminum and automobile sectors, has sought help trying to obtain a US visa. The US government has denied him a visa allegedly on the basis of allegations that he is linked to organized crime. He also sought help in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to purchase General Motor's European operations.

A Variety of Techniques

The Russian government has employed a variety of other techniques as well. The most prominent is the global RT (formerly Russia Today) television network.

Set up in 2005, the network now broadcasts 24/7 in English, Spanish, and Arabic in over 100 countries, according to its website. It has correspondents in New York, Washington, London, Paris, Delhi and Tel Aviv. It also claims to be the first network to “set up a bureau in Tskhinval, the capital of South Ossetia after the August 2008 conflict”. When President Medvedev visited Washington for the Nuclear Security Summit in May, he gave an interview to the local RT bureau, an honor that only *Izvestiia* has received this year, according to *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on June 2.

Among the more subtle PR techniques Russia employs are purchasing space in prominent foreign media. For example, the official government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* has funded monthly supplements in newspapers in India, Britain, Bulgaria and the United States, including a paid supplement in the *Washington Post*.

“Russia Now,” as the supplement is called, presents a sophisticated view of Russian domestic politics and advocates Russia’s foreign policy positions. Although the official *Rossiiskaya gazeta* is the source of most of the information, the May 26 supplement to the *Washington Post* included an article entitled “Outpost of Change” that was “prepared in cooperation with gazeta.ru,” the well-regarded Russian-language Internet news portal, which is now owned by Alisher Usmanov, who has close ties to Gazprom. The article, using a clever identification with Obama’s change theme, puts a positive spin on opposition protests that took place in Kaliningrad in January this year, in which as many as 10,000 participants joined a rally where some placards called for Putin’s resignation. The article described the northwestern exclave as a “model for constructive dissent” where some of the activists claim that they “are starting to be heard.” This picture of the domestic scene in Russia contrasts sharply with news usually presented in the *Post* and *New York Times*, which paints events in a much harsher light.

The supplement also makes a clear case for Russia’s foreign policy priorities and explains through example how Russian actions should be portrayed in the West. Under an unflattering picture of the Georgian president, it asks “Should America support Saakashvili?” Another article proclaims “Kremlin’s New Foreign Policy: Partnership with the West.” That text was written by the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Dmitry Trenin and republished from the *Moscow Times*.

Such efforts are only a small part of a much larger campaign. For example, as Gazprom’s image in Europe was sinking fast after the 2006 gas dispute with

Ukraine, the company managers decided to follow the example of Roman Abramovich, who gained celebrity status in the UK by purchasing the Chelsea football club. Since UEFA rules prevent Gazprom from purchasing a second club in addition to St. Petersburg’s Zenit, it could only sponsor one. Zenit President Andrei Fursenko recommended that the company sponsor Germany’s Schalke 04, since it has the same colors as Zenit. Gazprom is now the chief sponsor of the club and its logo is displayed prominently on team jerseys and the website. Similarly, in December 2008, as it was becoming clear that gas deliveries to Ukraine would probably be affected in the upcoming dispute, Gazprom opened a website for the crisis—Ukrainefacts (<http://www.gazpromukrainefacts.com/>)—which carried daily reports of meetings, press conferences, and the company’s version of events as they unfolded.

Mixed Results

The use of public relations techniques has produced different results for the Russian state and Russian companies. The Russian state has had little success in improving its foreign image. Russia often inflicts serious damage to itself in moves that receive wide attention in the Western media. Russia’s invasion of Georgia, energy conflicts with its neighbors, high levels of corruption and human rights violations at home win considerable attention in the West. The negative consequences of such actions greatly overshadow the positive benefits Russia receives from its wide ranging PR campaigns.

Additionally, it is not clear that many people are interested in this kind of material. For example, few of the US’s Russia policy-makers are likely to be swayed by this effort, while the general public is unlikely to focus on events in Russia when economic and political problems closer to home are much more pressing.

However, Russian companies, including state-owned Gazprom, who want to achieve very specific aims may be able to use PR effectively in these more concrete cases. Many observers have claimed that the blame for the 2009 gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine was more evenly shared between the two countries because Gazprom had improved its PR in comparison to the 2006 crisis. Gazprom’s business partners were obviously well prepared and supported Gazprom not only with words but also with proposals for concrete actions (like financing the additional gas needed for transport purposes). These results likely had an impact on political decision-makers. Of course, Gazprom will not be able to convince Western audiences, particularly the gener-

al public, that it is a white knight, but its PR may just be enough to assure business partners and governments

that they can profitably do business with Gazprom. Such outcomes are crucial for the company.

About the Author

Robert Ortung is the president of the Resource Security Institute and a visiting fellow at the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich.

Recommended Reading

- Greg Simons, *Mass Media and Modern Warfare: Reporting on the Russian War on Terrorism*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010.
- Miguel Vazquez Linan, "Putin's Propaganda Legacy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25: 2 2009, pp. 137–59.

Please see p. 11 and 12 for an overview of recent Russian public relations and lobbying activities in the US, as described in the US Justice Department Database.